

Quiet struggles - conflicts between residents, visitors and protected and recreational areas' administrations

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Abstract — The paper aims to discuss the conflicting situations which can occur between residents, visitors and political and administrative entities in protected and recreational areas, particularly in the ones located in remote rural spaces. Rural areas (both legally protected and without protection status) are increasingly valued in contemporary societies as environmental reserves. Consequently rural areas are progressively perceived as amenities and as objects of consumption mainly by urban or non local populations. The visitors' demands and consumptions of rural protected and recreational areas tend to prevail over the local populations' needs and aspirations in terms of socioeconomic development. The non coincidence between the desired and the lived rural environment tends to create a number of conflicts among the various stakeholders. These areas tend to become the scenario for both latent and manifest struggles, considering the contradictory perceptions, needs, interests and desires held by the different social actors. Based on empirical evidence from some Portuguese rural protected and recreational areas we will debate not only the existence of two clearly contrasting visions, but also the consequences these can have in terms of future social and economic development and environmental protection strategies.

Index Terms — remote rural areas, rural protected and recreational areas, social conflicts, social perceptions.



1. INTRODUCTION

Literature on conflicts between visitors, residents and political and administrative entities in protected and recreational areas' is not abundant. In fact, most of the literature on protected and recreational areas tends to emphasise the management of natural resources and/or to debate the need to monitor and manage visitor flows, often neglecting the prevailing species in many protected and recreational areas (especially in south European and in developing countries) – local inhabitants. Not surprisingly, the scarce literature on conflicts deals precisely with empirical evidence collected in rural areas of those same countries.

Based on data collected on some Portu-

guese rural protected and recreational areas, this paper aims to debate the conflicting situations which can occur among the various stakeholders, namely visitors, residents and political and administrative entities. Rural areas (either legally protected or not) are increasingly valued in contemporary societies as environmental and cultural reserves, playing important social functions to the society as a whole. Those functions are also, "recognized institutionally by political measures, programmes and policies designed for rural spaces" [1:159].

As a consequence, rural areas are more and more perceived as amenities and as objects of consumption mainly by urban populations. The visitor's demands, frequency and consumption of rural protected and recreational areas tend to confer to these areas a meaning that is not always in accordance with the perceptions of local populations. It also tends to prevail over the local popula-

tions' needs and aspirations in terms of socioeconomic development.

The non coincidence between desires and needs, between the rural demanded and the rural lived tends to create a number of conflicts, those areas becoming the scenario for latent or manifest struggles, considering the contradictory perceptions, needs, interests and desires held by the distinct stakeholders. Moreover, the different visions as well as the conflicting situations identified can have important impacts in terms of future social and economic development and environmental protection strategies.

2. RURAL PROTECTED AND RECREATIONAL AREAS AS AMENITIES AND OBJECTS OF CONSUMPTION

Due to the well known and well documented set of social and economic transformations, rural areas, particularly the remote ones, increasingly play a role of environmental and cultural reserves essentially for urban or non local populations. The functions now attributed to rural areas emerge directly from the so-called crisis of the rural world that, although dressing differently from one place to another, possess common characteristics, the most important being the loss of social and economic importance of agriculture (e.g. [2];[3]).

Rural areas tend to pass from food production spaces to areas more and more represented as moral, cultural and environmental reserves (e.g. [4]; [5]; [6];[7]). Although, "nature as long been a keystone in the social construction of rurality", [8: 272] nowadays the natural and environmental issues have gained a central role in the redefinition of the remote rural areas. This redefinition of rural and rurality is carried essentially by the populations of the more developed, industrialised and urbanised societies, that represent the rural as nature, as well as in an idyllic manner (e.g. [9]; [10]; [11]) in which once again the idealised environmental and cultural characteristics of the rural are central issues.

In this sense, one of the questions that

could be raised about the growing social and institutional identification between rural areas, environment and recreation is the institution of legally protected areas (e.g. [1]). Even though one can argue that there is no direct correspondence between those two aspects, mainly for time lag reasons¹, there are several authors stating that the creation of protected areas in rural spaces is a consequence of the abovementioned identification². Moreover, most protected areas within European Union are located in rural spaces³, which means, in places that have inhabitants as well as social and economic activities⁴.

The institution of protected spaces can be seen as playing an important role in the development processes of those same areas, thus constituting an important advantage. In fact protected areas generally attract numerous visitors and promote the development of recreation, leisure and tourism activities that can contribute to enhance the usually poor local communities' economy (e.g. [13]). Moreover, environmental protection plays an important role in preserving a common patrimony, often materialised in the conservation of unique and rare natural resources, wildlife species, landscapes and biodiversity. The value of protected and recreational areas is frequently determined by urban culture and it is intimately related with the perceived need for natural areas. These needs are often backed by scientific and State institutions, based on the definition of the 'common good' they attributed to rural areas. However, establishing rural areas as protected spaces implies the imposition of some regulations and restrictions that often come to collide with the practices, uses and needs of local inhab-

¹ In fact in most western countries (e.g. United States of America, France, Great Britain) the creation of protected areas occurred long before the current and widespread social interest on environmental issues and problems.

² For a more detailed discussion of this topic see [1].

³ This is also a common situation in developing countries (e.g. [12])

⁴ In fact, according to IUCN figures, more than 70% of protected areas worldwide are inhabited.

itants. In parallel, local population's point of view is also often neglected in the institution of their living areas as protected spaces. This situation⁵ tends to provoke perverse effects both on population's practices and in natural values' conservation (e.g. [14]; [15]).

In spite of the fact that in theoretical terms the statute of protected area could act as a development mechanism, the fact is that many of those areas located in remote rural spaces could not stop the demographic, economic and social decline processes. In fact, "if one thinks that the majority of these landscapes are the result of centuries of interaction between Man and Nature, the disappearance of the traditional socio-economic uses supposes its immediate unbalance and impoverishment. These will lead (among other aspects) to changes in the vegetation dynamics and to the destruction of well rooted eco-cultural models", [16: 504] which were the primary factors that constituted those spaces as important to be protect. In addition, most of the rural protected and natural recreational areas were created accordingly with the same conservationist and naturalistic logics of not inhabited places. As Pimbert and Pretty say "the dominant ideology underpinning conservation has been that people are bad for natural resources. Policies and practice have, therefore, sought to exclude people and so discourage all forms of local participation. This style of conservation has neglected local people, their indigenous knowledge and management systems, their institutions and social organisation, and the value to them of wild resources". [14: 2]. The authors also argue that the costs of such conservationist logic have been high to environmental and natural resources itself. It is also a kind of authoritarian and external (to local people) logic and a moral imperative that local inhabitants hardly understand (e.g. [15]).

⁵ As common in developed countries, as in developing countries, in what concerns the institution of protected areas.

This situation, in parallel with the neglecting of local people's needs, demands and aspirations can lead to important conflicts and tensions within the borders of protected areas. Moreover, as we suggest in previous works (e.g. [17]), although rural inhabitants may value natural resources in a different way from the urban populations and the State⁶, the fact is that local people value and utilise natural resources in a sustainable way. Indeed, it is "when local people are excluded that degradation is more likely to occur"⁷. [14: 15]. As Colchester states "the imposition of state controls on indigenous people not only leads to tensions between state agencies and local communities, but it also serves to undermine indigenous systems of resource control and management" [19: 111].

In spite of in many protected areas of the developed world, the dominant species are the visitors, in rural protected areas local population is often the prevailing group. This circumstance, along with the abovementioned arguments, clearly suggests that the demands, views and needs of local residents ought to be understand and, even more important, integrated in the measures and policies designed for those areas, both in what concerns socioeconomic development and environmental protection and conservation.

The frequent non coincidence between more global needs to protect nature and local needs of social and economic development is a powerful obstacle to managing protected and recreational areas and can as well contribute to disqualify the practices of local people, which have constructed and have been maintaining those spaces and their natural

⁶ We can say that rural inhabitants possess a more utilitarian perception of natural resources than urban populations. Those possess a more aesthetical vision of that same resources. See also the pioneer work of Dunlap and Tremblay, [18], for a better understanding of rural-urban differences towards environmental issues.

⁷ In their work, Pimbert and Pretty [14] present several examples of the severe social and ecological impacts of excluding and neglecting local people from the protected territories.

resources for decades (e.g. [1]). Not take into account local population needs, perceptions and knowledge can also contribute to a new subordination of these local communities, already marginalised and vulnerable. Moreover, “many people living in and near protected areas perceived their interests as tangible and immediate and the ‘common’ interests as unclear and intangible. Underlying this view is the issue of distributive justice, including the widely held belief that ‘common good’ refers to elite special interest imposed on the rural poor”. [15: 10]. This kind of argument clearly suggests that conservation and protection policies and measures need to address the perception (very common among local inhabitants) that residents on protected rural areas carry a disproportionate burden in terms of negative cultural, social and economic consequences. That argument also suggests that there are different (and often incompatible) perceptions on whether the environment can constitute an advantage or a vulnerability for rural development, and also that there are conflicting visions about what shape and content this development should assume. On one hand, local populations perceived the environmental protection of their living spaces as a constraint to economic development, as a factor of underdevelopment. On the other hand, for urban populations, for the State and for the management of protected areas, the environmental protection represents an important part of rural development itself (e.g. [20]; [13]).

3. QUIET STRUGGLES – CONFLICTS BETWEEN RESIDENTS, VISITORS AND PROTECTED AND RECREATIONAL AREAS’ ADMINISTRATIONS

The abovementioned issues are common to almost every protected area in the world, in spite of the variety of its type, shape and content. In Portugal the institution of protected areas has been ruled by the same conservationist logic that tends to disaffect, symbolically but also with important material effects, the protected territories from the wider social and economic

fabric as well as from the broader development processes (e.g. [1]). Consequently it excludes local populations and their needs, inducing several conflicts and tensions between different interests and legitimacies. In order to discuss and assess these conflicts, tensions and struggles, we use evidence collected from three Portuguese rural areas: the Natural Park of Montesinho (NPM) and Natural Park of Alvão (NPAL), protected areas; and Serra da Freita, listed in the Natura 2000 Network⁸.

The three areas can be classified as remote rural spaces, sharing many social, demographic and economic characteristics, such as serious population losses since the 60’s; a severe process of ageing; loss of agriculture economic and social significance. The areas can also be characterised as mountain areas with limited accessibilities, services, equipments and infrastructures. In spite of that (or precisely for that reason) all the three areas attract numerous visitors.

Taking into account what we argue in the previous sections, we may state that in the three areas there is a clear distinction between the rural as lived and the rural as desired and visited. Moreover, taking the status differences into account, we can identify another distinction between the rural lived and visited as protected and exceptional and the rural lived and visited as ordinary space. These differences also bring about the occurrence of distinct types of perceptions, tensions and struggles which can be summarized in the following:

- The representations and practices of the visitors often neglect the areas’ productive and inhabited character;

⁸ Empirical evidence was collected in the three areas through the application of questionnaires to inhabitants and visitors, using the quota sample method based on criteria such as sex, age, literacy level and profession (Nresidents= 501; Nvisitors=300). We also conducted 40 structured interviews to Natural Parks’ administration; parish representatives and local development associations’ coordinators. For a more detailed explanation on methodological and technical procedures underlying the studies see [1], [13], [17], [21].

- Visitors identify the three areas, regardless of their protection status with nature, although this circumstance is more evident in the two natural parks;
- Visitors frequency and consumption of the three areas are essentially related to natural and environmental qualities, disregarding the rural socioeconomic characteristics;
- Conflicts between visitors and inhabitants are more visible in the non protected area, due to the absence of regulations to control visitors practices;
- In the protected areas, conflicts tend to occur more between inhabitants and the administration bodies, due to the existence of regulations imposed on residents practices and uses;
- In the protected areas, visitors tend to agree completely with the rules in force to protect and preserve natural aspects, while inhabitants present a much higher level of disagreement with the same regulations;
- Inhabitants perspectives, views and needs are often neglected by the State and its agencies and bodies in what concerns both environmental protection and development strategies;
- In the protected areas, the majority of the inhabitants is not informed about the regulations in force, due to the absence of communication channels and strategies;
- Visitors' legitimacies tend to impose (although in a quiet form) to residents' legitimacies in conservation and development measures.

The majority of the conflicting situations in NPM and NPAL are related to construction; felling of trees, damages caused in crops by wild animals; inhabitants' perception of an unfair distribution of the benefits of the protection status and inhabitants' perception of the unequal importance attributed by Parks'

administrations to natural aspects conservation vis-à-vis peoples' protection⁹.

For Natural Parks' residents it is clear that the institution of their living space as protected comes to collide with their daily uses of the territory and natural resources. On the other hand, the majority of the inhabitants considers that "a bird worth more than a person"¹⁰.

Conflicts in the non protected area are, as stated before, of a different character. In fact, they tend to occur frequently between visitors and residents, due to the recreational and leisure activities developed by the former (e.g. picnics, rallies, cross-country caravans, motocross racings, etc) which come to collide with local social and economic habits and activities.

Although the studied cases reveal several types of conflicting situations, related to the areas' different status of protection, empirical evidence permits to conclude that the major conflicts among the various stakeholders are related with differing perceptions of nature, environment and rural development. These different perceptions lead to quiet struggles¹¹ about what should shape the future of rural protected and recreational areas for both visitors and inhabitants. Conflicting urban and rural perceptions about nature, environment and development processes are strongly related to the socio-economic characteristics of individuals, as well as to differentiated experiences and ideologies. For local inhabitants nature and environment are mainly viewed as resources, fundamental to their daily practices and subsistence. Visitors perceive those aspects from an aesthetical point of view, also representing rural areas as open, natural spaces that

⁹ A similar type of conflicting situations was identified by Finger-Stich and Ghimire [22] on the Cévennes National Park and on the Pilat Natural Regional Park, both in France.

¹⁰ This expression is used by Ojeda-Rivera [23] about the inhabitants' perceptions on the National Park of Doñana, in Spain. In the same sense, one of the inhabitants interviewed in NPM stated that "for them [the Park administration] a boar is more important than a person".

¹¹ Quiet because difficult to measure, in one hand, and because most of the times, they do not materialise in concrete and clear disputes, on the other hand.

must be preserved in order to their needs, dreams and desires. Moreover, these external perceptions and needs are often transposed to institutional discourses and practices towards rural protected and recreational areas, through policies, programs and measures which neglect, at the same time, local populations points of view. One immediate consequence is that local populations, already vulnerable and suffering from a diversity of constraints imposed by their living areas' characteristics and transformation paths, consider themselves not as proud guardians of a common patrimony but instead as secondary actors (assuming the natural elements the leading roles), 'decorative elements' of rural landscapes for recreational purposes (e.g.[22]).

4. CONCLUSION

The constitution of rural areas as aesthetical objects of consumption, mainly due to their environmental aspects, has caused an increase of demand and frequentation of those areas mostly by urban populations. These usually have interests, needs, expectations, perceptions and desires that are in dissonance with the local inhabitants' own needs, interests, perceptions and practices. Such situation tends to provoke several types of conflicts or struggles regarding the rural and its environment as well as regarding its future development paths.

From the theoretical and empirical evidence discussed in the previous sections it is possible to conclude that there is a rural to live and a rural to visit and in the last case there is also a rural to visit as protected and extraordinary and a rural to visit as vulgar space. In fact, conflicts and struggles (although latent or quiet in the majority of the cases) occurred in a different way and for distinct motives in protected and in non protected spaces, even though their similar recreational potential and functions. In the first case conflicting situations tend to occur mainly because the absence of regulations that control visitors' practices and

behaviours. In the second case, struggles occurred more often between local inhabitants and Protected Areas' managers precisely because of the existence of those regulations which are imposed to residents' daily practices and uses of local territories and natural resources.

The data analysed before bring to the fore the debate on whether environmental and natural functions of rural areas could represent a potentiality or a vulnerability. This discussion becomes more relevant if one considers that those functions mainly serve external needs and desires, not representing an asset (but rather a clear constraint in most cases) for local populations. On the contrary these functions often place rural protected and recreational areas inhabitants in a subaltern position regarding both urban populations and the broader social and economical development strategies designed by State bodies and agencies.

As we argued in previous works (e.g. [1], [13] and [17]) if, on one hand, it is not possible to deny the importance of nature conservation and environmental protection measures, as well as the relevant functions rural areas have in that matter, on the other hand it is vital to discuss the need to protect people in protected areas, exploring new and more inclusive forms and types of protection mechanisms and regulations. This is even more important when one considers that local inhabitants always have played the leading role in maintaining and preserving the resources, landscapes and characteristics nowadays valued by the society as a whole.

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