

# Tourism and forests around the Mediterranean

## *Comparing approaches, comparing fates*

by Samiha KHELIFA

***Tourism, a booming industry in the 20<sup>th</sup> - 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, relies more than any other economic activity on a territory's natural assets and hospitality.***

***The objective of the session «Tourism and forests» of the 4<sup>th</sup> Mediterranean Forest Week in Barcelona, was to share different perspectives on the importance of forests for tourism activities and socioeconomic development and discuss the technical, economic and political challenges involved in the promotion of nature tourism around the Mediterranean and in the management of forests and natural areas.***

### Introduction

Forests today, an immense worldwide reserve of biodiversity, offer perspectives for territorial development based on the multifunctional scope of the areas they cover and the profitable use of amenities that are without commercial value (landscape, biodiversity, clean air...). Besides non-wood forest products (NWFP), it is tourism that has become the buzz word. Tourism, an industry that has expanded considerably throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, centers more than any other economic activity on nature and hospitality, demanding the creation of attractive locally-based new products in response to the increasing demand for contact with a more or less unspoiled natural environment.

Forest protection policies that have failed to limit pressures affecting natural habitat are expensive to implement and have not improved the income of local inhabitants. They have given way to initiatives designed with a real will to embrace sustainable schemes for local and regional development. But how can an activity as polluting as tourism be combined with the preservation of the forests and woodlands around the Mediterranean Rim? Should tourism be a focus as the main vector of economic development or as a tool for the promotion of forests? What is the relationship between tourism in forests and the natural resource? Do forests represent inputs for the products for tourism or is their preservation in fact the ultimate goal? Surely profitable use of the resource and the setting up of local governance can generate wealth for a local population and reinforce a feeling of belonging at a time it is

undergoing a crisis of identity? To date, have there been successful experiments around the Mediterranean Rim? Is the context on the Northern Rim similar to that on the southern side? Such are the questions involved in the management and improvement of forests, woodlands and mountainous regions around the Mediterranean Rim.

This article seeks to suggest a number of lines of response by a comparative consideration of the main international and regional views on forest development, tourism and the Mediterranean.

## Mediterranean forests and woodlands: human and natural potential

Stretching over more than 75 million hectares, Mediterranean forests represent 2% of the world's forests. The threat to their very vulnerable ecosystems with a high number of endemic species justifies their status as a "hotspot" of world biodiversity (MEYERS *et al.*, 2000). This threat has been countered by the protection of 18 million hectares, of which 8.5 million are devoted to biodiversity (FAO, 2013) though there is an imbalance in their distribution (90% are in the North). As it is the case for forests worldwide, those around the Mediterranean are required to generate socio-economic benefits defined as "*deriving from forests, [which] correspond to the satisfaction of basic human needs and the enhancement of the quality of life (needs at a higher level) made possible by the consumption of goods and services coming from forests and trees or, indirectly, thanks to the income and jobs created within the forestry sector.*" (UNO, 2014). Indeed, it is by their non-wood products and their services that Mediterranean forests stand out worldwide (MERLO & CROITORU, 2005). Their attractiveness is due to their biological and geological diversity and to their landscapes, all of which can be turned to profitable use through tourism and leisure activities and are justifiably considered as directly usable features for which, as much in the south as in the north, the populations are willing to pay (FAO, 2013). Encouraging visits to Mediterranean forests will be that much more opportune when carried out in concer-

tation with the local inhabitants so as to reinforce approaches adapted to the local context and fitting in with society's mental representations. Such representations are the appropriation a social group makes of its environment and, when deeply shared, enhance the relations between its members and consolidate the group's identity (JODELET, 1989).

The 2014 FAO report on the situation of forests worldwide recognises the role of the cultural and spiritual uses of forests in developing a feeling of belonging amongst forest dwellers. Given that this sentiment is classified as among the higher needs of human beings, its prior requirements are justice and security and its possible perspectives involve an artistic sensitivity to nature and its ecosystems. However, though tourism can turn an area's defining heritage to profitable advantage, in its present form it constitutes a menace to social groups, particularly those in fairly undisturbed natural environments (BEDHIOUFI KHELIFA & KHELIFA, 2013). If tourism is to fit in with a sustainable dynamic of local development, it is vital that tourism and leisure activities generate benefits for the local population sufficient to reinforce the feeling of social justice and security and consolidate the feeling of belonging to the group by highlighting an authentic identity which can be communicated to visitors. The discovery of others is, in fact, the new impetus animating European tourists who represent the bulk of the clientele coming to the Mediterranean (BERRIANE, 2014). Coming together via cultural immersion and shared viewpoints is of the utmost utility in breaking down the stereotypes which condition how people regard others and which at the present time have set the Northern Rim against its southern counterpart.

The sustainable development of forests implies tourism integrated into the human activities previously established in the wooded areas (e.g. farming, logging, crafts). In this way forests will be able to meet head on the worldwide changes that are leading to the deterioration of the environment, as evidenced in the Mediterranean Strategy for Sustainable Development (MSSD) in rural Mediterranean regions. Such areas, on both the Northern and Southern Rims, suffer from disparities within themselves as well as from the lack of drive in business life and the absence of well-thought-out sustainable

development projects that are region-wide in scope and context.

While the stages in setting up a regional project remain similar right around the Mediterranean, each must be rooted in its northern or southern context. Any project starts from the assessment of the actual land holdings and their characteristics, the projects, the stakeholders and the potential facilitator among those involved. Next comes the analysis of the real potential, a realignment of geographic and administrative areas and the revelation of identity and originality. The final stage sees innovations acquire heritage status or, indeed, their recognition as creative artifices, along with their integration into the services and products involved in a regional strategy or project.

## Tourism eyes the forests

Tourism centers more than any other economic activity on nature and hospitality, demanding the creation of attractive locally-based new products in response to today's increasing demand for contact with a more or less unspoiled natural environment.

As a tourist destination, the Mediterranean Rim receives more than 300 million tourists a year (30% of the world's tourists), generates €902 billion, with continuous growth of more than 6% in 2013, and represents 12% of the region's exports (WTO, 2013). Scarcely developed in the past in forested areas, apart from ski resorts in the mountains, tourism nowadays is spreading into natural areas in pursuit of diversification and the quest for authenticity, thus reflecting the desires of its clientele. The Mediterranean Rim, traditionally providing seaside destinations, now attracts visitors towards its hinterland and little-frequented back country, particularly around the Southern Rim, giving rise to a more diffuse form of tourism that is modifying the relationship between the inhabitants and their territory (BERRIANE & ADERGHAL, 2012).

Also the object of this interest, forests and woodlands have been encompassed by a dynamic now leading to the implementation of government strategies and policies at international and regional levels. All such initiatives call for jettisoning the usual conventional tourism that is often limited to one

sector, using scarce and finite resources (such as water around the southern Mediterranean) with very little direct benefit to the local inhabitants or without care for the ecosystems. Now is the time to begin comparing outlooks so as to clarify the meaning of "environment" or "ecosystem" as understood by forest managers and tourism professionals. Whereas, for the first group, the meaning involves biodiversity, plant associations and biotopes, for the second it conjures up waste disposal, economising energy and water. The idea that each group has of ethical behavior is not the same. One is based on disinterested action while the other has profit as its aim, so that it becomes necessary to set up local governance based on the guidelines for shared action towards developing tourism in forests and woodlands. Such innovative governance derives from collaborative experimentation in a particular context involving surface areas that go beyond administrative demarcations (KHELIFA, 2014). Its establishment is made that much more complex by the fragmented nature of tourism development: a varied range of stakeholders, products and economic activities. Imbalance emerges rapidly if the people concerned lack an emancipated outlook and do not have available channels of communication in every direction which facilitate interconnection between the level of strategic planning and the hands-on activities in the field: the "bottom/up and top/down" by which the communicative input (*L'agir communicationnel*, HABERMAS, 1981) plays a major role in defusing the usual rivalries and fostering synergy for the profitable use of the regional resources.

The reinforcement of the multifunctional scope of Mediterranean forests through sustainable forms of tourism depends on the development of new tourism products which will be enhanced by conforming to the guidelines for the sustainable development of tourism as described in the manual for the development of tourism products published by the World Tourism Organisation in June 2014. This document lists five criteria:

- be genuine and of local origin;
- support the host communities
- respect the natural and socio-cultural environments;
- stand out from the competition;
- be viable.

In this way a tourism product can claim to

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endow a destination (forest and woodland) with a meaning, a relationship and worth, promoting a common identity shared by the various stakeholders involved directly or indirectly in the tourism activity which itself becomes the flag bearer for the region's whole economic sector, gathering those involved around a regional marketing policy.

The final two points meriting further refection are, first, the management of the cycle of a forest tourism product; and, second, the management of visitor flows (elite/general public) (TORRENTE, 2014).

## Conclusion

The place where the future of forests and of Mediterranean tourism intersect is the locus where stakeholders and decision-makers at the national and local levels will determine the destiny of forests and woodland areas. The borderline between a symbiotic relationship and a conflict of interests is easily crossed if the path forward is not clearly waymarked by the guiding principles of sustainable regional development. A happy medium between the different approaches adopted by forestry professionals and by the tourism industry needs to be found: the latter should rethink its mass-based character, the unequal sharing of wealth and resources and its conception of products, moving from a client-based approach to one centred on the region as a whole. The gains look promising but the risk of losing the right track is big and there could be no way back.

S.K.

## Summary

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Forests today, an immense worldwide reserve of biodiversity, offer perspectives for territorial development based on the multifunctional scope of the areas they cover and the profitable use of amenities that are without commercial value (landscape, biodiversity, clean air...). Besides non-woody forest products (NWFP), it is tourism that has become the buzz word, demanding the creation of attractive locally-based new products in response to the increasing demand for contact with a more or less unspoiled natural environment. But how can an activity as polluting as tourism be combined with the preservation of the forests and woodlands around the Mediterranean Rim? Should tourism be a focus as the main vector of economic development or as a tool for the promotion of forests? What is the relationship between tourism in forests and the natural resource? Do forests represent inputs for the products for tourism or is their preservation in fact the ultimate goal? This article seeks to suggest a number of lines of response by a comparative consideration of the main international and regional views on forest development, tourism and the Mediterranean.

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