SUSTAINABLE TOURISM CLUSTERS:

THE CASE OF ALENTEJO’S NATURAL PARKS

Abstract

The sustainable tourism has been increasingly regarded as a strategic development axis for regions of low density. The preservation of these areas and its enhancement for nature tourism both on the accommodation and on the animation environment, through their balanced development, may lead to greater short-term adherence to this type of tourism and long-term extended capacity to compete internationally in terms of sustainable nature tourism.

Thus, the growing attention given by policy makers to tourism, including the component of sustainable tourism, is clearly demonstrated in the main proposals included in the PENT (National Strategic Plan for Tourism). This policy document contains several different strategies, aimed to promote the development of tourism in the Portuguese territory. However, for the Alentejo, the PENT does not defend the development of natural tourism. We believe that Alentejo’s potentialities for nature tourism were underestimated in the strategic document mentioned above. Subsequently, the communication will focus on the sustainable nature tourism in the Natural Park of Southwest of Alentejo and Vicentine Coast. It will analyze the main economic features of this protected area and, more precisely, the conditions of supply and demand for this type of tourism.

Thus, the main goal is to analyze the sustainable tourism cluster, according to Michael Porter's model. This way, we will take into consideration aspects such as public policies and strategies followed in this protected area, cooperation and competition between companies and expectations related with recreation and leisure within the natural park. Finally, we intend to determine the most adequate strategies to facilitate the boosting of local economies (often weakened by the ageing population) and the continued preservation of natural and cultural values, ensuring that they remain differentiated from other areas. This last concern is clearly related with the recent standardization of local tourism and leisure.

Key-words: Sustainable, Tourism, Clusters, Development
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1. Tourism in Portugal

Tourism is one of the most important sectors in Portuguese economy. It represents 11% of the GDP and 10% of total employment (2006). According to the World Wide Travel and Tourism Council (2005), tourist demand grew more than 5% in 2005 and the yearly expected growth rate until 2015 is 4.1%. The large majority of tourists visiting Portugal come from Europe, followed by the United States. The United Kingdom contributes with more than 20% of the total. Germany comes second with 11% and Spain with 7%. The French represent only 3.2%. Over the last few years, the bed occupancy rate originated from the UK and Germany has decreased, but a significant increase in the number of Spanish and Portuguese, maintain a raise in the final numbers. The Algarve region is the most popular destiny with approximately 39% of total bed occupancy, followed by Lisbon with 20.5% and Madeira with 16%. Alentejo region represents only 2.9% of the total. Despite a considerable growth in the last few years, this region maintains a low attraction potential. When it comes to the tourists annual distribution, the weaker period is registered between November and February and the strongest between July and September. Alentejo tourism is oriented towards the internal market (the same happens with the North, Centre and Azores regions). The other regions are oriented towards the external markets: Algarve, Lisbon and Madeira. Bed occupancy rate in Alentejo scores 29.9%, below the national average (38.6%), but above the Centre and the North regions.

Despite the fact that Alentejo has the lowest hotel capacity of all Portuguese regions, when Rural Tourism (TER)\(^1\) is concerned, the region rates second with 145 establishments, next to the North region. Just to permit a comparison, let’s say that Algarve has 30 registered establishments of this kind and the Azores 47. When it comes to nature tourism, it is obvious the existence of a strong relation with the rural tourism infrastructures mentioned above. Statistics also show that the number of lodging-houses (or country-houses) is the highest of all the regions in Portugal. These numbers reveal the identity of Alentejo: rural, with a bias towards a more quite and elitist demand, which avoids crowds and prefers the quietness of the country.

The beautiful and more untouched landscapes, its rural origins and one of the lowest (twelve month) tourist densities among Portuguese regions created also “une certaine atmosphère”

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\(^{1}\) Portuguese definition for Tourism in Rural Space – includes country houses, village tourism, agro tourism, rural tourism, house tourism, rural hotels, camping, holiday camps/colonies and youth hostels.
for the investment. Over the last few years, national and international investors became more visible and larger tourist projects are growing, namely around the Alqueva Dam Lake in the eastern part of Alentejo.

2. Alentejo Parks and Natural Reserves

The Portuguese Institute for Nature Conservation and Biodiversity (ICNB) defines “Natural Parks” as “national interest areas containing natural and semi-humanized landscapes and consistent examples of the integration of human activities and nature, which shows samples of a natural region”.

Natural Reserves are "areas for the protection of flora and fauna", fully integrated in demarcated areas for protection, within the protected areas, "to maintain the natural processes in undisturbed state". Marine reserves are areas in demarcated Protected Areas to ensure marine biodiversity.

The various plans of Nature Tourism in Reserves and Parks highlight the natural features as the major potential for this type of tourism: geographical location and natural environment (in which we can include the landscape); historical and cultural heritage; fairs; festivals and pilgrimages; sun and beach; nature watch; walking and sports of nature; thematic routes; museums; crafts, food and wine; and last but not the least, tourist accommodation. Next, we start to briefly present the main natural parks and reserves in Alentejo Region.
Fig. 1 - Location of natural parks and reserves in Alentejo Region.

Source: Own elaboration.
Fig. 1.1. Sado Estuary Natural Reserve (RNES)

With an overall area of 23,160 ha, the RNES, created in 1980, presents as special natural interests, its Botany and its Fauna (with ornithological and ictiology).

The Reserve integrates the municipality of Alcácer do Sal and of Grândola, each one with 14 and 11 lodgment units, respectively.

Source: ICNB, 2009

Fig. 1.2. Santo André and Sancha Lagoon Natural Reserve (RNLSAS)

Created in 2000 by ICNB, the Santo André and Sancha Lagoon Natural Reserve has an total extension of 5,247 ha among the municipalities of Sines and Santiago do Cacém.

Its main natural interests are the Wetlands (important for breeding, wintering and migration of birds), its Dunes, but also the Sea Lane and its Marine Faune.

The number of lodgment units in Sines Municipality reach the 10 units, and in Santiago do Cacém it reaches de 11 units.

Source: ICNB, 2009
The Guadiana Valley Natural Park, developed among the municipalities of Serpa and Mértola, has an overall extension of 69.773 ha.

Its special natural interests justified its creation in 1995. Nowadays it is particular relevant for its Fauna and Flora, but also for its Geomorphology and Landscape and for its peculiar History and Culture.

Regarding the number of tourist units in this Municipalities, Serpa has 14 and Mértola 8 lodgement units.
Integrated in the Municipalities of Sines and Odemira, the PNSACV has an extension of 76,000 ha.

It was created in 1980 due to its Coastal habits, its Flora and its Endemic fauna (with ichthyofauna and birds). The History of this territory plays an important role also in its creation.

In what concerns the tourist offer, Sines has a total number of 10 tourist units and Odemira, the largest Municipality in Portugal, has 26 lodgement units.

Source: ICNB, 2009
Created in 1989 by ICNB, the São Mamede Mountain Natural Park integrates four municipalities (Marvão, Castelo de Vide, Portalegre and Arronches) over an total area of 55,524 ha.

It is particularly important for the compatibility between human activities and ecosystems dynamics.

Concerning the number of tourist units offered in this area, Marvão has 31 lodgement units, Castelo de Vide 17 and Portalegre 16. The municipality of Arronches does not have any tourist unit.

3. Porter “Diamond” Model

Clusters are emerging spontaneously based on market forces on a variety of activities. The process of cluster formation occurs naturally as firms, infrastructure investments, logistics, etc. responding to local needs, organized in cluster concentrations. Given such spontaneous economic processes responding to market, should clusters be left alone in a process of natural development?

In the beginning of the 80’s, M. Porter proposed the existence of geographical concentrations where growth was strong and sustained by the interactions among private, public and institutional actors. Its functioning was schematized through the famous four points “Porter diamond”:

- “Factor conditions” – the structural environment elements (natural resources, workforce, infrastructures, institutions, universities). The main production factors quality is the first issue for the cluster development framework.
• “Demand conditions” – disclose the demand conditions for products or services in the internal market. Through its analysis firms preview the foreseeable evolution of markets and try to cope the consumers’ desires. Demand stimulates innovation, the search for new production methods and the climb along the value chain.

• “Related industries” – these are the activities that offer other products and services, but that to a similar demand, can interact both with the client or the firms’ cluster. Geographical proximity enhances the exchange of ideas and innovations benefits.

• “Strategy, structure and rivalry” – the existence of local competitors is a powerful stimulant to innovation and performance improvement. But – when needed – cooperation among firms can also reveal itself as a determinant factor.

In order to complete the diamond systemic nature, Porter still included two external factors to the cluster: historical hazards and public policies.

![Fig. 2 - Porter “Diamond” Model](image)


This scheme should be analysed in a systemic way, as the effect on one of the four main elements depends from the others’ state. Interactions inside the cluster are mainly informal, enticing coherence: all actors favour the cluster (cooperation), but keep their freedom of choice in all business opportunities (competition).
The detailed examination of each and one of the diamond points is a practical guide (through enquiries, interviews and statistical analysis) to carry out a SWOT analysis of a particular cluster.

*Fig. 3 - The Porter “Diamond” Model applied to Tourism in Protected Areas*

Source: Authors

Government has an important role in assembling information about cluster composition, membership, employment, and performance. Such information will allow public policies and public investments to be better aligned with business needs, based on the cluster composition in each location and region. This will make public policy effective. Cluster information will also increase the efficiency of private sector investment and foster the rise of new businesses.

Another potential role for government in cluster development is to *convene* cluster participants. Once clusters are organized in trade associations or other forms, government agencies need to become active participants in dialogs with cluster participants to understand local constraints to productivity and identify gaps and weaknesses in public policy. That’s one of the problems identified in Alentejo. Sometimes the absence of a global strategy, partnerships and the lack of an “association spirit” has many disadvantages. In a region like Alentejo that appeared has an unexpected variable.

Cluster-based policies, unlike industrial policies (for example), should be neutral with regard to the economic activity. Enhancing cluster externalities and spillovers will increase productivity and prosperity in any cluster, providing superior levels of territorial
The region of Alentejo has great potential for tourism and government should strongly support this cluster. Like many other regions, Alentejo has a product that is “one of this kind”, unique and presents a large attractiveness potential, as for national and international markets. Landscape, natural environment, climate and heritage could be the answer to regional development.

In diamond Porter history or chance can be seen like the part or some random cases that happen and can explain why development or some industries appear in that place or in that order. For example, Krugman (1991) explain “the location of the carpet industry in Dalton, Georgia to Catherine Evans, who in 1985, by chance made a tufted bedspread as weeding gift. The bedspread was regarded as so beautiful that neighbours began demanding tufted items. From that beginning, with the addition of modern technology, the carpet industry grew and became concentrated in Dalton. A general theory of location or trade could not account for chance events that give rise to global production locations such as carpets in Dalton. [...] Chance and dynamics are both present in the Dalton example because bedspread maker could have been born anywhere.” (Feinberg, 2003).

4. Inquiries results analysis

4.1. Introduction

Aiming at the assessment of sustainable tourism's importance in Alentejo (Portuguese region), we conducted a series of telephonic surveys to several lodgement enterprises operating in the ten municipalities of Alentejo who have areas integrated in Natural Parks. From the 104 contacts established, only 59 were effectively conducted. Therefore, that is the total number of contacts used in this particular study.

The survey applied was rather synthetic. In order to avoid incoherencies and doubtful interpretations in the final treatment of the inquiries' results, we privileged the use of closed questions, more objectively and synthetically treatable. The inquiry was structured in seven different thematic domains:
A – Firms identification;

B - Suppliers;

C – Employment;

D – Supportive sectors;

E – Strategy, structure and competition among the companies;

F – Client Markets;

G – Public Politics.

To assess the users’ profile of Alentejo nature tourism, an application of a questionnaire was carried through in the units classified and licensed by the natural areas municipalities. The questionnaire used was synthetic, with a majority of closed answers, helping in the results treatment.

In the total, 152 surveys were conducted in the five natural sites, distributed as follows: PNSSM - 48; PNSACV - 34; PNVG - 37; RNES - 9; RNLSAS - 20.

The five Protected Areas were also contacted both through mail and telephone but only two answered on time: Sado Estuary Natural Reserve and Southwest Alentejo and Vicentin Coast Natural Park.

The three inquiries are carried out jointly, following the Porter model adopted to sustainable tourism, as mentioned above.

4.2. Factor Conditions

4.2.1 Firms Identification

From the juridical point of view, 91% of the 66 inquired firms are “independent entities” (53). Approximately 7% are integrated in a national group (“Pousadas de Portugal”, “Teixeira Duarte” or “Acqua Hotel”) and only 2% belong to an international group (the “Best Western Hotels”).

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In what relates to the funding distribution, with the exception of “Pousada de Santa Clara” (in Odemira), all the inquired firms are supported through national private funding.

4.2.2 Employment

The great majority of the lodgement units – specially the smaller ones, functioning as Rural Tourism – use a multitask approach to their employees. That’s specially the case in the cleaning services (around 90% of the sample) and in the marketing, promotion and publicity (82%).

There is great variability in the number of persons working in the lodgment units. Therefore, the average number (8 persons) does not reflect properly the founded disparity. Bigger units (Hotels and Hostels) employ a higher number of persons, whereas small Rural Tourism units employ not more than two or three persons.

Almost half of the employees (46%) do not present any kind of training in the job performed. It’s particularly the case of those working in areas such as cleaning or kitchen activities. Normally, the small businesses are organized as little family businesses. Even so, approximately ¼ of the people working in the lodgments can be considered as specialized personnel.

The survey also showed that 60% of the businesses owners or director managers have a high level of education (graduate level). The remaining 40% have an undergraduate level (medium degree education).

4.3 Demand Conditions

We concluded for the total of natural areas that 73% of the clients are Portuguese, 5% belonged to the region and 22% were foreigners.

In what gender is concerned, 59% of the inquired were men and 41% women. The RNES presents 56% of women and RNLSAS contains the lowest number of women, only 30%. The remaining natural areas follow the average.
The inquired average age is 46 year and in all the natural areas the age is around the 40 years old, except for PNVG for 52 years old. The inquired occupations are extremely varied, with primary focus on teachers, engineers and pensioners.

In what concerns the education level, one detects very different situations depending on the natural area analyzed. In the total 61, 4% of the inquired customers have a graduate level, 27,7% high school level and only 10, 8% have elementary education (mainly at RNLSAS and PNSSM). Then the natural parks clients’ majority has a university degree.

*Fig. 4 - Customers level of education by natural area*

![Figure 4](image-url)

Source: Authors’ questionnaires

To the question on the reasons to choose Alentejo as a tourist destination, the answers are most diverse: landscape, work, people, and peaceful environment. Individual events are also a factor to come to Alentejo: a cheese fair in PNVG or a jazz festival in Portalegre (PNSSM) can act as powerful attraction elements in the regional context. Historical and architectural sites also play an important role, namely in PNSSM (where 3 important castles are located).
As we can see, leisure is the main reason to visit these areas. This is true to all the natural areas under consideration, with the exception of RNLSAS where business was pointed as the main reason. Consequently, it is in this Reserve that the average stay is higher (6 nights).

The PNSACV also presents a longer average stay, as during the summer holydays many people enjoy its location near the beaches. The remaining natural areas have an average stay of just two days. Thus, in the total, the average is 3.6 nights.

Fig. 5 - Reasons for choosing Alentejo and a particular natural area

Source: Questionnaires.

On the information source, the answers pointed to Internet, friends and family. There are also some references to the workplace or colleagues.

On the question of the activities, they are diverse and varying, but in total, the most popular category is “other activities”: rest, walk, cuisine.
Sports also attract many people specially those who focused on aquatic activities such as surfing, windsurfing or swimming as well as hiking and interpretative pathways.

Culture presents some relevance, particularly concerts, castles and local museums.

Business tourists’ state that they use their free time to explore the location, taste the cuisine and will likely return again in leisure.

Only two people said that the health facilities were bad or absent.

Catering is generally classified as “good”, despite the fact that a majority of people complained about the lack of restaurants, cafes and hotels for the middle / high class. The few existing are classified as “good”. Restaurants were worthy of the highest praise, many often stating that this was the main reason to come to Alentejo.

A majority of answers show that these are people who are used to this type of tourism. Those who don’t have this habit say they are considering doing it in the coming years, taking into account the beauty of the landscape and the sports.

*Fig. 5 - Nature Tourism Habit (number)*

Source: Authors’ questionnaires
To the question whether they intend to return, only two people answered negatively in the Guadiana Valley Natural Park (PNVG). Many say they only intend to return under the condition that Alentejo does not change dramatically in the coming years.

Thus, one can conclude that the actual tourists are potential future customers, as they declare to be satisfied.

### 4.4 Related and Supporting Industries

Around 85% of the inquired units believe to depend on related and supporting industries in order to be successful in their business. The most commonly identified factors are natural patrimony (sightseeing and cultural tourism) and, more specifically, the existence of beaches (especially during the summer season). That’s particularly the case of the PNSACV.

*Fig. 6- Recognized factors of success by units*

![Graph showing recognized factors of success by units](image)

Source: Authors’s questionnaires

The inquiries conducted via-telephone allowed to note down some qualitative aspects that should be pointed out. Activities such as animal's watching are specially requested by families with small children, or by couples with some knowledge on the matter (e.g. bird watching).
Trekking activities are also very popular among the couples – mostly foreigners –, as an alternative to the traditional sun and sea.

Among the factors mentioned by the enterprises, relevance to the Meetings & Incentives (normally pointed out by the lodgements near to the PNSSM. Sports and cultural events in the various municipalities are also commonly mentioned. In bigger lodgements, the use of regional public/private services (such as local transports like taxis or cleaning services) presents a greater regularity.

Food and Beverages are supplied in 82% of the inquired firms from regional and local sources (the reminiscent 18% prefer national suppliers), a value which points to a very satisfactory cluster cohesion.

Law and financial services are mostly guaranteed by regional suppliers.

Tourism animation is the sector where clearly lies the highest propensity to partnerships establishment. At least 91% of the inquired firms make regular associations with other local/regional agents in order to offer a wider and more articulate list of leisure activities to their clients.

4.5. Firm Strategy, Structure and Rivalry

The vast majority of the inquired firms have not established any kind of partnership (60%), despite the fact that they recognize it as a most important factor. The remaining 40% established cooperation agreements, especially in the tourism animation area (and, more informally, with restaurants), namely with local/regional enterprises.

In some cases it was possible to identify the partner: it’s the case of the so-called “Salt Way” (Alcácer do Sal) or the “Badoka Safari Park” (Vila Nova de Santo André and Santiago do Cacém).

The majority of the units (31 among the inquired 59) do not take part in any local, regional or national sector association. Among the 33% that answered affirmatively to this question, the biggest share recognized great benefits in this fact, mostly in terms of access to information. Designations such as “Alentejo Heritage” “Portugal Hotels Association” or “AETAL –
Tourism of Alentejo can be placed among the most named regional/local sectorial associations.

More than 1/3 of the lodgments admitted to cooperate with national travel agencies. Approximately 22% do not cooperate in any kind of distribution and placement channel.

*Fig. 7 - Cooperation with Travel Agencies in different geographic levels (%)*

A similar situation can be verified in the partnerships with Tour Operators: more than 1/3 of the units cooperate with com National Operators.

### 4.6 Public Policies

All the inquired entrepreneurs assumed to be currently facing difficult times. Nevertheless, there is a wide range of variation in the nature of these problems.

In what concerns the existence of local and regional problems, the most cited were the lack of building maintenance and the low quality of public services. Even so, the most identified problems (36%) concern to the tourism sector itself. Seasonality and the weakness (or even inexistence) of public municipal policies (e.g. in the promotion of the municipality as a tourist destination) are among the main problems.
The difficulty to find specialized workforce (Food and Beverages), bureaucracy, lagging period to obtain licensing papers and the lack of intra-firms cooperation are some of the identified problems.

The problems posed by the current World economic crisis concentrated 31% of the answers.

Protected Areas management problems are also mentioned repeatedly. Entrepreneurs view the Protected Areas’ organizational structure in a general negative perspective, in particularly what concerns the inexistence of cooperation strategies between Protected Areas and firms. The existence of Protected Areas promotional material in the lodgment reception areas, is the only connective element between the two entities (parks and firms). As far as we could understand, there are no specific relationship channels between the parks and the lodgement agents. To avoid partial judgments, we transcript some of the critiques pointed out:

“Best Western Hotel – Porto Covo” - “The natural park does not give us the support that they should.”; “Refúgio da Praia (Rural Tourism – Porto Covo) - “In the last two years I have been trying to cooperate with the park but without results. I think mainly due to political questions”; “Hotel Vila Park – Santiago do Cacém” - “I do not recognize advantages of belonging to a natural park… I will tell you why… I asked for the ICNB’s [the official regulatory entity of a specific park] support in order to promote bird watching activities among my clients and I did not get any answer. Besides that, we had around 10.000 trees to give to ICNB to plant wherever they wanted to in Portugal and they didn’t want them”; “Hotel Monte da Leziria – Santiago do Cacém” - “We have a good relationship with the park’s management but we would think there would be a great benefit if ICNB adopted a more commercial managing system to the parks. The booking of guided visits to the parks is quite limited and heavily dependent on the presence and availability of human resources. So, despite having an excellent cooperation with them, the truth is we are really conditioned in our offering possibilities to our clients, because we are quite dependent of ICNB”.

On their part, protected areas managers assume to make some kind of cooperation with local authorities and with Tourism officials. Parks directors believe that it is not their role to promote common strategies with other parks.

In conclusion, despite the individualism of entrepreneurs and certain mistrust on the part of hotels and protected areas managers, one can identify a trend towards increased cooperation intra and inter-firm business.
When asked to make a prediction, entrepreneurs presented a wide variety of perspectives. Except for one or two rural tourism facilities (e.g. “Monte das Fraias” in Grândola), all the answers pointed to increasing difficulties in the near future. Summarizing, entrepreneurs adopt one of the following three distinct behaviors:

1. The ones that will try to redefine their position in the market by:
   - Creating more services (aim to attract more tourists and per capita spending) like spas, restaurants or unit capacity increase;
   - Creating cooperation protocols, in order to offer more (and thematically wider) leisure opportunities;
   - Redefining their position in some markets, namely the Nordic, through agreements with foreign Tour Operators.

2. Those that “will wait and see” to what the future might bring, maintaining (for now) their business and commercial strategies.

3. The ones that assume to have given up all hope in their businesses and are even thinking of closing, claiming that the demand is going to decrease, affecting the sustainability of their core business.
When questioned about the Strategic Plan for Tourism the Nature Parks managers were unanimous, agreeing that the Alentejo should be a priority area to the promotion of nature tourism. Tourist and sport nature companies share the same point of view, arguing that Alentejo has a great potential for this type sustainable development. Protected areas argue the importance of increasing average stay, saying "it is more advantageous for a protected area, have a visit from a person seven days of that seven people in one day" (Sado Estuary Natural Reserve).

4.7 History

Protected areas represent more than spaces free of strong and visible human activity: these territories also reflect a balance between nature and human action and, in order to maintain that balance, it is required to keep a sustainable dimension on the development of economic activities such as agriculture, hunting, livestock and fisheries.

Even if Portugal always had, within its territory, very interesting natural sites and beautiful landscapes, specific legislation aimed to the preservation of these spaces only appeared in 1948. In that year, the Portuguese Government approved the first piece of legislation which included a first mention to the concept of natural parks.

Nevertheless, the real beginning of a structured policy aimed towards the protection of valuable nature spaces and sites, was only established much later by the Law No. 9 / 70. This legal document stated that it was up to the Government the particular responsibility of promoting and protecting the so called natural spaces. This way, and according to the Law mentioned above, the Government should pursuit the necessary strategies to guarantee "the defense of areas where the natural environment should be reconstructed or preserved against degradation caused by man, "and" the rational use and protection of all natural resources throughout the country to enable their enjoyment by future generations "(explicit reference to sustainable development). These objectives should be achieved by the creation of National Parks and Reserves.

Following this first step, it was created in 1971 the first Protected Area - National Park Peneda-Gerês. It is interesting to notice that this natural structure is the only National Park that exists in the Portuguese Territory. All the other natural spaces have different legal definitions, such as Parque Natural and Reserva Natural.
After 1974, the issues related with Nature Preservation gained a new pace with the creation of a Secretary of State with specific political powers over environmental questions. This way, through the publication of Decree-Law No. 613/76, there was a clear definition of protected areas, with the introduction of the concept of Natural Park, which already existed in several European countries. Another very important moment for the Protected Areas came with the publication of Law No. 11/87, the *Law of Environment*, which noted the importance of regulation and implementation of a national network of protected areas. The Law 11/87 also defined the legal status of that these specific areas should have at a national, regional and local level. This set of principles would only be clarified six years later with the Decree-Law No. 19/93 which eventually created the National Network of Protected Areas.

In Portugal, the creation of protected areas has closely followed the global trend, since the vast majority of these natural spaces were created after the mid seventies.

*Fig. 9 - Establishment of Protected Areas, 1970/2000*

![Graph showing the establishment of protected areas from 1970/2000](Source: www.igeo.pt)

Alentejo remained with local characteristics and natural unchanged, because the builders always denoted greatest attention to the Algarve coast and the region of the west coast of
Portugal. So today we have this area with unique characteristics and an undeniable beauty. Focusing now on the PNSACV we can say that above the decades has been gaining importance as a protected area. In 1988 it was classified as a protected landscape, and later in 1995 classify as a natural park.

In the case of PNSACV we can say that the accident caused builders opt for other regions of the Portuguese territory, thus creating the current situation, where the growth potential of a sustainable tourism in the Alentejo region is enormous. Currently, this situation is beginning to occur, cooperation between companies is emerging in order to meet the new requirements and make PNSACV unique in tourism.

5. SWOT matriz of sustainable tourism in the Alentejo:

The SWOT Matrix clearly shows the Alentejo’s high potential to develop a tourism strategy based on its endogenous natural resources, such as architectural values, parks and reserves. Nevertheless, it will be absolutely vital to define a set of goals that will allow Alentejo to surpass the major threats and to reduce/eliminate the main weaknesses, such as the lack of cooperation between tourism economic agents. This is an important challenge for Alentejo’s near future (table 1).
Table 1 – SWOT matriz of Alentejo tourism

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<tr>
<th>Strengths</th>
<th>Weaknesses</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Suppliers are in most cases regional;</td>
<td>Lack of cooperation between tour operators;</td>
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<tr>
<td>The proportion of registered foreign guests come to be higher than recorded throughout Nut II Alentejo, showing some power of attraction on the tourist market of high consumption of nature and sustainable tourism;</td>
<td>Existence of low supply of nature oriented activities;</td>
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<tr>
<td>Existence of large number of units of tourism in rural areas, providing the possibility of Alentejo is the state of your typical tourist accommodation units;</td>
<td>Greater dependence on the national market (without much of a motivation for travel);</td>
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<tr>
<td>Existence of five natural areas with great potential for global population;</td>
<td>Large seasonal (not always the height of summer is the richest and most suitable for visiting the parks / nature reserves);</td>
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<tr>
<td>Wealth cuisine, landscape, cultural and natural;</td>
<td>Much of the staff employed in the units of accommodation does not have any specialized training, putting into question the quality of service offered</td>
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<tr>
<td>Attractive beach and coastal areas;</td>
<td>Accessibility reduced;</td>
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<td>Fauna, flora and attractive habits;</td>
<td>Reduced number of beds for tourist purposes;</td>
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<td>Ability to adventure sports.</td>
<td>Environmental sensitivity;</td>
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<td>Low qualifications of the labor-tourism;</td>
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<td>Little awareness of the existence of natural areas;</td>
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<td>Low environmental awareness;</td>
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<td>Low entrepreneurship and disclosure of protected areas;</td>
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<td>Low use of local potential.</td>
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<td>Opportunities</td>
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<td>-----------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
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<td>▪ Increased national awareness (European and world) against the importance</td>
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<td>of preserving the environment, induces the extension of the market segment</td>
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<td>of tourism travel and the nature of touring and cultural landscape;</td>
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<td>▪ Awareness of the lack of promotion potential of inappropriate Destination</td>
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<td>by units of housing;</td>
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<td>▪ Dynamics tourism in nature;</td>
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<td>▪ Increasing activities related to sports to nature;</td>
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<tr>
<td>▪ Creation of a cluster of tourism of nature;</td>
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<td>▪ Increased cooperation and competition between different companies.</td>
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<th>Threats</th>
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<tr>
<td>▪ Destinations competing national and Extremadura (in Spain) with better</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>means of distribution and marketing;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>▪ International economic and social, which retracts the potential for travel</td>
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<tr>
<td>to the markets of fitness &quot;nature&quot;;</td>
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<tr>
<td>▪ Destinations similar in Portugal and abroad better known and used from</td>
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<tr>
<td>the tour;</td>
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<tr>
<td>▪ Lower business cooperation;</td>
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<tr>
<td>▪ Low accessibility compared to other tourist destinations.</td>
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<tr>
<td>▪ The over-marketing can generate a mass tourism;</td>
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<td>▪ Risk of environmental degradation.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Final Conclusions

This paper considers a set of assumptions, namely:

1 – Tourism can be considered a basic strategic axis to the Portuguese sustainable development;

2 – These last few years there have been a strong increase in the number of investments in sectors not related with “Sun-Beach” main core;

3 – These investments are mainly located in the inner parts of the country with low population density, which is the general case of Alentejo.

We consider Parks and Reserves to be a value-added resource that deserves to be included in the “National Tourist Supply”. These areas represent spaces where is possible to experiment a peaceful environment and a general feeling of decompression, which is no longer possible in Algarve or some parts of the western coast line.

The choice of Alentejo as our case study took into consideration elements such as geographical dimension, patrimony and the existence of an important network of parks and natural reserves (5).

We argue that Alentejo offers a unique potentiality to the development of the so-called “nature tourism”. This type of tourist supply is considered to have a strong growth potential mainly due to the European market behaviour (Tourism National Strategic Plan - PENT, 2007).

Can we conclude that Alentejo is considered one of the main elements in this new national strategy? The answer is double-face: on one hand, the PENT assumes that the promotion of nature tourism is a strategic challenge, at national level; on the other hand, when it comes to define the regions with greater potential, Alentejo is strangely missing².

The authors of the present paper clearly argue favourably for the Alentejo potential to receive investments (both public and private) to promote this type of tourism. Our conclusion is based on the following main insights:

² «Um dos desafios para Portugal consiste em desenvolver uma oferta respeitando o ambiente. O objectivo é tornar o produto vendável turisticamente, mas sempre preservando as áreas protegidas.» (PENT).
1. The tourist region of Alentejo ranks in first place in the number of overnight stays in the Rural Tourism (TER) at a national level. This result is extremely important to recognize that, in itself, housing is rarely sufficient to retain tourists in local.

Therefore, it is absolutely vital to create a new tourism dynamic based, among other factors, in a renewal of the space management. This will tend to increase the demand for a higher quality, based on the crossing between different tourism products. The Rural Tourism (TER) investments, with a pattern of location in areas of low density, justify a long-standing affinity with Nature Tourism. It is very likely that, in the long run, we will watch a growth in this tourist product, since there is enough established capacity, based both in terms of the quality and the ability to establish networks of information gathering throughout the tourism value.

2. The development of nature tourism in the Alentejo faces optimistic times, since the region has an abundance of resources and natural areas. However, the result of this study also recognizes the existence of some constraints in the development of tourism product, including:

- Nature areas are poorly organized for tourism;
- Smalls companies with little competitive ability;
- Slight tradition of product: insufficient accumulation of experience, technology and know-how;
- Lack of regulation and supervision in the sector;
- Lack of working in partnerships (limited to the structure of the product);
- Deficit of skilled human resources

3. In this work, the lack of partnerships is evident. Traditionally the ICNB was only concerned with the preservation of rural landscape. Only recently, this public authority started to show a clear interest in promoting in natural areas other activities such as tourism, leisure and entertainment.

However, it is expected in a short time, the development of initiatives in vital areas such as cooperation and competitiveness. The new Regional Authority for Tourism, *Tourism of Alentejo*, has taken as a priority the redefinition of the nature tourism product. This way, this new Regional Authority already started to work in partnership with the ICNB, in order to define new frameworks for this tourist product in the Alentejo region.
It is important to stress that this product was considered as a top priority in POTA (Alentejo Operational Plan Tourism). This way, in its plan of action, POTA includes the development of a new business called *Alentejo Paths*, which seek to promote the recovery and/or the redefinition of nature tourism circuits in protected areas or with natural value.

4. The traditional products\(^3\) of the Alentejo region have high standards of quality and can attract tourists to PNSACV. On the other hand, the high quality of TER establishments, guarantees the gaining of new adherents to this form of tourism, mainly because people want to escape from the urban stress. This way, if the companies that operate in the tourist sector start to cooperate, there is a strong possibility that Alentejo will become a destination of choice in the Iberian Peninsula.

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\(^3\) For instance, fish, products from agriculture, rural landscapes
References:


Appendix 1

INQUIRY: SEARCH FOR REASONS TO TRAVEL TO “ALENTEJO”

A - PERSONAL IDENTIFICATION

1. Origin___________________________________
2. Gender: Male □  Female □
3. Age_______________________________________
4. Profession__________________________________
5. Level of Graduation:
   Elemental (until 6º Year) □  Medium (7º to 12º Year) □  Superior □

B - SEARCHING ALENTEJO

6. Reasons to choose Alentejo/District?
   _______________________________________________________________________
   _______________________________________________________________________

7. Motive for travel: Leisure □  Business □  Congress □  Other □

8. How long are you staying?
   _______________________________________________________________________
   _______________________________________________________________________

9. How did you get knowledge about this place?
   _______________________________________________________________________
   _______________________________________________________________________


10. How often do you come to this place?
   Once ☐   Rarely ☐   Once a year ☐   Frequently ☐

11. What is your opinion about the existing infrastructures?
   Sportive__________   Cultural__________   Health__________   Restauration__________
   Others__________

12. What activities you intend to practice?
   Sportive______   Cultural__________   Others__________________

13. It is your habit to do tourism in nature?

   ______________________________________________________________
   ______________________________________________________________

14. Do you think about returning?

   ______________________________________________________________
   ______________________________________________________________