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The role of the presence of a protected wild area in local development. A case study in the Aysen Region, chilean Patagonia

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ARTICLE SECTION

The role of the presence of a protected wild area in local development. A case study in the Aysen Region, Chilean Patagonia

Abstract: To prove if the development of a small town can be driven by tourism associated with the presence in its vicinity of a protected wild area, we studied the case of Villa Cerro Castillo, in the Region of Aysén, Chilean Patagonia. With this purpose, tourism projects in the locality were recognized and local service providers were characterized. In order to evaluate the evolution of the provision of tourist services, the situation of 2019 was compared with that of 2006. As a result it was found that the existence of tourist services multiplied by 1.5 in the 19 years of this century, manifesting also a higher quality and variety. This rate of growth was accelerated from 2013, coinciding with a strong increase in tourist arrivals in the Aysén Region and an increase in interest in eco-tourism. In addition, it was estimated that the tourist activity generated 64 jobs for the town in the last season and a total annual income of 650 thousand dollars.

Key words: National parks, local economy, local community, Chilean Patagonia.

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IDEAS CLAVE / HIGHLIGHTS / IDEES CLAU

1. La atracción turística de un parque nacional se traduce en beneficios para las localidades aledañas.
2. La Patagonia chilena tiene una alta oferta de recursos para turismo de naturaleza.
3. El turismo es un factor que favorece el desarrollo en comunidades menores.
4. En el caso de estudio se verificó un aumento en ingresos y puestos de trabajo.

1. The tourist attraction of a national park translates into benefits for the surrounding settlements.
2. The Chilean Patagonia has a high supply of resources for nature tourism.
3. Tourism is a factor that favors development in smaller communities.
4. In the case of the study, an increase in income and jobs was verified.

1. L'atracció turística d'un parc nacional es tradueix en beneficis per a les localitats limítrofes
2. La Patagònia xilena té una alta oferta de recursos per a turisme de naturalesa.
3. El turisme és un factor que afavoreix el desenvolupament en comunitats menors.
4. En el cas d'estudi es va verificar un augment en ingressos i llocs de treball.

EXTENDED ABSTRACT¹

The Aysén Region, Chilean Patagonia, located between 43°38' and 49°16' south latitude, has registered a strong growth of tourism, especially nature tourism, adventure tourism and extreme sports. This has been possible thanks to the significant offer of nature that is available in Aysén. During 2018, there were 110.537 visits to the national park system of the Aysén Region. Of these, 83.910 were Chilean citizens and 26.627 foreigners. This information corresponds only to 12 units, including national parks and national reserves, that have registration systems. According to the CONAF registry, the growth rate of protected wild areas visits between 2009 and 2019, in Aysén, is about 380 %.

In order to study the economic effects that the development of tourism has on the communities surrounding a protected wild area, the Cerro Castillo National Park was selected. The selection of this Park was made in a participatory workshop with different actors in the field of tourism and the management of protected wild areas in the Aysén Region. The selection was supported by the fact that this Park was prioritized by the national government for investment in enabling infrastructure, as well as the fact that it is one of the most grown in visitation, in the Region.

Aysén, while possessing a pristine nature and great beauty, is a region of low population, with a density of about 1 inhabitant per km². Its geography is rugged because the Andes mountain range occupies much of its territory. This is also the reason for its relatively recent settlement at the beginning of the 20th century. Its population is just over 100.000, concentrated in two cities and a set of small towns and villages of less than 3.000 inhabitants. Villa Cerro Castillo is one of these small towns, with only 376 inhabitants.

The main objective of this research is to evaluate the effect that the proximity of a protected wildlife area, in this case the Cerro Castillo National Park, has on the local development process in the Cerro Castillo Village. This evaluation will focus on the analysis of tourism-oriented business development in the early years of this century.

For this purpose, a survey of the existing tourist services and the owners was carried out to assess the economic results in the locality, whereas this Village is the main access point to access the natural attractions of the National Park. The study was carried out in 2019 and its evolution was analyzed, comparing the data obtained with a previous study carried out in 2006. The methodological approach is mixed, quantitative and qualitative. Surveys and interviews were conducted with public officials, tour operators and concessionaires. With them it was possible to characterize the local community dedicated to tourism and to know their interactions with the management and decision making regarding the Cerro Castillo National Park. 23 initiatives linked to tourism were identified, of which a total of 16 tourist services, which were in operation at the time of fieldwork, were interviewed and surveyed, and a general characterization sheet was applied to them, emphasizing the services offered and the date of installation. These interviews were tabulated using descriptive statistics in Microsoft Excel.

The tourist services studied in Villa Cerro Castillo, are micro-enterprises, both individual and family and 62 % of them are headed by women. There are no services of large companies operating directly in the village. This is not an obstacle for these services to be used by regional or national operators who pass through the place to visit the National Park or to continue their journey to the south of the Region.

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

As a result of the interviews it was found that 81 % declare tourism as their main activity. Forty-four per cent say they are exclusively engaged in tourism Thirteen per cent derive their income mainly from other activities, such as education and trade. Another 6 % have livestock as their main source of income with tourism as a complementary activity, which allows ensuring economic activity throughout the year, solving the problem of seasonality in income, which affects tourism in southern Chile.

While the majority of those interviewed are long-term residents of the place, 25 % of them say they have arrived in the last 20 years and even more, 19 % have done so in the last decade. This may be an indication of the attraction for tourist entrepreneurs, due to the increase in tourism activities mainly related to nature tourism and the visit to national parks. The trend of the visitation shows an increase from 2013, which would explain the arrival of new inhabitants to Villa Cerro Castillo, with the intention of dedicating exclusively to tourist activities.

Local economic development in the small towns of Aysen is a problem for these communities and for government agencies. That is why it is necessary to identify strategies that make it possible to promote development processes. In that sense, tourism has emerged as an alternative to achieve this purpose.

Local development, understood as an endogenous process of small localities that promotes economic dynamism and the improvement of the quality of life, requires strategies that take advantage of the resources present in their territory to transform them into factors of development. International experience indicates that the presence of a national park nearby is a natural capital relevant to this objective. Localities close to these areas can improve their local economy if they are able to capture the flow of visitors by increasing their supply of services and thereby capture the expenses of tourists.

In the case of study, the Villa Cerro Castillo has been able to orient its economic activity towards the satisfaction of the needs of tourists who visit the National Park. In this way, it has managed to increase the dynamism of the local economy, increasing the level of income from tourist spending. With this it is possible to hope that the conditions are generated to promote local development and the improvement of the quality of life of this small town.

The increase in the flow of tourists interested in ecotourism and adventure tourism has favoured the local economic development in Villa Cerro Castillo, which has seen its increased supply of services aimed at tourism, in the first decades of this century. This has also led to the generation of 64 jobs and total income of \$650.000 per annum. Between 2013 and 2019, 37 % of the tourism projects studied in the town were established, a period in which the greatest growth of tourism in the Aysén Region was verified.

This study has made it possible to evaluate the effects that the development of tourism, associated with the presence of a National Park, causes on the local economy of a portal community. It can be deduced that there is a relationship between the development of tourism, the existence of attractions, in this case a National Park, and the increase in economic activity in the Villa Cerro Castillo, at the same time as in the tendency to specialize in this area. It is important to carry out other case studies, in other communities associated with protected wild areas, to verify the strategies they have developed to take advantage of the flow of tourists, so as to leave economic benefits in the territory.