

Babia and Luna future natural park (Leon, Spain): between a paradise and a desert for visitors

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European natural areas have significant values and they are the result of hundreds of years of exploitation of their natural resources. In fact, scarcely one could find an actual natural area in Europe, even in the highest mountains. Thus, it is extremely important to manage these areas in order to maintain these landscapes as well as to provide resources to reach a sustainable development to local communities.

Babia and Luna future natural park: a general view.

Babia and Luna future Natural Park are located in the north of Spain, on the south side of Cantabrian Mountains. It was a traditional place where Leon Kings used to come so as to hunt or to relax. This is one of the reasons why in Spain to have one's head in the clouds may be called "to be in Babia" ("estar en Babia"). There is another hypothesis related with its pastoral past.

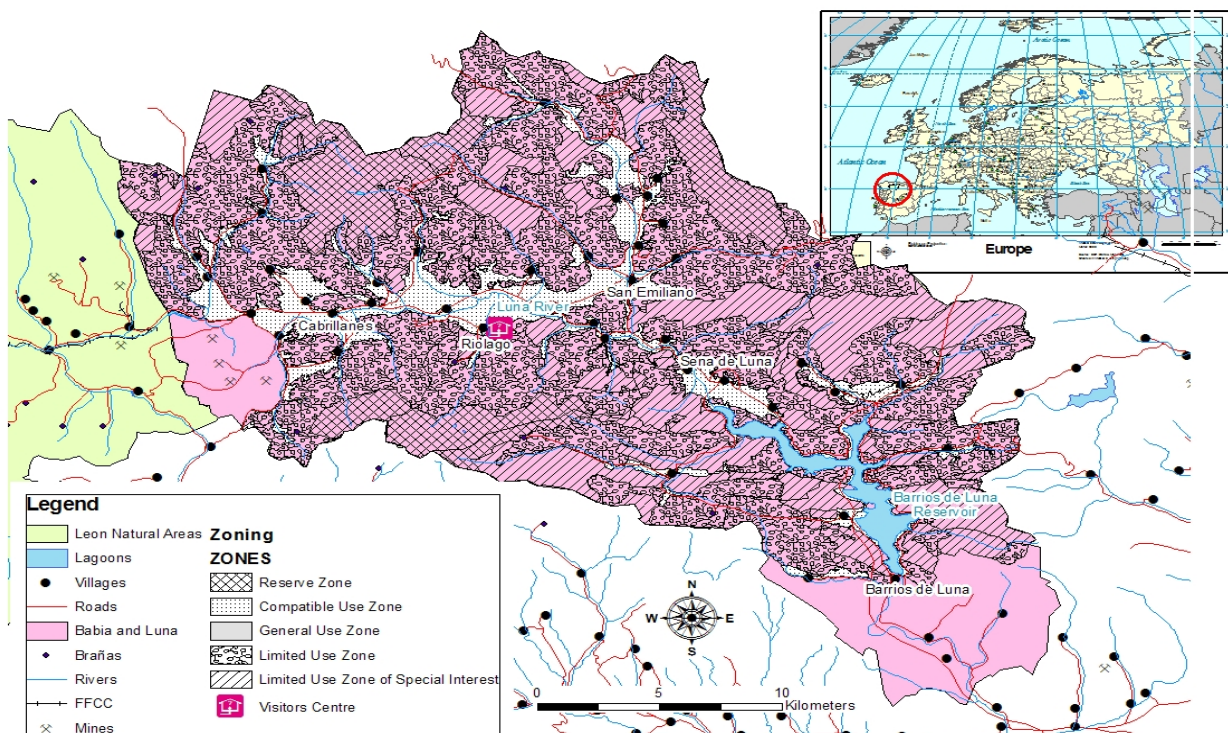


Fig. 1. Babia and Luna future natural park map.

The current landscapes of Babia and Luna are the result of centuries of land management. Forests were cut and prairies were improved in order to reach best pasturage for livestock, mainly sheep, cows and horses, resulting in the current naturalized landscapes. This past is still important, but changes have involved a new conception of the land also.

In this context, Spanish natural areas usually have common characteristics such as being marginal, deprived, mountainous areas, or having aging and lower density of population. Moreover, their amount of people has been decreasing for the last century, and this process has seen an acceleration since sixties when modernization and migration changes occurred in Spanish countryside. In addition, changes related to coal mining took place in these areas where the most important coalmines of Spain are located.

Although the portion of land is small and the mining jobs are not numerous, the economy was clearly influenced by this economic issue. However, nowadays its weight is lower and lower and people do not see confident future. Thus, people have turned their eyes to tourism –natural areas’ tourism– as a way to develop the area.

The natural area: a brief history

Babia and Luna future Natural Park has 57,628 ha. Four municipalities are included totally or partially: Cabrillanes, San Emiliano, Sena de Luna and Barrios de Luna.

Babia and Luna Natural Area as Valle de San Emiliano Natural Area was included in Castile and Leon Natural Areas’ Act in 1991. In this law a network of natural areas with a planning to follow was established in order to reach the status of a natural area (a natural park, reserve or monument). Natural areas’ planning as a waterfall process:

First level: National law: the National Heritage and Biodiversity Act (2007) and Regional Law: the Castile and Leon Natural Areas Act (1991).

Second level: Areas system plan: Natural Parks Program in Castile and Leon (2002). It is not properly a plan.

Third level: Management plans: Management Plans for Natural Resources (PORN). They are compulsory for every park or reserve, and they have to be approved before the declaration act. Concerning Babia and Luna natural area, it has just been approved in 2014 and it needs to be developed.

Fourth level: Master plans (PEUG). They put in action the PORN’s orders. Nevertheless, there is no one in Castile and Leon.

Fifth level: Sectoral plans. They are less developed although they are the most specific ones. The most common are conservation or public use, as well as sustainable development plans. However, Castile and Leon have no sustainable development plans, which could be extremely important for local communities.

Although the steps are clear, the issue is that while the management plans were drawn, socioeconomic situation was changing significantly and, therefore, natural resources could have been affected by external effects or by degradation, for instance.

On the contrary to the common feeling toward natural areas' declaration process, Babia and Luna population has been requesting a quick resolution because of their weak economy. Thus, local authorities have been demanding the declaration for years.

Leon Mountain area as a whole has suffered from depopulation and ageing because of migration movements, and these municipalities are not excluded. In fact, they have had almost 8,000 inhabitants in 1900 to 3,000 in 1991, but the depopulation is bigger and bigger each year.

This is the reason why authorities are in favour of having an actual natural area: to reach a sustainable development, mainly through tourism.

The opportunities to develop the area through tourism based on natural resources.

Babia and Luna not only have a wealthy biodiversity, but also have a wide range of natural resources that can be easily used in visitors' field to engage visitors eager to enjoy this magnificent nature.

As we said above, this natural area is located on the south side of Cantabrian Mountains. Here the visitors can find one of the highest peaks of these mountains: Peña Ubiña (2,417m). These mountains have karst processes, and one can find many examples of glacier evidences: lagoons, valleys, etc.

Vegetation is also important, with some important species like beech trees. However, prairies are everywhere, especially in highlands. Fauna is also rich, able to attract bird watching people.

Nevertheless, the issue is local resources that we want to focus on. Probably sheep are not worth seeing, but cows and especially horses would be important potentialities. People love looking at cows and taking photos with them, at least in Picos de Europa National Park, why not here? Concerning horses, they have a local breed: the Hispanic-Breton horse. It is a short but strong one, able to support weather bad conditions. Moreover, local dogs are extremely esteemed by their characteristics.

Finally, Babia and Luna have an important cultural heritage. The visitor centre (an old palace) is thought to be open this spring. There are also many possibilities to develop paths, viewpoints, picnic areas, etc. In addition, some nature companies are bound to serve visitors' expectations.

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