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Iberian Wolf and tourism in the “Emptied Rural Spain”

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ARTICLE SECTION

Iberian Wolf and tourism in the “Emptied Rural Spain”

Abstract: The present study analyzes the tourist activity of observation of the Iberian wolf in Spain as an alternative to other traditional tourist modalities in rural areas. The own experience within the sector has been crucial to understand its dynamics and develop this work. It studies the upward trend of nature tourism in general and the observation of the Iberian wolf in particular, the *modus operandi* of the activity is described and its main impacts are exposed. Wolf tourism generally provides benefits for the local population in economic, environmental and socio-cultural terms. Its compatibility with the environment and the intrinsic characteristics of the activity closely linked to a sustainable, fresh and offline tourism turns this sector into an interesting tool to mitigate the demographic, economic and social emptying of some areas of Spain.

Key words: Iberian wolf, wildlife tourism, environmental education, local development, territorial intelligence, Spain.

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IDEAS CLAVE / HIGHLIGHTS / IDEES CLAU

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| <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Los valores asociados a la observación del lobo se relacionan en buena medida con aspectos intangibles.2. Se trata de una experiencia <i>offline</i>, un aspecto diferencial respecto a otros productos turísticos.3. Existen 16 empresas de observación del lobo en España, cuyas sedes se ubican por lo general donde se realiza la actividad.4. Las tareas divulgativas y de sensibilización son especialmente importantes en especies con dudosa reputación como el lobo.5. El lobo es un generador de oportunidades como fuente de leyendas, historias antiguas y experiencias personales | <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. The values associated to wolf observation are largely related to intangible aspects.2. This is an offline experience, an aspect differentiating it from other tourism products.3. There are 16 wolf observation businesses in Spain, whose head offices are generally situated where the activity is conducted.4. The tasks of publicising and raising awareness are particularly important for species with a bad reputation such as the wolf.5. The wolf is a generator of opportunities as a source of legends, age-old tales and personal experiences. | <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Els valors associats a l'observació del llop es relacionen en bona part amb aspectes intangibles.2. Es tracta d'una experiència <i>offline</i>, un aspecte diferencial respecte a altres productes turístics.3. Existeixen 16 empreses d'observació del llop a Espanya, les seus del qual se situen en general on es realitza l'activitat.4. Les tasques divulgatives i de sensibilització són especialment importants en espècies amb dubtosa reputació com el llop.5. El llop és un generador d'oportunitats com a font de llegendes, històries antigues i experiències personals. |
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EXTENDED ABSTRACT¹

“En Tierra de todos: stories of coexistence”. Such is the title of the new WWF documentary recounting the experiences of livestock farmers and shepherds in order to improve coexistence with Europe’s large carnivores. This report is one of the results of a community project with the *Life* brand, promoting communication, cross-border cooperation and the interchange of knowledge to improve the relationship between local communities and various European predators: the bear in the Alps and the western mountains of Romania, the lynx in central Europe, the wolverine in Scandinavia and the wolf in Croatia, Slovenia, Austria and Spain. Preventive measures are the common element in these testimonials, which speak of indispensable mastiffs or fences, but also of the importance of eco-tourism companies and local inhabitants, increasingly more aware about co-existence with these animals.

The Spanish testimonials hinge on the compromise between *homo sapiens* and *canis lupus signatus*: a livestock farmer in the Sierra de la Culebra in Zamora province; a pastoral shepherd in Extramadura and a shepherd and mountain guide in Somiedo, Asturias. The first featured with his inseparable mastiffs in an excellent report in the weekly *El País Semanal*; he decided to stay in his village and do his best for his home and his cattle. Indeed, a wealth of territorial issues underlie these inspiring personal histories.

This paper does not attempt to approach all of them. It focuses solely on the role that tourism specifically linked to Iberian wolf sightings can play in the rural environment as an alternative to other tourism formulas or economic activities. Converging here are themes linked to hunting, livestock farming and tourism, as well as multiple actors in the productive system, institutions, local society and the scope of scientific knowledge.

The present study analyses the tourism activity of observing the Iberian wolf in Spain as an alternative to other traditional tourism modalities in rural areas. Other secondary aims are to analyse the current situation and trend of wildlife observation tourism, especially in Spain and Europe, to provide information about the current offering (specialised companies) in Spain, to describe the activity itself (*modus operandi*) and main values associated to the wolf and its sighting, and finally, to depict this sector’s principal effects at local scale by means of an exploratory study.

Personal experience within the wildlife tourism sector was crucial for understanding its dynamics and undertaking this work. Indeed, the study’s main strength lies precisely in the contact with the terrain and with the main actors involved. This occurred in a series of interviews that gathered facts, opinions and perceptions from different people directly or indirectly associated to this sector (6): a guide specialising in observation of wildlife and particularly wolves, an unspecialised nature guide, a manager of a wildlife observation business, a hostelry professional, a tourist and a hunter (and resident) of the area. These interviews were conducted in the regional park of Montaña de Riaño y Mampodre in Castile-and-León during the months of August and September 2018. They were done using a semi-structured script based on an itinerary and including four questions about the role the wildlife observation tourism segment plays in the local society and economy.

The Iberian wolf is distributed in eight of Spain’s autonomous communities, although the highest density is found in the country’s northwest quadrant. Wolves are most present in

¹ Authors’ exclusive translation. The full version of the article is available in Spanish.

the two biggest demographic deserts in the Iberian Peninsula (<10 inhabitants per square kilometre): the area of the so-called Celtiberian Range (provinces of Teruel, Soria, Cuenca, Guadalajara and parts of Burgos) and the border with Portugal (provinces of Salamanca, Zamora and Orense), as well as other relatively unpopulated adjacent areas of Lugo, León, Asturias and Cantabria.

In Spain there are currently 16 companies that offer the activity of Iberian wolf observation, most of them active in the Sierra de la Culebra in Zamora province and around the Picos de Europa mountain range. The local population perceives a deficit of supply with respect to demand, though it is noteworthy that this deficit's positive effect for combatting mass tourism is repeatedly mentioned.

The symbolic significance of the Iberian wolf (myths, stories, legends, etc.), the role of the naturalist Félix Rodríguez de la Fuente in boosting knowledge about the animal and the development of an increasingly urban society (far removed from issues affecting the countryside and wolves) have led to the creation of a tourist product. The main values associated to marketing this experience range from tangible to intangible values of this canine and its surroundings: the feeling of freedom, atavism, connection with nature, sounds and fears, etc.

As for impacts, the following positive consequences are noted, depending on the sources consulted, personal experience and conducted interviews: it is an important income source for local communities, by means of job creation and spending by tourists, which also leads to improved infrastructures and services. Local heritage is promoted and environmental benefits are generated, derived from the tasks of publicising and awareness-raising carried out by companies in the sector. This fact emphasises the debate about their idealness as a sustainable alternative to other activities such as, for example, hunting. Although the positive side of this activity has been highlighted, it must also be stated that its development entails some environmental problems generally caused by mass arrivals in some periods of the year. Yet these problems can and should be avoided by implementing measures such as environmental awareness and the use of good observation practices. The latter could be strengthened by developing and applying specific regulations beyond those referring to active tourism in general.

This research considers the upward trend of nature tourism in general and observation of the Iberian wolf in particular, describing the activity's modus operandi and explaining its main impacts. Wolf-related tourism generally provides benefits for the local population in economic, socio-cultural and also environmental terms. Its compatibility with the environment and the activity's intrinsic characteristics, linked to a sustainable new kind of offline tourism, could lead this sector to become an interesting means to alleviate the demographic, economic and social desertification of some areas of Spain. The wolf-man binomial is one of the richest duos in Spain's natural and cultural heritage. Over the course of history the wolf has prompted countless emotions and behaviours, from domestication to fear, attraction, rivalry, hunting, management or marketing (for tourism). Wolf observation is therefore much more than just viewing this fascinating animal. As the tourism offering ages and is reinvented based on the creation of stories and emotions, the wolf is a generator of opportunities, as a source of legends, age-old tales and personal experiences.