

Using ecotourism experiences to educate tourists: First results from a research in Figueira da Foz salt works (Portugal)

Pedro Morais¹, Javier Benayas²

Keywords: ecotourism, education, tourist behaviour, salt works, sustainability

Despite the suggestion that education is a key element in ecotourism experiences and is fundamental to give tourists awareness about complex environmental problems, there is a general lack of research about this evidence in almost all activities. Higham y Carr (2002), Marion y Reid (2007), and also Dolnicar et al. (2008) recommend the carrying out of research about the use of ecotourism and educational activities as a way to promote environmental behaviour changes in visitors. Particularly in deeper forms of ecotourism (Acott, et al, 1998), we can realize the enormous potential of educational activities that can be offered aiming simultaneously to enrich the visitor experience and to promote a better understanding of complex environmental systems. These educational components seem to be essential to trigger changes of visitors' behaviour in order to achieve higher levels of sustainability.

This poster presents some early results from a research carrying out in Figueira da Foz salt works (Portugal) focused on the evaluation of some positive impacts from an ecotourism activity based in an interpretive guided trail. The salt works of Figueira da Foz have a large number of particular characteristics to be used as an ecotourism product: the place was an important centre of traditional salt production in the past with cultural and economic importance for local people, and some of them are still running in a traditional manner; it is located and depends on a estuary with a great ecological value and enclosed by an highly complex and sensible ecosystem; these salt places are suffering a high threat to be converted in industrial fish farms; the salt works are also integrated into an eco-museum and a visitors centre and some of them are still producing traditional salt, "salt flower" and some "new" vegetable products such as Salicornia (*Salicornia* spp). This context is a unique place to implement ecotourism activities that integrates important ecological, social, economic and health aspects.

To carry out this preliminary research about the impact of this activity in visitors' behaviour, a questionnaire was administrated to a sample of 29 participants at the end of the interpretative guided trail of Salinas. We aim to measure the understanding of tourists about the overall salt works problems and also their perspectives about future actions related to salt use. On a second moment 7 of these participants were asked about their changes and perspectives of change concerning the traditional salt products consume. The measurement of this positive impact of the activity, concerning the visitors understanding and changes about the traditional salt consumption, gave us a clear tendency about the role of the interpretative trail to promote a greater valorisation of the traditional salt works and so to promote real changes in consumers' behaviours.

Like other current environmental problems, the use of traditional salt products and its benefits to the environment, local community and also visitors' health are integrated in a complex net of relations. We assume that only a real understanding of it can permit a real change of the consumer behaviour to buy traditional salt products and also to assume an active role to contribute to protect these kind of resources.

In the quest for a new educational paradigm it seems that ecotourism activities can assume an important educational role that is generally not recognised. We have to find the most efficient educational strategies that will contribute to reduce negative impacts in visited areas and can also promote positive and long term benefits for some threatened contexts. Despite this, some

¹ CERNAS, Escola Superior Agrária de Coimbra, Bencanta, 3040-316 Coimbra, Portugal , pmorais@esac.pt

² Departamento de Ecología, Facultad de Ciencias, Universidad Autónoma de Madrid, 28049 Madrid, Espana javier.benayas@uam.es

important questions are still without answers, such as if the ecotourism activities attract only educated tourists or, on other side, if ecotourism effectively can educate general tourists to increase our level of sustainability.

References

- Acott, T. G., H. L. La Trobe, et al. (1998). "An Evaluation of Deep Ecotourism and Shallow Ecotourism." *Journal of Sustainable Tourism* 6(3): 238 - 253.
- Dolnicar, S., G. I. Crouch, et al. (2008). "Environment-friendly Tourists: What Do We Really Know About Them?" *Journal of Sustainable Tourism* 16(2): 197 - 210.
- Higham, J. and A. Carr (2002). "Ecotourism Visitor Experiences in Aotearoa/New Zealand: Challenging the Environmental Values of Visitors in Pursuit of Pro-environmental Behaviour." *Journal of Sustainable Tourism* 10(4): 277 - 294.
- Littlefair, C. and R. Buckley (2008). "Interpretation reduces ecological impacts of visitors to World Heritage site." *Ambio* 37(5): 338-341.
- Marion, J. L. and S. E. Reid (2007). "Minimising Visitor Impacts to Protected Areas: The Efficacy of Low Impact Education Programmes." *Journal of Sustainable Tourism* 15(1): 5 - 27.