Undercover tourism in the Ebro River Delta

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Abstract

The following study is to outline the development of regional tourism resources of a specific territorial unit. On one hand, discusses how the landscape is formed and what elements make it up. From there, the discretion of the existing tourist resources, proposing a classification according to their regional role. It concludes with which are the areas of project implementation, and how a center for specific tourism services can provide value to the site and a new dimension to tourism development.

Introduction

The Ebro Delta is a region clearly distinct, which has undergone major changes in the last twenty years. In a place where the economy is based mainly on the primary sector, the cultivation of rice, livestock, fisheries and the environment have amazed visitors.

Context

The Ebro Delta is a fragile area, an alluvial soil where water plays a key role. This is a dynamic system, mobile and changing. River’s delta is a place where the small topography can change the geometry of the site, formed by the random choices of the weather. Some Delta edges disappear, while others earn territory on the sea. There are the changing dunes, from station to station, while the rice becomes the star of this vast territory.

Figure 1. Aerial map of Delta Ebro River highlighting major protected areas.

Here the water master, drive, flood fields and dry it, amending relief, and those who work the land plays a key role in the domain of this silver territory. The area is over 30,500 hectares, covering several municipalities. The distance between edges is about 25 km and 30 km between the bays. The so clear geometric shape in the Ebro Delta hides a structure of ways and canals complex and blurred.
In the Ebro Delta there are two main towns, Sant Jaume d’Enveja and Deltebre, and several residential areas or satellite added, which are Rumar, Els Muntells and Balada. There are as well Els Eucaliitus and Poblenou Del Delta, which belong to the town of Amposta. This one and L’Ampolla, Camarles, L’Aldea and Sant Carles de la Rapita are on the threshold or on the terrace that separates the Delta from the hinterland.

In this region, tourism has been a recent discovery. The tourist activities could have been spontaneous and crude, clumsy. But they have the courage of being linked to the site and the territory. Its geometry fits on the ground that accompanies it. They do not bother. They are not isolated or disconnected to the environment. They are gestures on the land.

Tourism initiatives should have a justification. No more than one. And this justification must be linked to a discovery, to a dream. In fact tourism is based on something intimate, personal and unique, which is the bed. The bed should be comfortable in a safe place, and that enables you to dream. If you cannot dream, it couldn’t be called tourism. It becomes just a stay, a temporary stay in an unknown place.

In this respect, they re-emerged, on the one hand, the traditional huts of the Delta. The primitive hut, or what could be the first house. It’s made by trunks, reeds, grass and mud. In one time it
was a solution for an urgent need, easy and economical to build. But now is a tourist haven with all the luxuries. The element that is justified in this case with its own Delta rice fields.

Furthermore, spontaneously, on the sea water of the bay, stands a restaurant on the delicate structures that hold wires in the cultivation of mussel. In another place, a boat anchored to hold the sunsets. And around, where there are the last houses of farmers made by labour, they are reused as a touristic dwelling.

With all these valuable items off, but with legislative strange fit, there is an unsolved question: where you drive the tourist? Where it leads? What element articulates tourism initiatives? The following work will attempt to answer these questions -which could be a much more extensive investigation- and will culminate with a rehearsal of a specific proposal that could meet the needs and aspirations of the people of this territory, under sustainability criteria, enabling these initiatives bring together and articulate.

**Tourism support elements**

All tourist land should have a main tourist attraction. It should make sense to the other levels or layers. In the case of the Ebro Delta, its own is already the tourist attraction, the presentation card. However, because of the geometry of the Delta and the structure of roads, easily the visitor gets lost. It does not show a clearly defined structure.

One might speak of different layers of tourism resources. For this, we propose the classification as described below:

- Primary tourism resources
- Linear tourism resources
- Complementary tourism resources
- Ephemeral tourism resources

First we talk about primary tourism resources, those that cover the basic needs of visitors. They are mainly staying and the food, and would be minimal tourist items. In this respect, issues related to food have a special relevance.

The Ebro Delta stands well for the quality of cuisine, mainly linked to the rice as a main crop of the Delta. But there is also hunting, fishing and seafood. The main food centres are linked to their immediate surroundings in them offer, that could be in the areas near the sea, the rice fields or river.

In all of them, the intermediate space between the enclosure and the outside takes a crucial importance, being a special case of the restaurant called the "Xiringuito" located in the Alfares Bay, accessible only by sea.

The architectural form of the "Xiringuito" is based on a simple wooden structure anchored to the bottom of the bay area. It has a small harbour, closing it without any external wall, and repeating the structures of mussel farming and the oyster.
As for the overnight stay, there is a limited supply of hotel beds on the delta plain, with a number of hotels that is around 10, usually medium-sized or small.

Mostly hotels are located in urban areas, showing a more introspective relationship, that makes a low possible influence on the territory. However, initiatives such as the case of DeltaHotel, Hotel Mas de Prades, or Algadir Hotel in Poblenou Del Delta, all they show an architectural form which try to answer to the environment and the place they are located. In these cases, the relationship with the outside, and the views from the rooms, are key points, as shown by its origin.

The first case is a converted former cattle farm. The second, newly created, is located in an old traditional house. The third case, has an architectural form that is the culmination of a neighbourhood that has become iconic. With an interesting built volume, it tries to answer to Poble Nou village.

It is interesting to know the case of Poblenou Del Delta, as a recent tourist enclave. Its origins date back to 1941 from the National Institute for Colonization of the Franco regime, in order to increase arable land and the revival of the agricultural sector, due to the lack of food during of civil war. The fact that the district of settlers was realized from a single project under the direction of one architect, Jose Ojeda Borobio, has given a unity form and well solved composition worthy of becoming a model. The proportions of the core, with 127 planned
homes, architecture measured, just the height of buildings and street widths, gaps and shadows, and founded the residential type, give to it today the condition of a centre tourism.

Figure 6. Corner and Algodir Hotel in Poblenou del Delta

The comfort of this small rural town has caused that many of the homes have been reused as a tourist homes, increasing the offer to the visitors.

Cities tangential to the Delta, in the geological terrace upper which separates, there are variety of hotels and tourism resources, and they would be considered as gateways to the Delta. However, this detached position, not embedded in the Delta itself, does that have to be considered in a separate territorial unit.

Other resources related to overnight places are the old rural houses which have been converted into tourist homes. They have a homogeneous distribution in the delta plain. The main feature of these houses is their isolation, with a clear link with the outside world, primarily with fields of rice. The geometry of these homes is based to meet the needs that were in a specific time. As objects in the territory, they can frame and place the visitors in a specific context.

Also as a private house, in recent years, it has been recovered the types of primitive and traditional hut of the Ebro Delta. It had been forgotten with the advent of modern building materials and machining field. The traditional huts, made with materials from Delta itself, such as couch-grass, straw, clay and wood, had a great harmony with the surroundings and the landscape, with a very comfortable interior. As a model of environmentally friendly tourism resource, the huts offer the visitor an element which shows the land where they are located, their culture and tradition. Also used as interpretation centres or restaurants, the current distribution on the land is not homogeneous. Their situation differs from the original, whose position came motivated by the need to work in the field. However, their links with the outside is necessary when it comes to housing tour.

All these primary tourism resources referred have been created from own land inhabitants. There have been modest actions but extremely important. They give a new value to the site. However, the distribution and allocation that have these elements need the linear tourism resources. They have to be able to articulate and bring structure to tourism initiatives, providing a spatial sense. With no linear tourism resources, constructions just would be buildings.

As the most significant linear element, we find the Ebro River, which is navigable because of the peace of its waters. However, its use mainly as a tourism attraction, for example the cruises, or as a place to practice sport activities and leisure time, loses sight of its importance as a
structural element. It’s to say, it might articulate and link Delta's own land. In this sense, it is important to arrange a larger number of boat moorings in the river Ebro, which can allow use the river as a transport infrastructure.

From the River Ebro appears extensive and complex network of irrigation canals and ditches. They structure and offer territorial organization to the fields, together with dirt roads, making them should be considered as an important structural element.

Throughout this, the linear tourism resource of dirt roads takes a special importance. It mainly would have to be used by bicycle, which must be considered as the element that truly can structure the delta plain. However, the routes that are currently shown have a specific start and end. They are not linked to each other. They have been created as leisure paths. In this respect we need a network of paths across the delta plain, which they link the possible tourist resources, with an overall approach and clear instructions.

As well as a linear tourism resource, could also be considered travel by sea, from the harbours located in the armpits north and south of the Delta, the municipalities of L’Ampolla and La Ràpita, and at the same harbour on the river mouth.

As a third layer of tourism resources we have to speak about complementary tourism resources, which perform and represent the country in some way. In this group we find those elements of attraction, cultural, natural or sport which, based on the site, they complement the tours. Here we find the Ecomuseum in the town of Deltebre and the interpretation centre of the huts in Sant Jaume. As well, there is the Interpretation Centre Bird, placed at the building called Wood House. We can also consider the playground called Deltarium, the cruise ships or canoe trips on the river Ebro, and other elements that help to consolidate a sense of territory.

As a last layer of tourism resources, ephemeral events provide in a certain places acts that provide a social dimension, cultural and recreational determined. It is an introduction letter in the territory, and they are rarely replaceable by any other tourism resource.

With a clear pool, the celebrations called the Planting and the Harvesting recall traditional forms of farm work, in a place surrounded by rice fields and associated with festivals. Not only contribute to self-esteem of a territory, but also are an outward projection. It is also the case of some gastronomic fairs, or, more innovative way, Deltebre International Dance Festival.
Tourism functional structure

As for tourism resources, in the Ebro Delta we can say that they have been a recent discovery, almost the last 30 years. It’s something good that they have appeared from the locals of the place, creating these in its true dimension. However, the geographical location of these resources is based on criteria of ability and opportunity, without a framework position. This position may be through a structured network of paths, with a design thought for bikes, as described above. For this reason, it is necessary a plan of paths that cover all the delta plain.

Another element for regional support is the catalogue houses and villas, in recognition of those existing traditional houses. It has to specify their possible changes, with minimum criteria in case of intervention, from the perspective of formal unity and composition.

Regarding the positioning of tourist resources, from the map of its sphere of influence, we can note that are detected four major hubs. The first is located near Sant Jaume and Deltebre, with urban vocation, an area of recovery of traditional values. In this case the vertical axis between the river and the fields become priority. The second and third hubs are located at the river mouth, surrounding the suburban town of Riumar, on the one hand, and the area of Els Eucaliptus on the other. They have a more eclectic ways of tourism. The fourth hub corresponds to a broader area. It includes the small town of Poble Nou and the Bay of Encanyissada, with environmental and natural vocation.
These areas can be considered project areas. However, in the delta plain there is not a centre that could introduce these initiatives scattered throughout the territory. It could be possible to create a centre of tourist services in a specific location, to serve as a starting point or introduction to the visitor in the Ebro Delta. It could help to have a global conception of the territory, and that the visitor could define a scale of his interests during the stay.

**Proposal for a Centre of Tourism Services**

Talking about the situation of a new tourist attraction could not be done without taking into account the above. It’s important the functional structure of the territory which is from the characteristics of self-organization of Delta. However, neither could speak of the establishment of a centre of tourism services - CST- with a certain size, without understanding the role it should take on the land, as a gateway to the region or as a centre host visitors.

By successful, the Urban Master Plan of the Ebro Delta had already proposed controlled location of the Centres of tourism services, with a strategic position in the delta plain. The question is not only its location, but also the functional program, in order to allow a successful implementation of this.

This article introduces a proposal for a CST. The authors of the CST project planning, the architects Ms. Ariadna Capdeferro Perich and Mr. Maarten Neering have captured this proposal planning in an accurate and sensitive way. It is called King's Bridge because of the existence of this heritage infrastructure nearby. The situation of the CST is in a halfway between the town of Deltebre and the suburban of Riumar, but also in a position perpendicular between to the pond called Canal Vell in the north, and the river Ebro to the south. This situation in a crossing point allows it to find new synergies with other elements, such as bonding with water activities near the river, or activities related to nature in the north, as the connection between the two urban areas by bicycle.

It is to emphasize the importance of the environmental of this CST, which is justified in the way it can concentrate the masses and tourist flows, are currently scattered throughout the territory. It can provide knowledge and raising awareness about the importance of natural, cultural and agricultural in a particular environment such as is in the Ebro Delta.
It is proposed a functional program based on the study shown in previous chapters: the CST should be easy to read, based on a representative central area such as a square. Here you can see all the buildings. In the north, near the road but with a separation, is located a tourist information centre. This building entrance should have a multiplicity of uses that can allow the visitors to take information and to contract several services: bicycle hire service, local products shop, and a restaurant with a menu offering local meals.

On the left, it is placed a built volume related to environmental education, as it could be a nature school.

Following the cross-shaped geometry of the group, in the eastern part, there are located some old farms that could be regained, as well as conditions permit. Here we find a large building to be used as a hotel, with a surface around 4,000 m². This building will be drilled to permit access by a porch attached to the central square, with perforations to permit breaking the existing compact volume.

In the west, there is a natural pool that can offer a game area associated with traditional boats. In the south, with views to the fields towards the river, it is suggested the recovery of traditional huts, by way of tourism housing. In this sense, the land use of the CST is decreasing from the road to river.

The skin of the buildings surrounding the square have a different job front, with a predominance of the horizontal dimension, as the delta plain has. The materials and construction methods must respect to the traditional building characteristics of the delta.

With all this, the center of tourist services that is proposed, as an element that changes the land and landscape, must take into account the own elements of the place is located, this is the case of the Ebro Delta.

This does not mean, however, that regional planning has to take control of each and every existing issues or formal. But it must be able to start a job that should be followed by many other agents involved in the construction process. Therefore, the planning of tourism resources must be skilful enough, accurate and simple in its conception to be successful in their development.
Notes

The Urban Plan of the CST as referred to in this document is under the authorization of their authors, architects Ms. Ariadna Perich Capdeferro and Mr. Maarten Neering. This document is in process administrativa, which was initially approved for the Municipality of Deltebre dated 11.16.2010. Figures 11 and 12 are made by the same authors.

Figures 1,2,4,6,8,9 and 10 included are carried out by the author. The map databases used are from the Cartographic Institute of Catalonia.