
An experimental action of 2B Parks project

Local tourism strategic plan for Alentejo Litoral (Portugal)

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Mediterranean regions are touristic hotspots. Promoting sustainable tourism in protected areas is a major challenge. In this article, the authors provide elements of marketing strategy to balance environmental conservation and economic growth. Balancing these interests and marketing a destination, as it is the case of the coastal Alentejo in Portugal, is a difficult but challenging undertaking.

The 2BParks project

The 2BParks project – Creative Sustainable Management, Territorially Compatible Marketing and Environmental Education – was developed from July 2010 to June 2013, by a partnership involving 10 organisations from 7 countries (Italy, France, Greece, Spain, Slovenia, Cyprus and Portugal). RCDI, Development and Innovation Network was the Portuguese partner of the project.

The project was co-financed by the programme MED and aimed at integrating environmental issues into core institutional thinking and into private business options, by developing innovative governance patterns for Protected Areas.

The project focused on the following topics: Participatory planning for the management of Protected Areas; Territorial marketing of Protected Areas to promote sustainable tourism; Education and awareness raising towards Protected Areas, to increase environmental sustainability and social cohesion.

In short, the 2Bparks objectives can be summarised as follows:

- Assist Protected Areas managers with effective decision-making tools, where environmental concerns and policies are reconciled with economic and social issues;

- Improve skills and capacities for the management of Protected Areas;

- Involve businesses and the public in general as effective drivers of Protected Areas enhancement;

- Increase collective awareness towards Protected Areas values and opportunities, while disseminating the culture of sustainable development;

- Strengthen sustainable tourism in Protected Areas.

In the scope of the components related to the encouragement of sustainable tourism, the project included the outline of a Joint Marketing Strategy for all Protected Areas involved in 2BParks. Eight Local Tourism Strategic Plans (LTSP) were prepared, building on the common guidelines resulting from the Joint Marketing Strategy and aiming at balancing environmental conservation and protection with economic growth.

A brief review of the Local Tourism Strategic Plan for Alentejo Litoral is presented hereafter, based on the report “Experimental actions: Local Tourism Strategic Plan (LTSP) for Alentejo Litoral, Portugal”.

The Local Tourism Strategic Plan for Alentejo Litoral

Scope of the Plan and general overview of the territory

The territorial scope of the Plan is Alentejo Litoral, one of the 5 NUTS III subdivisions of the Alentejo region, in Portugal. With an extension of 5,309 Km² and a population of 94.2 thousand inhabitants (13% of the Alentejo total population), Alentejo Litoral is organised in 5 municipalities: Alcácer do Sal, Grândola, Odemira, Santiago do Cacém and Sines.

The territory combines small urban centres with rural landscape and a coastal area that spreads along 179 Km of shoreline. The

largest city is Sines (11.3 thousand inhabitants), but its proximity to Santiago do Cacém and Santo André creates a larger urban system of 25.3 thousand inhabitants.

The Alentejo Litoral coast extends from the Sado Estuary to the Algarve region, offering an almost continuous stretch of sandy beaches. The rich biodiversity that characterises the ecosystems of the Sado and Mira estuaries and of the Santo André and Sancha natural lagoons, a rich marine life and the inland forest habitats led to the classification of 222 thousand hectares of land in the Natura 2000 Network.

Three Protected Areas are located in the region: the Nature Reserve of the Santo André and Sancha Lagoons (RNLSAS), the Nature Reserve of the Sado Estuary (RNES) and the Nature Park of Southwest Alentejo and Vincent Coast (PNSACV). Only RNLSAS is totally included in the Alentejo Litoral region. The other two protected areas are shared by the border regions, respectively, the Lisbon Region (in the North) and the Algarve Region (in the South). The three protected areas have a high biodiversity level and very sensitive ecosystems, particularly the two wetland reserves (RNLSAS and RNES), which are both included in the international list of wetlands (Ramsar Convention).

Total lodging capacity in Alentejo Litoral was estimated in 4,125 beds in 2010, 65% of which were in rural resorts and rural hotels. Hotel offer is complemented by 13 camping sites distributed along the coastal area.

The Alentejo Litoral tourism offer includes sea and beach activities, which are the first drive for summer visitors. Surfing and other water sports (kitesurf, bodyboard) have flourished in the Alentejo Coast in the past decade and a rich marine life favours diving and boat trips. Other open air sports, such as biking, hiking, horse riding, windsurfing and canoeing in the natural lagoons, in the Santa Clara-a-Velha reservoir and in the Mira river, complement the mix of open air activities offered in Alentejo Litoral.

In 2010, 137,654 guests stayed in Alentejo Litoral. Most tourists (83%) are from the domestic market, while 17% originate in foreign countries, mostly from the European Union, in particular from Spain (in a leading position), Germany, France, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom and Italy.

The Local Tourism Strategic Plan (LTSP) for Alentejo Litoral was developed on the basis of a mix of techniques, with a particular emphasis on participatory solutions involving representatives of different stakeholders in the region (e.g. management boards of the Protected Areas, municipal authorities responsible for environment and economic development, regional tourism authorities, tourism related business operators, local associations of entrepreneurs and local environmental NGOs) to promote commitment with the preparation and subsequent implementation of the plan.

From the participatory approach followed it was possible to conclude that there is general consensus on the value that the region natural heritage can bring into tourism and, consequently, on the need to respect nature protection and conservation requirements.

However, critical issues to be resolved were identified, which are mostly related to the territory infrastructure, tourism prod-

ucts and the development of a local culture oriented to tourism. See SWOT analysis.

Objectives

The National Tourism Strategic Plan (PENT) enhances Nature Tourism as one of the developing products in Alentejo. It recommends a better organization of the tourism offer and an effort to increase the number of visitors. In line with these orientations and with the conclusions of the SWOT analysis, the following objectives were proposed for the LTSP.

Overall objectives

- To benefit from natural heritage as a marketing tool for tourism development in Alentejo Litoral;
- To strengthen the integration of nature conservation objectives into the tourism model of Alentejo Litoral;
- Optimise a sustainable balance between economic benefits and environmental and socio-cultural costs.

Fig. 1:
SWOT Analysis



Marketing objectives

The existing resources and the experiences already initiated in the Alentejo Litoral are envisaged as the basis for the successful development of a nature tourism model supported by an integrated strategy, addressing the following marketing objectives:

- To further develop and structure the product Nature Tourism in Alentejo Litoral;
- To promote the three Protected Areas of Alentejo Litoral as tourism resources;
- To increase the offer of tourism activities inside the protected areas and neighbouring territories;
- To reduce seasonal variation of tourism demand in Alentejo Litoral.

Operational goals

- To increase and enhance tourism offer related to the fruition of natural resources (business operators, facilities, training);
- To increase the number of visitors in the protected areas (and neighbouring territories) by 5% until 2015;
- To increase the share of foreign visitors by 3% until 2015, targeting in particular Germany, United Kingdom, Netherlands, the Scandinavian countries, France and Italy;

Picture 1:

The breaching of the Santo Andre Lagoon
Author Rui Rodrigues



- To improve tourism infrastructure and services (e.g. information, quality standards), viewing to Increase the satisfaction ratings of tourists.

Competitive positioning and differentiation attributes

The differentiation attributes of Alentejo Litoral relate to its unique landscape, preserved natural resources, unspoiled beaches and mild climate.

The competitive positioning of the region will rely on these attributes and in the development of an integrated offer of high quality tourism services, to meet the visitors' expectations.

The marketing mix strategy was built on these differentiation attributes, taking also into consideration that the tourism industry is being changed by new global conditions and needs to adopt new organisational and managerial principles, including quality, flexibility, customisation, innovation, diagonal integration and last, but not least, environmental soundness.

Marketing mix strategy

According to Middleton and Hawkins "a marketing perspective is essentially an overall management orientation reflecting corporate attitudes that, in the case of travel and tourism, must balance the interests of shareholders/owners with the long-run environmental interests of a destination and at the same time meet the demands and expectations of customers".

Balancing these interests and marketing a destination, as it is the case of Alentejo Litoral, is a challenging undertaking, in particular due to the diversity of stakeholders involved and the complexity of their relations, for the development, production, distribution and promotion of tourism services. These issues are discussed hereafter in the scope of the marketing mix strategy proposed for nature tourism in Alentejo Litoral.

Product

The major difficulty in developing a "tourism product" results from the fact that there is a multitude of private enterprises and public bodies delivering the services that constitute the product. A hotel, a nature

park, a bus company or a restaurant are all part of the product, but they do not recognise themselves as business partners and share little in common, except from being on the supply side of the tourism market. National, regional and local public authorities are also key players, having responsibilities, for example, over the conservation of natural and cultural heritage and construction and maintenance of supporting infrastructures such as roads and signalling systems, as well as on the planning and regulation of the sector. Nevertheless these public bodies do not consider as being part of the tourism industry, although they are also contributing to build the tourism products and to define the profile of the destination.

Understanding interdependence and developing collaborative solutions is therefore the first key factor to successfully develop the “nature tourism” product in Alentejo Litoral.

This product consists of the entire range of facilities and services offered locally (e.g. transport, accommodation, food and beverage, specialised nature tours, nature sports, recreational activities), plus all environmental resources (protected areas, unspoiled beaches, unique landscapes) and socio-cultural heritage.

In short, the nature tourism product to be sold to the visitor is an intangible experience that is made up of many contributing components that need to be integrated and managed altogether.

A feature to take into consideration in this integration process is that the services are mostly provided by small and micro-enterprises that dominate the sector numerically, in Alentejo Litoral. Individually, these micro-enterprises are not major players, but collectively they provide the local experience and the specific fruition of the nature tourism product. They are therefore highly relevant for the quality of the visitors’ experiences. To support these enterprises in the development of innovative solutions and create local partnerships for the delivery of unified experiences is fundamental and therefore highly recommended.

Developing nature tourism and attracting appropriate target segments should also promote the reduction of seasonality, through specialised offers (e.g. bird-watching, horse-riding), as well as through events viewing to increase demand during the low season.

Finally, nature tourism is also envisaged to contribute to the preservation of the natural resources by increasing the awareness of visitors and local inhabitants on the exceptional quality of those resources and by providing funds for their conservation and management.

Price

Defining global pricing solutions for a specific product or destination is a rather difficult process because prices are determined simultaneously by the selling strategies of the local enterprises (which are not easy to co-ordinate, since each operator has its own policy) and by the marketing strategies of distributors at the places of origin.

The Alentejo Litoral is not targeting mass integrated tourism, therefore it is not expected to suffer significantly from the bargaining power of the large tour operators, representing bulky volumes of tourists.

On the other end, premium prices are only possible if a unique experience is offered. Visitors may pay a premium price if the product is considerably better than that of competitors’ destinations. Nevertheless, tourists are increasingly experienced because they have travelled widely and are getting more difficult to impress. Global competition, in particular the upsurge of new destinations in developing countries, (with lower labour costs) is also contributing to influence price levels.

Picture 2:
Himantopus himantopus
and *Ciconia ciconia*
at Santo André Lagoon
Nature Reserve
Author Dário Cardador





Picture 3:
View of The South West
Alentejo Coast Natural
Park
Author Rui Rocha Santos

Place/Distribution

The selection of the distribution channels (i.e. the range of actors that bring together tourism demand and supply) is extremely important to guarantee that the target segments are successfully reached.

Domestic tourists (which are currently dominant in the region) usually make direct arrangements and use their own transport, while foreign travellers tend to be more influenced by intermediaries, such as travel agencies.

A range of appropriate travel agencies and tour operators specialised in nature tourism should be retained as major distribution channels in the selected foreign markets. Those channels should be provided with Information and promotion materials and should also benefit from educational trips, as well as incentives to the staff, for the promotion of Alentejo Litoral. Building long lasting partnerships with these players will contribute to successfully consolidate the region as a nature tourism destination.

The development of ICT has revolutionised the tourism industry, defining new paradigms in terms of interactivity between tourism suppliers and consumers. The Internet allows consumers to look for information, organise and purchase their travels on-line. To build an electronic comprehensive tool is of outstanding importance to support the distribution of Alentejo Litoral products

and reach the target audiences both in national and international markets. This Internet tool will allow to reduce dependency on traditional distribution channels and will also be much effective to promote specialised products to small market segments.

Furthermore, electronic distribution will contribute to enhance interaction and collaboration among local suppliers, allowing to integrate local resources and build all-in-one solutions.

Promotion

The improvement of communicating channels to increase awareness on the specific issues related to nature tourism should rely on a co-ordinated message to support an effective promotion campaign, involving relevant stakeholders and tourism suppliers in Alentejo Litoral.

The “brand” Alentejo Litoral is not clearly perceived by national visitors, which define its territorial scope in an imprecise manner, although they are able to outline its major attributes. Information about the assessment of foreign visitors is not available, but empirical evidence suggests that perceptions will tend to be even vaguer than those of national tourists.

At least three different designations are used to address this specific coastal area in institutional websites promoting the territory – Costa Alentejana, Litoral Alentejano, Alentejo Litoral – therefore making difficult to create a consistent image and branding. This is a relevant aspect to be discussed and agreed among the regional and local stakeholders, getting consensus on the brand name and the lead message to transmit.

Designing and implementing a cost-effective communicational mix to promote nature tourism in Alentejo Litoral will require to combine different interests and join efforts to achieve potential synergies.

The promotional mix can include different techniques that are usually organised in two different categories – above and below the line promotion.

Above the line promotion includes, for instance, publicity on press, radio, television or poster campaigns. These options tend to be rather expensive and have not been used recently to promote Alentejo Litoral in the national or foreign markets. Below the line promotion covers activities such as participa-

tion in tourism fairs and similar events, public relations, or organisation of press trips. The two regional Agencies responsible for the promotion of Alentejo (“Regional Tourism Board of Alentejo” addressing the domestic market and “Regional Agency for the Tourism Promotion of Alentejo” targeting the foreign markets) have adopted mostly this approach.

Below the line solutions appear also to be the best techniques to adopt predominantly for the promotion of Alentejo Litoral, considering the cost-effectiveness relation. The specific approach to be followed should be integrated with the overall communication strategy for Alentejo, allowing however to differentiate the specific attributes of Alentejo Litoral. Although focusing in particular in the nature tourism product, promotion should address the destination Alentejo Litoral as a whole, exploring complementarities among the different tourism products.

Action Plan

Resulting from the marketing strategy and the contributions collected from the stakeholders, an Action Plan was proposed, including ten key actions. Three major con-

cerns steered the definition of these actions: to build on existing experiences and on-going initiatives, to consolidate positive aspects; to deal with the most urgent constraints identified; to match PENT (National Strategic Tourism Plan) orientations for Alentejo and Nature Tourism.

The proposed actions are thought to be both feasible and effective as just a first step in the consolidation of Alentejo Litoral as a real sustainable nature tourism destination, taking on the richness of the resources of the 3 Protected Areas.

The following table shows the 10 actions proposed and their contribution to the operational goals indicated above. Eight out of the ten actions aim at improving the tourism offer, in terms of increasing articulation among the different stakeholders, providing better visiting conditions and services and enhancing overall quality. The other two actions (actions 2 and 3) are intended to increase demand from target markets.

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Table 1:
The 10 actions proposed
and their contribution to
the operational goals.

ACTIONS	Goal 1 To increase and enhance ourism offer	Goal 2 To increase the number of visitors	Goal 3 To increase the share of foreign markets	Goal 4 To improve tourism infrastructure and services
Action 1 – Operational coordination of regional actors	V			V
Action 2 – Integrated distribution management system for the destination	V	V	V	V
Action 3 – Development of a communication campaign oriented to foreign markets		V	V	
Action 4 - Monitoring tourism quality	V			V
Action 5 – Tourism oriented education and training	V			V
Action 6 – Improving on site information				V
Action 7 – Production of a tourism investor guide in relation to the 3 Protected Areas	V			V
Action 8 – Production of a guide for nature tourism activities	V		V	
Action 9 – Smartphone application to access information on tourism offer		V		V
Action 10 – Improving environmental quality of businesses and services	V	V		V

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Summary

This article summarises the Local Tourism Strategic Plan (LTSP) proposed for the Alentejo Litoral Region (Coastal Alentejo Region), in Portugal, in the scope of the project 2BParks, co-financed by the MED Programme. The territorial scope of the LTSP is one of the 5 NUTS III subdivisions of the Alentejo region in Portugal. The territory combines small urban centres with rural landscape and a coastal area that spreads along 179 Km of shoreline. Three protected areas are located in this region: the Nature Reserve of the Santo Andre and Sancha Lagoons, the Nature Reserve of the Sado Estuary and a Nature Park located in the southernmost part of the Alentejo coast. The article includes a brief analysis of the natural resources and socio-economic characteristics of the target territory, a summary of tourism resources and of recent evolution of tourism offer and demand. This evaluation, combined with the participatory approach followed, supports a SWOT analysis addressing the development of nature tourism in Alentejo Litoral. A strategic plan for sustainable tourism is outlined, including the definition of strategic objectives, marketing objectives and operational goals. Based on this framework, a marketing mix strategy is proposed and an action plan is defined.

Résumé

Cet article résume le Plan stratégique local de tourisme (LTSP) proposé pour la Région de l'Alentejo Litoral (Région côtière de l'Alentejo), au Portugal, dans le cadre du projet 2B Parks, cofinancé par le Programme Med. Le cadre territorial du LTSP est l'une des cinq subdivisions NUT III de la région de l'Alentejo au Portugal. Le territoire combine des petits centres urbains avec des paysages ruraux et une zone côtière qui s'étend le long de 179 km de rivages. Trois aires protégées sont situées dans la région: la Réserve naturelle des lagunes de Santo André et Sancha, la Réserve naturelle de l'Estuaire du Sado et un Parc naturel situé dans la partie Sud de la côte de l'Alentejo. L'article inclut une brève analyse des ressources naturelles et des caractéristiques socio-culturelles du territoire visé, un résumé des ressources touristiques et de l'évolution récente de l'offre et de la demande touristiques. Cette évaluation, combinée avec l'approche participative suivie, s'appuie sur une analyse SWOT abordant le développement du tourisme de nature dans l'Alentejo Litoral. Un plan stratégique pour un tourisme durable est esquissé, incluant la définition des objectifs stratégiques, des objectifs marketing et des buts opérationnels. Fondés sur ce cadre, une stratégie marketing combinée est proposée et un plan d'action est défini.