

Economic and touristic aspects of Isonzo River Mouth Regional Natural Reserve

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1. Introduction

The present work presents the results of two researches carried out in Isonzo River Mouth Reg.Nat.Res. The researches were carried out by the dep. of Economic Sciences of the University of Udine on behalf of the Management Body – “Consorzio Il Mosaico”. Technical data are presented in an informative way, aiming at giving an exhaustive overview of the management situation and of the touristic fruition of the Reserve.

2. Touristic fruition in protected areas

In the last years, the analysis of environmental impacts of tourism, and the possibility for tourism to contribute to sustainable development models, have been given increasing interest at the scientific, the commercial and the no-profit level. A high environmental quality is of the utmost importance for most touristic activities. It is therefore important to enhance sustainable forms of tourism, that can ensure the long-term maintainance of the resource. Open air and environmental tourism attracts increasing numbers of fruitors. Tourism in protected areas can be regarded as part of this phenomenon, and it is often indicated as eco-tourism. The definition of eco-tourism has not been clarified yet, although ecotourism always implies the association between touristic fruition and environmental conservation.

The word eco-tourism has been created in 1983 by Hector Ceballos-Lascurain (1987), and it is usually characterised as (WTO-UNEP, 2002):

- *naturalistic tourism aimed at the better understanding of natural resources and traditional cultures located in protected areas;*
- *it is usually associated to environmental education or interpretation;*
- *it is usually aimed at small groups followed by specialised agencies;*
- *it puts an effort in minimizing the impacts on environment and populations;*
- *it aims at safeguarding protected areas, by:*
 - *providing economic benefits to the local communities and management bodies of protected areas,*
 - *providing new forms of employment for locals,*
 - *increasing the understanding of conservational topics both in locals and tourists.*

The ecotourism is different from the other forms of tourism as it indicates a way (sustainability) and some locations (protected areas) that have a priority position in touristic choices. It is important to consider both "way" and "location", as the combination of these two features makes ecotourism a unique type of fruition, where recreational, educational and interpretational purposes are always taken into consideration. Ecotourism is quite a new phenomenon, as fruition in protected areas is quite a new topic as well.

Ecotourism requires a qualified type of offer, and the touristic product must be properly characterised and must give an intellectual enrichment. According to Polci and Gambassi (2005), 157 millions of tourists have visited Italian parks in 2004. In terms of economic activation, this means that people have spent about 10 billion euros to visit protected areas in a year. This is about 13% of the total touristic expenses. The most visited areas are Tuscany islands, with 16 millions of tourists, Cilento (about 15 millions) and Gargano (over 14 millions). Follow Stelvio (9.4 millions), Circeo (8 millions), Vesuvio (7 millions).

The most visited region is Campania. In Italy, the protected area network is composed by 24 national parks, 23 marine areas, and over 700 reserves and natural parks. People are not only interested in nature when they choose an ecotouristic holiday, but also in tradition, culture and food.

At present, a few researches have been devoted to better understand ecotourism (Ecotur, 2003 e 2004; WTO, 2002). It is therefore interesting to understand the modes of ecotouristic fruition of Nat.Res. Isonzo River Mouth and the consequent management choices.

3. Management characteristics of the Reserve

Touristic management of the reserve has found some difficulties, due to the conflict between too many tourist presences and nature conservation.

The touristic flow has thus been regulated, and the structures have been differentiated in order to find a balance between fruition and conservation. Since 2002 a ticket has been introduced, both to control the flow of tourists and to obtain a way to partially self-finance fruition activities (one third of the income). Furthermore, recreational tourists have been oriented towards areas different than those with educational purposes. It must however be stressed that there are not many examples of monitoring of touristic flow and of analysis of costs and benefits deriving from reserve management. Therefore, there are not many hints on how to carry out efficient and shared management policies (Marangon and Tempesta, 2003).

4. Touristic demand

The analysis of touristic demand has been mainly done by associating cost of ticket and number of visitors.

4.1 Assessment of touristic demand in the Reserve

The recent introduction of a ticket has allowed to carry out some investigations on how the presence of additional costs affects the touristic flow (Marangon et al., 2004). The first step is to estimate the number of tourists when no tickets are present. Then the touristic demand is assessed, associating numbers of visitors to different costs of the ticket. This estimation allows to calculate the social benefit, that is the benefit that all fruitors gain from the fruition of a reserve. The estimations can be based also on completely hypothetical scenarios, following specific economic methodologies (Casini e Tempesta, 2001; Mitchell e Carson, 1989). The estimated functions are compared to the real demand, that is calculated when a ticket is introduced. It is also interesting to compare the type of visitor before and after a ticket's introduction.

4.2 Tourist presence and quantitative variation of touristic demand

Data have been collected over 12 months (16 november 1997-14 november 1998). A total of 963 interviews has been obtained (Tempesta et al., 2002; Visintin, 2000). In the last 10 years, the number of visitors have been indirectly estimated in different ways. One of these methods has been by counting the parked cars (Tempesta et al., 2002). Considering an average of 3 people per car, among 23.000 and 25.000 units per year have been estimated (Ceschia et al., 1997).

From 1995-1998 an estimation based on the number of signatures on the reserve book has been carried out. Monthly distribution of visitors has then been calculated, considering that about 30% of visitors signed the book (Visintin, 2000). However, realistic data on visitor income start only from march 2003, when the visitor center was opened. For this reason, touristic flows are analysed for the period march 2003–february 2004 (Graf. 1).

The number of visitors is of 15.969 units, 13.473 (84%) of which have bought the €1.00 ticket, and 2.496 (16%) have bought also the additional ticket for the visitor center. Free entrance is allowed to students of the schools located in the municipalities of the management body (Staranzano, Fiumicello, Grado, San Canzian d'Isonzo), for a total of 532 visits.

A total of 4.985 students have visited the reserve carrying out visited guides with the cooperativa Apepiramondo. Touristic flow have strong seasonal trends, with two peaks in spring and autumn (Graf. 2).

The estimated number of visitors after the ticket introduction were 20.387 (method of estimation: agreement to pay) and 16.425 (method of estimation: travel cost). The effective number of visitors have been 15.969.

4.3 Qualitative variation of recreational demands

An assessment of the type of tourist that visits the reserve with and without a ticket has also been done. During march-may 2004 an investigation on 292 visitors have been carried out. Such tourists have visited the reserve for a total of 458 visits in the 12 months before the interview. Data collected have been compared to the previous analysis (Visintin, 2000), especially considering: socio-economic features; types and modes of fruition; habits and behaviour of visitors.

4.3.1 Fruition modes

The trend is towards a more focused fruition of the reserve. This is also related to an increase in the distances covered by tourists to visit the reserve. Indeed in 1998 people covered an average of 80 km, in 2004 the distance covered reached 150 km.

There are higher numbers of extra-regional fruitors (15% against 9% in 1998) and a higher percentage visit the reserve as the only target of the trip (from 77% in 1998 to 96% in 2004). The duration of the visits moves from 2 hours and 20 minutes in 1998 to 3 hours and 45 minutes in 2004. The number of times that a tourist visits the reserve over one and over three years decreases (1.6 and 2.9 against 2.2 and 5.1 in 1998), but the number of people that visit the reserve for the first time increases.

4.3.2 Touristic habits

The visitors go in the reserve mainly to have a walk (78%, in 1998 54%), or to observe nature (75%, 70% in 1998). In 2004 there is also a strong prevalence of tourists that have a walk and do birdwatching.

More people take naturalistic photographs (27%, 5% in 1998) and go riding (10%, against 7% in 1998), or carry out studies (9%, 6% in 1998). The naturalistic interest of tourists is also indicated by the high number of people that went in the visitor center (55% of total visitors). A higher environmental attention is also signalled by the higher numbers of guided visits.

4.3.3 Socio-economic features

55% of visitors are male (in 1998 59%) with an average age of 43 (41 in 1998) and median of 41 (39 in 1998) (Tempesta et al., 2002). Graduated people numbers have increased (25%) and postgraduated as well (5%), whereas people with a primary diploma (15%) or a high school diploma (53%) decrease. 60 % has visited also other regional protected areas during the last three years, and 15% is part of an environmental association. There is an increase in people employed in services (30%) and in art work (7%); people employed in the public sector are constant (21%), as well as in commerce (12%) and agriculture (2%); non-active people decrease (16%) as well as people working in industries (13%). There are higher numbers of dependent employeeed (67%); retired and housewives are constant (14%), as well as autonomous workers (8%), professional consultants (7%), managers (1%) and unemployed (1%); whereas students decrease (2%). The introduction of a ticket has produced an effect on people having medium to low incomes (10-30.000 euros per year), that decrease from 70% to 63%. People having medium to high incomes (over 30.000 euros per year) increase from 27% to 29%. People with incomes lower than 10.000 euros are stable (8%). The number of people in a family group increases from 2,98 to 3,13 units, although the median remains 3 units. The presence of a ticket has modified visitors' behaviour (more time spent in the reserve, more activities of observation and interpretation of nature) and their socio-economic profile (higher formation and incomes), as expected.

5. Management, functional and economic aspects of the Reserve

The economic situation of the Management Body has been analysed by a second research. The analysis was motivated by the need of making a synthesis of the economic management of the reserve, that involves three cooperatives (Contea, Nemesi e Thiel) (Marangon e Visintin, 2005). The analysis has started from the framework given by the Long Term Financial Plan presented by Conservation Finance Alliance (2002) in cooperation with The Nature Conservancy (2001) at V World Park Congress, held in Durban (South Africa) in september 2003. The reserve is in a passive financial situation, but this is almost a constancy in parks and reserves. However, the passive situation can be improved by decreasing the costs or increasing the incomes, once that a priority to costs that can be decreased and incomes that can be increased is given. The highest costs are related to people employed in vegetation management. However, half of the costs are devoted to "impaired" employers, as the mission of the management body is to sustain disabled people. On the other hand, a decrease in number of working hours of not-impaired employees would translate in a worst management of the reserve, and the progressive degradation of territory and structures would have an effect on the quality of the touristic offer. These types of costs are not balanced by any incomes, because maintainance activities are only aimed at the valorization of the natural environment, of regional property. For this reason, regional fundings should be devoted to maintainance activities. On the contrary, the more commercial activities (management of restaurant, visitor center, etc) should reach a self-financing situation. Incomes could derive both from the activity of such structures and from an increase in the cost of ticket. To obtain more visitors, promotion activities and an increase of touristic offers should be carried out. The preparation of the Conservation and Development Plan of the Reserve could help to valorize the area both from a naturalistic and an ecotouristic perspective. The creation of synergies with other structures could help optimizing promotion costs. This appears to be the orientation of the agency Monitor (2004) that includes tourism among the economic potentialities of Friuli Venezia Giulia, as long as it is connected to the creation of clusters of excellence in the different sectors. The integration can either be horizontal, thus developed around protected areas, or vertical and thus oriented on the whole territory. This is an important approach, as the reserve could be integrated in a wider touristic framework, naturalistic (together

with other reserves such as Val Cavanata, Marano, etc), historical-archeological (Aquileia, Grado, Cividale, Villa Manin; Miramare, the World War in the Karst, etc.), related to sports (riding, canoing, diving, caving, bike-riding, etc.), thermal (Grado), eno-gastronomic, and all this elements could be integrated in specific rural tourism offers. Hence, the regional touristic potential is characterised by a high number of small and fragmented realities, that should be connected in a network in order to create an articulated offer, that can satisfy not only the persons on a short trip, but also the tourists coming from longer distances and looking for a more complete type of holiday. The reserve can offer a touristic typology set on conservation and on benefits for the local population, on minimizing the negative impacts and maximizing the positive ones, on environmental education and sensibilization. Innovative ecotouristic offers should therefore be planned to fulfill these new requirements, in order to reach a successful management of protected areas.

6. Conclusions

First of all, the two researches show the importance of understanding the touristic demands. Environmental policies in Italy have usually not included these considerations. Indeed, environmental valorization and conservation do not usually come out from the same policies (Marangon and Tempesta, 1998, 2003). Conservation cannot be expressed in economic terms, whereas valorization must include also socio-economic efficiency, and include the calculation of costs and benefits weighing on the population. The management of protected areas in Italy should therefore be revised. The resources must be used in the most efficient ways, and ways of self-financing must be pursued, although reaching a cover of all costs is almost impossible for protected areas (AA.VV., 2003). Management bodies should monitor number of visitors and economic and environmental costs and consequent benefits. Indeed, only a good understanding of the phenomenon can allow to gain efficient and socially accepted managing policies.



Foto Silvano Candotto