

Signs of hope or wrong way? The implementation of ecotourism as a touristic product within Morocco destination

Yassir LAMNADI

Universitat Rovira i Virgili (URV), Faculty of Tourism and Geography, Tarragona. yassir.lamnadi@estudiants.urv.cat

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Abstract. This paper tries to highlight the state of ecotourism in Morocco, in order to examine its practicing experience, its presence as a touristic product within the destination Morocco, and how is the state developing and managing this vital sector. The state developed coherent projects and management plans (Vision 2010, Vision 2020...) looking for a strong and alternative economic pillar. However, touristic products offered by Morocco remain largely dominated by seaside product (3S tourism or Mass tourism). While other more sustainable forms of tourism (mountain, natural, cultural, green, eco...) remain struggling to emerge as a competing national product. To achieve the above objectives this paper is based on a review of primary research (case studies) conducted on different Moroccan national parks and regions. along with secondary data (official reports, statistics) and literature written on tourism and ecotourism in Morocco.

Keywords: Morocco, Tourism, Ecotourism.

Introduction

In the last two decades Morocco focused more on the tourism sector and its promising outcomes on social development and more importantly, on the country's economy. The state developed coherent projects and management plans (Vision 2010, Vision 2020...) looking for a strong and alternative economic pillar. These plans pushed Morocco forward in global tourists' arrivals, and provided a considerable economic resource. However, touristic products offered by Morocco remain largely dominated by seaside product (3S tourism or Mass tourism). While other more sustainable forms of tourism (mountain, natural, cultural, green, eco...)

remain struggling to emerge as a competing national product. This seaside dominance does not represent Morocco's richness concerning natural and cultural potential, which is a contradiction in itself (Berriane 2002). This situation is imposed by the global ecotourism demand and by Moroccan authorities themselves which have not pushed too much in that direction on the ground (Sbai 2012). Even though recent management plans and their juridical frameworks concerning the sector, pay special attention to a more sustainable form of tourism, especially within protected areas, and to the necessity of preserving natural biodiversity and cultural heritage.

Moroccan tourism sector

History

Protectorate phase

From the first years of its installation, the French protectorate in Morocco included tourism in its development policy for the country along with the modernization of agriculture, exploitation of mineral wealth and the installation of some processing industries. Even if, at the very beginning, tourists were just related families of settlers, civilian and military officials of the Spanish and French Protectorate. As to (Stafford, 1996, quoted by Brault, 2004), the real tourism began in the country thanks to the first political General Resident Lyautey, whose policies aims to offer a resting place for the French and wealthy tourists. Thus investments were oriented luxury hotel construction to better meet of travellers' requirements. At this stage, the protectorate's major investments were focused only on some strategic areas, either due to their colonial importance to the French or for the political sake to the Moroccan established authority then. This distribution will provoke next what divided the country into utile and inutile Morocco (Jiménez, 2015).

(Stafford, 2005) argues that as their departure approached, the protectorate left a large potential in tourism infrastructure, (roads, ports, airports and railways) which was implemented, primarily, to allow a better military control for the sake of the plundering of the country's natural resources. And then as a secondary objective, to promote the early settlement of the country, which in the end, one way or another, is serving the primary purpose. this infrastructure had enabled subsequently, the development of international tourism in Morocco.

Early in 1936, Morocco witnessed its first organized touristic tour since the end of the establishment of colonial power in Moroccan territory. This tour was established between three imperial cities: Marrakech, Fes, Meknes. Just one year later, in 1937, the protectorate Committee of tourism was replaced by the Sherifian Tourist Office, which was, according to (Stafford, 1996, quoted by Brault, 2004), primarily

responsible for the creation, management and control of host organizations and intelligence tourism and the preservation of historic monuments. Just after the WWII ended, in 1946, Morocco will see the birth of the current national Office Moroccan Tourism (ONMT) (Stafford, 1996, quoted by Brault, 2004). This period, was the founding era of Moroccan tourism took advantage from the protectorate experience in the country and consequently continued the infrastructure path by contributing to the creation of the first hotel chains in Morocco, which were characterized by a luxury hotel infrastructure encouraged in its realization by the Moroccan Office of Tourism. Later on, the office will encourage private investments which will bring more and more touristic facilities and end up opening Morocco an international tourism destination.

Post-protectorate phase

After independence (1956), the Moroccan State had left with many stuck matters concerning tourism sector as any other sector, a normal situation for such an emerging State. This caused the country to enter in a 'touristic coma' that lasted almost a decade as described by (Berriane 1992). Morocco did not officially enter the international tourism market until the year 1965 by the creation of the Tourism Ministry, as well as the massive investment of the state in the tourism sector. Then, the ministry developed a three-year plan (1965-1967) in order to create the principle foundations for Morocco to become a busy tourist destination (Berriane 1992).

The Ministry of Tourism will develop during this period ZAPs, i.e. priority management areas. As (Stafford, 1996, quoted by Brault, 2004) points out, these areas are privileged places where one intends to concentrate tourism development. they were mainly focused in the resort of Agadir and the circuit of the imperial cities (Marrakech, Rabat, Fez and Meknes). Symbolically, this distribution illustrates the types of tourism were established in Morocco by that time, seaside and cultural tourism.

During the period from 1965 to 1973 Morocco saw the appearance of its Mediterranean coast on the international market. the Mediterranean coast was chosen in the middle 1960s to receive the first implementations destined to international tourism. It will see the birth of a series of seaside stations with foreign clientele management (Berriane, 1992). But this flourishing on the Mediterranean coast will not last for a very long time, not even a decade after its emergence. Tour operators which turned themselves to new ways of success achieved by the "product winter" deep away from the coast. Indeed, at tourism, the plan had an approach that was based on " making new tourism products corresponding to new centres of tourism development and the types of Tourism marginalized.

An important step in the development of tourism in Morocco will be reached during the 1988-1992 five-year plan. (Berriane, 1992) confirms the very special and promising change in that period, it took until the middle of the 1980s to attend an effective revival of the region. original and unusual phenomenon, this revival is the national tourism. But generally speaking, the late 70s see a marked decrease government investment in the tourism sector, and that until the early 90's the private sector that took the relay. The privatization process helped to diversify the Moroccan touristic product, especially with the emergence of domestic tourism. National tourism brought back balance to tourism sector in general and reached levels beyond competitiveness. (Berriane, 1992) describes the relationship between the two as complementary rather than competitive. This completion lays in the distribution of tourists (national and international) on cities, on one hand, and their distribution on months of year on the other hand.

Present-day tourism

Morocco is located in a region of the world where the countries of the Mediterranean are, despite a relative stagnation of international tourist arrivals (UNWTO, 2002), tourism is a sector among the most developed in the world. This region, however, is experiencing intense competition, especially due to the rise of new destinations such as Turkey, Malta... The sub-region countries of the southern Mediterranean, which borders Europe through the Strait of Gibraltar, is mainly composed of five destinations: Morocco, Tunisia, Egypt, Turkey and Cyprus.

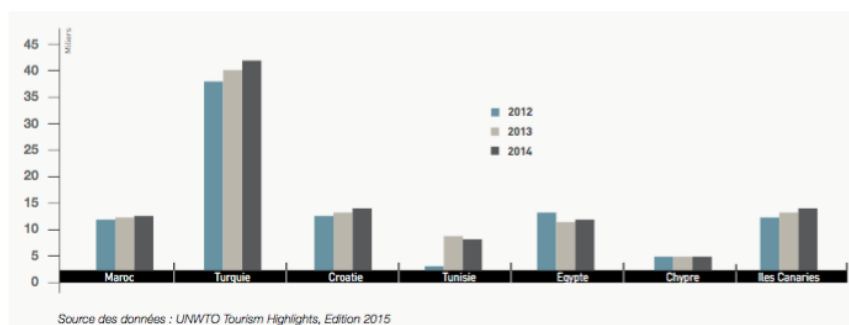


Figure 1: Mediterranean destination tourists arrivals in Million (Observatoire du Tourisme 2016)

International tourism in these five countries is extremely important with nearly 40 million international tourist arrivals in Turkey during 2014, followed by Canary Islands with 15 million. Morocco here, showed a slight increase in tourist arrival from 2012 to reach nearly 10 million in

2014, overcoming both Tunisia and Egypt benefiting from the unstable political situation in both countries after 2011 events (Observatoire du Tourisme 2016).

in her analysis of the annual report of Morocco's Central Bank published in 2004, (ARIB, 2005) concludes that that its share is three times that of seafood, textiles and agriculture. Thus, one of the most important sectors in terms of economic growth, foreign exchange, investment and job creation appears to be tourism. The economic contribution of tourism in Morocco is certainly important. It is increasingly regarded by officials as a strategic sector to support economic development. Morocco has granted in its development policy, a prominent place in the tourist activity in the late 1960s Since independence, successive governments have sought to encourage the sector without making the necessary political will.

It was not until 2001 that the decision was taken at the highest state level to chart a new strategy involving the sectors both public and private with a new vision called "Vision 2010" or Plan Azur. This ambitious strategy for tourism in 2010 aims at hosting 10 million tourists, achieving 160 000 new beds, the creation of 600 000 new jobs, the increase in annual foreign exchange earnings of 80 Billion MAD and a contribution in GDP of 2 to 3 points per year. Morocco therefore hopes to move in the space of ten years, from the 39th to one of the world's top 20 destinations (VELLAS and MEHADJI, 2005).

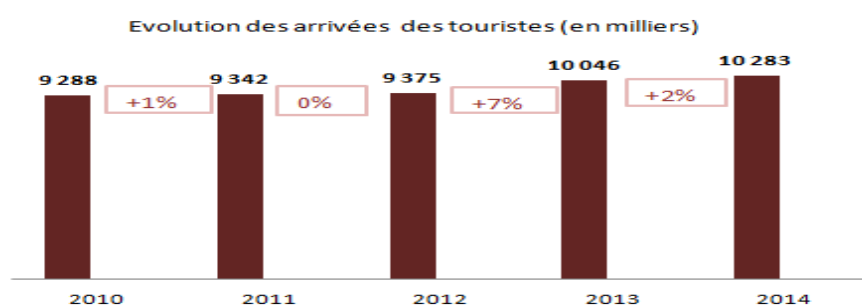


Figure 2: Morocco tourists arrivals evolution in Thousands (Observatoire du Tourisme 2016)

Under the motivation of this framework agreement, the plan Azur was launched. It was meant mainly to develop six new high potential areas, located near airports: Khmis Sahel Larache, Mogador, Saida Ras El Ma in the Oujda region, El Haouzia in El Jadida, Taghazout Agadir and finally white Beach in Guelmim. The realization of these sites will double the accommodation capacity, to help accommodate the 10 million tourists.

Indeed, promoting tourism in Morocco requires significant investments especially in terms of accommodation and infrastructure. The plan envisages a total investment that requires a down payment of more than 100 billion dirhams. To reassure lenders will require that Morocco can offer an internal rate of 12% and an occupancy rate of 60% on hotels (Achbany et al. 2007).

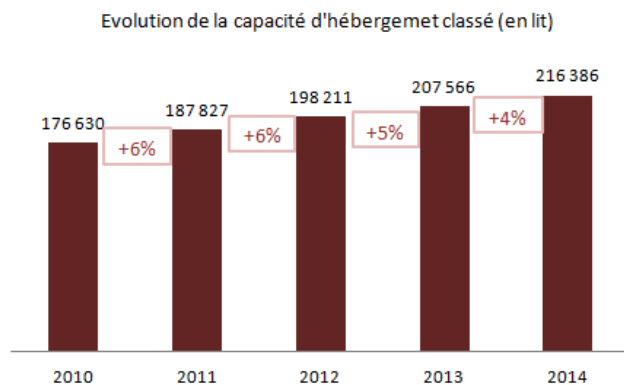


Figure 3: evolution of classified accommodation capacity in beds (Observatoire du Tourisme 2016)

Figure 3 shows that the evolution of classified accommodation capacity between 2010 and 2014. It remains at a very comfortable positive rate between 4% and 6%.

As shown in Figure 4, the evolution of overnight stays in classified touristic establishments remains at a steady rate between 3% and 9%. Except for the years 2010-2011 in which it has dropped seriously to -9% due to general geopolitical situation and the global economic crisis.

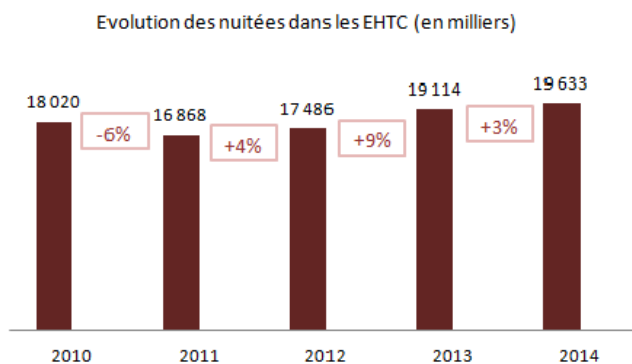


Figure 4: Evolution of overnight stays in Thousands (Observatoire du Tourisme 2016)

The state of ecotourism

It is obvious that when we put ecotourism in Morocco in the spotlight, we do not unveil only the state of ecotourism, but more importantly, we detect the flaws in tourism management plans and the value of the State's tourism policy such a vital sector. (Sbai, 2012) sees that ecotourism offer in morocco is weak, even not visible in the destination morocco. Ecotourism sector is generally associated with the development of nature, green and rural tourism. However, Ecotourism clientele remains very limited compared to the whole tourist flow in Morocco as well as in the world. For instance, the ministry of tourism in morocco gives a number of 150,000 visitors per year, where 50% is for the atlas destination only, and 30% for the desert product. (Sbai, 2012).

The ecotourism sector in Morocco, despite the efforts done in the last years, remains a niche yet to emerge strongly. it has been always just included or annexed to mass tourism management plans; the government yet approaches the ecotourism sector, at its best practice, as a secondary matter. the intention was always turned to only towards a seaside mass tourism that can bring a maximum of visitors. (Sbai, 2012) also points out that morocco has simply followed the classic scheme which consisted of receiving the maximum tourists, with a minimum care for the impacts on natural resources, witness cases in this framework are not to miss. Consequently, and as direct reflection of the State's policy, Moroccan tourism is highly concentrated on the shoreline. This concentration translates the whole Moroccan tourism sector into a 3S tourism (Sea, Sand, and Sun) despite its rich and varied potentials.

The touristic offer in Morocco has two main weak points that affect negatively the whole sector. These points are the highly concentrated geographic distribution of tourists, and the low diversified touristic offer (Sbai, 2012). It is less than 10 cities that focus about 80% of the total capacity. He argues that The strong focus of lodging capacity on the shoreline and imperial cities, is also the consequence of the low touristic offer diversity. However, the cause/effect relationship between the two points remains open to debate; because, from another perspective, if there was a diversified touristic offer (rural, nature, green tourism), there would be a relatively tourist distribution eliminating the high concentration on shoreline and imperial cities.

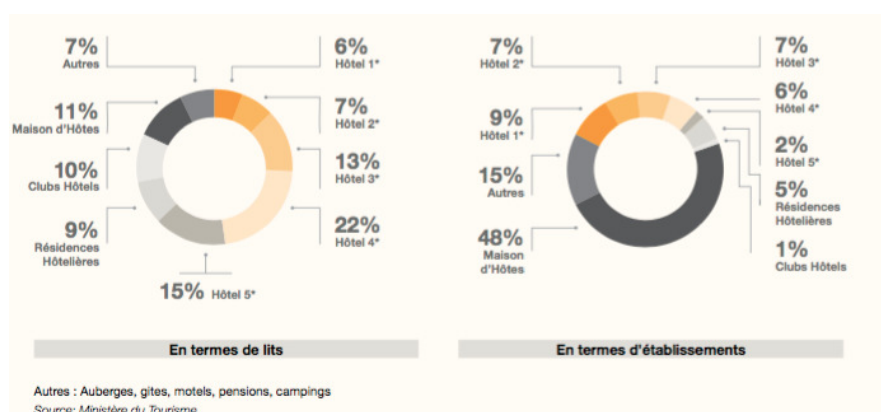


Figure 5: Accommodation types and distribution in Morocco (Observatoire du Tourisme 2014)

Despite the official dark side, still, there is a bright side of ecotourism in Morocco. Some individual initiatives along with the valuable contribution of NGO associations begin to make their way in ecotourism development. Even if these initiatives start isolated, with the support of some foreign operators who find refuge in local particulars; have started to develop this segment of sustainable tourism (PORTER, 2008).

Another directly related factor to the ecotourism segment, is degree of contribution of protected areas. These areas are the main attraction of ecotourists, therefore, well managed and developed protected areas, in which preserving the environment is the above all priority, are one of the main pillars of this type of tourism (El Ansari, 2013). In Morocco Many factors can be considered as indicators that can favour such an orientation choice, and their intelligent combination can reinforce this tendency.

Morocco's resources, in this sense, are numerous and diversified all across the country, between national parks, SIBEs (Sites of biological and ecological interest), and biosphere reserves: 10 national parks, 154 SIBE, and 3 Biosphere reserves. These areas are undoubtedly of great quality and of vast diversity, but remains fragile and above all insufficiently protected. The valorisation of these natural spaces through ecotourism will allow offering a real economic alternative that can help to decrease the degradation process which continues to endanger Moroccan natural spaces (MOUDOUD and EZAÏDI, 2005). The conservation of natural areas has become a decisive issue. Especially in promoting local community development in terms of economic alternatives.

Methodology

To achieve the above objectives this paper is based on a review of primary research (case studies) conducted on different Moroccan national parks and regions. along with secondary data (official reports, statistics) and literature written on tourism and ecotourism in Morocco.

Findings

Findings of this paper centre around three main problematic points of the ecotourism sector in Morocco: First, lack of the integration of local communities neither in official management plans nor in the stakeholders' touristic strategies. This opposition usually lead to tourism being rejected by local population. Second, these actors themselves, despite their large numbers, often they are not organised or embodied in a global network. Which complicates their work on the ground and diminishes any positive effect of their presence. Third, the state management plans are focused on seaside tourism product. As this type of tourism lost its brightness in last decade in favour of cultural/natural tourism. The state did not act on this basis and diversify ecotourism destinations and products.

Another vital factor that is seen to be decisive in the management of the tourism sector in Morocco is the fact that public authorities, or the ministry in question, tackles the sector issues from a very surface perspective ignoring the real and deep challenges of the sector. For instance, in the last two decades we the ministry planning huge and long term contract programmes that are intended to revolutionize the sector but on the ground, we see entire cities and region, which are very important in terms of tourists flows, lack even a local representation of the ministry and other necessary infrastructure for a touristic destination.

Discussion and Analysis

First, lack of the integration of local communities neither in official management plans nor in the stakeholders' touristic strategies. It is imperative that any development plan, that does not include local communities, is condemned to fail (author). Therefore, in order to establish a sustainable form of tourism, Moroccan authorities and private/public stakeholders must take into consideration different aspects of local communities by compromising their strategies with their lifestyle needs and by avoiding any violations that may negatively affect them or their environment.

Second, these actors themselves, despite their large numbers, often they are not organised or embodied in a grouped network. The different

stakeholders of any given sector, the more there are; the more necessary is the grouping or embodying network. This kind of organisation has many qualities over ungrouped stakeholders such more harmony and effectiveness in the stakeholders' performance, sharing experiences and spreading the benefit between stakeholders, and being unified in one voice when represented to public authorities or any other external institutions.

Third, the state management plans are focused on seaside tourism product. While Morocco is considered as the second most biodiversity in the Mediterranean after turkey, and has a very rich cultural potential. This focus on seaside mass tourism remains a contradiction in its self. However recent tourism development strategies started to involve sustainable and and cultural tourism in their projects, but individual and private initiatives remain always a step ahead from the state in this sense.

Tackling the sector issues from a very surface perspective and ignoring the real and deep challenges of the sector, Of course, this paradoxical approach will not take the tourism sector anywhere, on the contrary it makes those milestone vision and contract-programmes useless. To avoid this planning loophole, the authorities must radicalise their tourism development strategy. That is to say, working on the sectors basic and small-detailed issues locally or regionally, in order to make them ready to receive and suit any national development strategy.

Conclusion

The present paper highlights the state of ecotourism in Morocco and its implementation in the country's destination as a touristic product. Despite the state's inability to force the emergence of ecotourism as national touristic product on the ground, other individual, private, and civil society initiatives contributed to a large extent in establishing many different projects centring around ecotourism and generally a green sustainable form of tourism throughout the country's territory. These kind of initiatives, despite being low-funded and less-organized, proved their efficiency over official governmental plans at least locally speaking. What will be now a considerable constructive strategy from the state is to support and collaborate with these individual initiatives in order to nationally promote ecotourism and establish a touristic destination that complies with the country's very rich and diversified natural and cultural potential.

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