

Acknowledgements:

To Arantxa and Dani, for all the support they have given me and for having shared with them our great American dream...

To Moni, because thanks to her we have always pursued the best of times...

To my family, because the total I represent is the sum of all of them and they have been with me in the moments of truth...

To my directors, Pablo Vidal, and Ramón Llopis, and to the rest of the members of the Mountain Sports Research Group, for being the front that every mountaineer needs at night...

To Claudia Vallengia and the rest of my family in New Haven and Yale University, because they made the United States my second home...

And to all those collaborators, informants, experts, and mountain lovers who have allowed us to capture all our feelings and emotions in this work.

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Summary

Introduction

This doctoral thesis is framed within the study programme of Social Sciences and the Challenges of the 21st Century and, as such, will attempt to delve into one of the great challenges of today's society: demographic changes and depopulation in rural areas from the perspective of the practice of sporting activities.

The proposed subject of study requires a holistic and coordinated vision of the different interest groups that interact in specific and interdependent areas and fields of work. Therefore researchers, professionals, policy makers, citizens, managers, etc. must all be included. For this reason, as will be observed throughout the work, the object of study is approached from different fields or specialised fields of work.

Parallel to this, the author's training, skills and abilities have a strong influence from the field of Sports Science and Tourism Management. This characterisation has modulated and influenced this profile, so the great challenge of depopulation will be approached from this perspective.

It is for this reason that the doctoral thesis "Hiking as a tourist proposal to fight against depopulation: the case of the interior of the province of Castellón" will represent a study of the phenomenon of depopulation in relation to one of the most important activities of the regional, national, and international economy, tourism. At the same time, it will be linked to one of the most successful activities in the field of tourism, sports activities in nature, more specifically, hiking.

In short, it will try to answer some of the following questions: What role does hiking play within the tourism paradigm, What is the relationship between the heritage of rural areas and hiking, What role do new technologies play in the field of tourism? All of this will be framed in a specific region of the Valencian Community: the interior of the province of Castellón. A unique area which, due to its natural, heritage and cultural characteristics, can represent a perfect test bench that can generate a turning point for the application and replication of tourism products and services in the rest of the Spanish regions.

As can be seen, this project is based on three main pillars or themes. These three main sections could be considered as entities with a life of their own due to the great repercussion and importance they have in the socio-economic, political and environmental spheres, both nationally and internationally.

In this way, depopulation, hiking and the region of the mountains of Castellón will coexist in a very complex web of complementary and interdependent relationships. Depopulation, conceived as a demographic problem; hiking, within the field of tourism and health; and the area under study, will be conceived from an integrated vision with the aim of understanding the present in order to propose a better future.

Methodology

A qualitative methodology has been designed for this study. As Newland and Aicher (2018) point out, a qualitative approach provides a deeper understanding of how

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different tourism stakeholders use heritage as a tool to enhance the quality of the tourism experience.

The research techniques used were interviews and focus groups. In Moscoso's words, the interview is very feasible "to go deeper into the specific aspects we required, so we had to select very particular individuals who knew how to provide us with the information we needed" (2008, p.62). Whereas the essence of focus groups lies precisely in the group itself and the interactions that are generated between them when using this methodology. Few research techniques provide as much as the dynamics of focus groups (Kitzinger, 1994).

On the one hand, a total of 18 semi-structured interviews were carried out, lasting between 40 and 70 minutes. The profiles of the people interviewed included various agents involved in sports tourism in both the private and public spheres. These agents have direct contact with users/excursionists through the different services and/or products they offer. In addition to this, 2 focus groups have been carried out with profiles similar to the interviews, including members of the local population.

All the information collection work has been carried out between September 2019 and November 2021. Both the interviews and the focus groups were conducted in a quiet space, so as not to have any element that would distort the opinion of each of the participants. In order to carefully follow the scientific literature on working techniques, a series of rules were explained to the informants depending on the technique used.

The selected profiles respond to the double geographical and professional criteria. On the one hand, in terms of professional criteria, the different profiles of participants involved in the field of tourism and heritage have been selected. These profiles represent entrepreneurs, employees of tourism promotion associations, politicians and local residents. The reason for this variety is due to the great importance of having a variety of opinions and points of view on similar topics. On the other hand, as far as the geographical criteria are concerned, an attempt has been made to represent the largest number of localities in the research area. The geographical heterogeneity of the sample is necessary due to the great variety, specialisation and tourist and heritage experience of the different localities.

The informants are aware of the researchers' professional interest in their work and have given their consent to be interviewed. The interviews and focus groups have been transcribed in order to be able to order, categorise and analyse the information.

In order to carry out the information analysis procedure, the script was elaborated and standardised according to a series of established variables that allowed the researchers to find out which heritage elements are the most used to improve the quality of the experience, as well as what kind of promotional strategies were being implemented.

This research study with qualitative methodology was based on the characterisation of elements proposed by Saldaña (2011) and adapted according to the elements studied by Vidal-González and Fernández-Piqueras (2021).

The methodology chosen was based on the principle of parsimony, which states that if there are two systems for conducting a research study, the simplest is most likely to be the most appropriate (Sober, 1981). The researcher has always been in control of the execution of the research technique and has been able to redirect the questions when

necessary, but freedom has been given to the interviewees, who have been able to respond in their own way.

As Dupuis (1999) points out, the researcher's experience and perspective should be used in qualitative research to better understand the social and cultural interactions between different settings.

There is an added difficulty in qualitative data analysis. This challenge has created a long-standing debate between scientists advocating qualitative and quantitative analysis techniques (Walle, 1997). Given the difficulty of the approaches presented by the Social Sciences or Tourism (Finn et al., 2000), the use of qualitative methodology helps to better understand the phenomenon under study and all the interactions between them (Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2007).

Therefore, a very thorough process has been followed for the analysis of the data in order to provide maximum rigour and reliability to the results (Jennings, 2005). First, the objective of the work is explained to the participants. The information obtained is transcribed in Microsoft Office Word 2017. Each of the transcriptions is made as soon as possible, in order to complement the recorded information with the notes observed throughout the interview. As Miles and Huberman (1994) point out, one of the advantages of qualitative data recording techniques, such as interviews or direct observation, allows for greater contact with specific contexts, which greatly enriches the information obtained.

According to Lincoln and Guba (1985) the triangulation of results in qualitative methodology is fundamental. In order to triangulate the results and make the data obtained more reliable, two analysis techniques have been used. In the words of Phillips and Jorgensen (2002), the aim is to systematise the analysis of the data in search of meanings.

Results

In the results section, four large blocks of information are analysed. The conjunction of these interdependent and complementary categories allows us to provide a response and make the most scientific possible construction of the intersection between the phenomenon of depopulation, sports tourism and hiking.

Firstly, the socio-demographic profile of visitors to the destination studied has been established qualitatively. The study of the different variables is necessary in order to characterise the different profiles that visit the area. This information allows the various interest groups to segment services and products adapted to their needs. At the same time, it also represents a good indicator of the state of specialisation of the different hiking accommodation in the area. In addition, informants have also provided information on the socio-economic impact and preferences of their visitors, which has a direct impact on the main topic of the doctoral thesis.

Secondly, following the scientific literature on tourist attraction factors, 4 key elements have been analysed in this relationship: accessibility to the location, the accommodation options available, the quality and quantity of entertainment and the novelty of the territory. Undoubtedly, the public-private management of these 4 elements is key to strengthening the attractiveness of the destination analysed.

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Thirdly, and following on from the previous idea, the analysis of the great variety of existing heritage elements is very important. Knowing the environment and the possibilities it offers can represent a competitive advantage for the different hiking accommodations. Thanks to the information analysed, it has been possible to characterise a series of elements that are important for the sports tourism industry. In addition to this, it has also been possible to contrast a series of risks that derive from the management of these areas.

Finally, an analysis was made of the role played by new technologies in the management and promotion of destinations. Work in this area is closely related to the different strategies promoted by the various public bodies at local, national and European level, which is why its application to the tourism industry is essential in order to modernise the different processes.

Conclusions

Based on the analysis of all the information, a series of very interesting conclusions have been drawn.

Tourism is an economic sector with great weight and importance in the global economy. Tourism per se represents an economic engine capable of generating economic and social development in different geographical areas, including rural, mountain and depopulated areas.

The sports tourism sub-sector has experienced a very strong growth in total numbers in recent years. This growth has also been observed in very specific geographical areas such as rural and mountain areas, a growth that has been boosted by the COVID-19 health crisis.

Among the variety of activities in the field of sports tourism, hiking is one of the most interesting for several reasons. Firstly, it is an activity that can be practised by the vast majority of the public. Secondly, it can be linked to other cultural and social activities, which further enriches the activity. Hiking, as a tourist activity, represents a differentiating element in the tourist experience.

In spite of all this, the information obtained from informants has confirmed the low specialisation of the sports tourism sector and even more so for products related to hiking. These figures indicate that, of the total number of visitors, less than 35% travel for the sole purpose of hiking. This factor has several interpretations: on the one hand, accommodation can use other resources or attraction factors to reach a larger number of visitors. On the other hand, there is a risk of losing this flow of visitors to other more specialised destinations.

In relation to the above, this factor can at the same time represent a great opportunity for the sports tourism sector through the management and implementation of various strategies. First, customer segmentation. Knowing the socio-demographic profile of the visitor is one of the most important tasks of the tourism industry. According to the results obtained in this study on the socio-demographic profile of hikers and visitors to the inland mountain area of Castellón, we can establish four very specific profiles of hikers: The non-hiker, who practices hiking. This profile fits in with a tourist who sees the mountain as a place to disconnect and finds the possibility of practising hiking and other sporting activities. The hiking mountain club. This profile applies to members of

associations and sports clubs that organise weekend hiking excursions. The basic hiker. This profile describes a rambler who feels a certain attachment to the sporting activity and for him hiking is a kind of initiation activity. The advanced hiker. This profile applies to people who have a long experience in the practice of hiking and make little use of the channels that a tourist establishment can provide for the organisation of trips.

Second, digital tools have developed enormously in recent years. Their link to the various productive fields and sectors has been very powerful. In the field of tourism, digitalisation is very present and represents one of the great challenges of the future, in order to achieve a more sustainable and higher quality tourism. In the more practical field of tourism, digital tools allow for improvements in the field of promotion and marketing, as more potential clients can be reached; and in the field of internal management, making some of the management tasks more agile.

Thirdly, one of the main motivations of tourists is the attractiveness of the cultural and natural landscape around the accommodation. In this sense, the owners of hotel establishments should promote this heritage in order to improve customer satisfaction. We have detected a low level of promotion of the natural and cultural heritage associated with the territory of the establishments. We recommend that those in charge of tourist establishments should value and promote this cultural heritage. The positive aspects of this tourism activity in rural areas outweigh the possible threats to the heritage, which in any case should not be underestimated. This strategy will increase the number of visitors as well as improve their satisfaction.

Contributions

Having said all this, the work carried out in this doctoral thesis has a direct and positive implication in different professional and academic fields.

Firstly, with our work we have contributed to an analysis of the socio-economic reality linked to mountain activities, hiking and tourism in the inland mountain region of Castellón, specifically in the regions of Els Ports, El Maestrazgo and some inland towns in the regions of El Alcatén and Alto Millares. In relation to the above, we have also been able to analyse the role played by the Tinença de Benifassà and Penyagolosa Natural Parks as attractive elements for visitors and sports tourists.

Secondly, thanks to this work we have also been able to contribute to improving the body of scientific knowledge in the field of sports tourism and activities in the natural environment in the inland mountain region of Castellón. Specifically, two specific articles have been published in specialised international journals: on the one hand, the article "Hiking accommodation provision in the mountain areas of Valencia Region, Spain: a tool for combating the Depopulation of rural areas" in the Journal of Sport & Tourism. On the other hand, the article "Can cultural Heritage be a successful strategy as a tourist experience? The case of tourist establishments in the mountains of Valencia, Spain" in the Journal of Heritage Tourism.

Thirdly, our work has also contributed to increasing our knowledge of the different realities existing in the inland mountain areas of Castellón. This factor has allowed us to forge stronger alliances with that destination, which has led us to sign two collaboration agreements with the town council of Culla, where we advise them on sports activities from a touristic point of view.

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Fourthly, this work has also enabled the Mountain Sports Research Group. Health, Inclusion and Society and the Faculty of Physical Activity and Sport Sciences of the Catholic University of Valencia San Vicente Mártir to take a further step towards the consolidation of national and international specialisation in mountain sports research. This, in turn, translates into the improvement of institutional relations with the various interest groups, especially the mountain sports federations.

Finally, this work has also allowed us to highlight a growing trend in visitors to rural areas, where they are looking for quality rather than quantity. This factor may represent an opportunity for sustainable and prolonged growth over time, where quality and sustainability will be the most important elements. In relation to the above, in the case of the sector's entrepreneurs we have also been able to corroborate that there is a trend insofar as in their discourse it has been possible to analyse that the variables sustainability and quality are very present.

Introduction

Structure of the Doctoral Thesis

The structure of this doctoral thesis attempts to establish a logical narrative that is closely related to the scientific research procedure.

The preface starts from the core topics under study: depopulation as a demographic problem and sports tourism as one of the possible solutions to the problems that depopulation generates. At this point, the competences, skills, motivations, and inspirations of the researcher to focus his or her vital efforts on this topic are also described.

In the first part, all the aspects that have encompassed and still encompass depopulation and sports tourism, as well as all the issues inherent to these concepts, are developed from the rigorous scientific literature. Previous research, databases, reports on recommendations, policies, strategies for improvement, among others, form part of the international, national, and regional reality on these issues.

The second part, dedicated to the working methodology, covers each one of the aspects that underpin the methodological processes of research, from a qualitative point of view. From the choice of the method, through the research techniques used to the criteria for selecting the sample, this chapter unpacks many of the central elements of the different realities of the studied environment. All these realities are fundamental to understanding the analyses carried out in the work.

The third part presents the main results obtained from the analysis of the information gathered during the fieldwork. An in-depth and meticulous analysis that tries to triangulate the information obtained with other similar studies and research.

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Subsequently, in the conclusions section, the aim is to verify whether the hypotheses proposed are true or, on the contrary, are totally contrary to reality. In addition to all this, a SWOT analysis is also proposed in this section to provide a series of conclusions, aspects for improvement, strategies, etc. for possible application to the field of sports tourism in the area studied.

Finally, there is a section of bibliographical references which serves as a database specialising in the different subjects we have dealt with in this work, as well as the annexes we have considered necessary to strengthen the information contained in this work.

A Tour of Scientifically Inspired Spaces

To better understand and identify the precise seed that would later flourish into this interest that I have in these issues, perhaps we should go back to when I began my degree in Physical Activity and Sport Sciences. Although years ago, I already felt a lot of attraction to the mountains, this was limited to a purely sporting relationship. It is then, at the university, where I began to have a more academic and professional relationship with the mountains. Inspired by some of my professors, I decided to collaborate with the Mountain Sports Research Group and soon I became aware of what path I wanted to follow in my life.

Thus, before officially beginning my academic career, through my doctorate, I was already able to make a first scientific approach by attending the 1st Intergenerational Mountain Congress held in the emblematic city of Granada. On that occasion I was lucky enough to listen to the Spanish Professor Eduardo Martínez de Pisón in the opening session. In his words one could venture a kind of very special relationship with the mountain, a relationship with which I identify strongly with. In that same space, I also

realized the great variety of perspectives from which the mountain can be observed scientifically.

That said, I seriously considered the idea that this was the professional field to which I wanted to dedicate my time and enthusiasm, so I decided to venture into the beautiful task of giving a scientific vision to one of my passions. My connection to the research group was key to this.

Months after that experience, I was able to return to the city of Granada for the XV AEISAD International Congress, a congress organized by the Spanish Association for Social Research Applied to Sport. On that occasion, I had a much more active participation, with the presentation of a communication entitled “*Enhancement of the natural heritage of the mountains of the interior of the province of Castellon through an integrated offer of a hiking journey*” that was based on the works that the research group in the province of Castellon was actively carrying out and that formed part of my doctoral thesis. In this second experience, I was able to meet academics and specialists from various fields of knowledge related to mountains. This is the case of the lawyer José María Nasarre and the sociologist David Moscoso. These experts generated in me a greater conviction that the path I had chosen was the correct one.

In 2019, we faced our first great academic and scientific challenge and I say challenge because the Mountain Sports Research Group accepted the mission of organizing a congress in the city of Valencia, whose theme was Mountain Sports. Thus, the 1st International Congress of Hiking and Mountain Sports represented an international space where different experts in the field of mountains shared all their knowledge and interests. Undoubtedly, it was a time of a lot of work, but in retrospect it has served us to position the group as a benchmark in the knowledge and study of different fields of

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knowledge in the field of mountain sports. On that occasion, I was also able to present a communication entitled “*Heritage elements of the populations of the mountains of the interior of Castellon: hiking itinerary from Morella to Montanejos*”. And I was inspired once again by internationally renowned figures, such as Frits Vrijlandt, who at that time was president of the International Climbing and Mountaineering Federation (UIAA) or the Danish Lis Nielsen, former president of the European Ramblers' Association (ERA), to name a few.

A few months later we were invited to participate in the 1st Conference on traditional mountain paths, a conference held in the idyllic space of San Juan de Penyagolosa. There we had the opportunity to present the work “*Trails and livestock routes as a heritage and ecotourism resource in the Valencian Community and Europe*”. But without a doubt, the most important thing on that occasion was the consolidation of the relationship with the president of the Mountain Sports and Climbing Federation of the Valencian Community (FEMECCV), which would later bring us many professional challenges.

Unfortunately, most stories have their negative side and this one was influenced by the COVID-19 pandemic, which also had an impact on our work. To do this, the entire world tried to use the means not to stop work and that generated a professional space that to date was residual in many areas of work, known as teleworking.

In this case, we were able to continue presenting our work online at the 14th International Conference on Sustainable Development or the 5th International Conference on Physical Activity in the Mountain Areas of Poland and World. At that time, we also began to work hand in hand with the president of the FEMECCV, Carlos

Ferris, which would be the first federative mountain congress in the history of the Valencian Community.

In this case, I assumed the Scientific Direction of the CIMS Intergenerational Mountain Congress held in October 2021 in the city of Cocentaina, having the opportunity to gain an in-depth knowledge of the social and associative realities of the mountainous fabric of our country.

All these experiences have shaped my knowledge, my critical capacity, and my academic-scientific training in a very positive way. Without a doubt, the work presented here gathers and treasures all the kilometers traveled along the paths of life.

The Reasons Behind this Doctoral Thesis

This doctoral thesis is part of the study program of Social Sciences and the Challenges of the 21st Century and as such, it will try to delve into one of the great challenges of today's society: demographic changes and depopulation in rural areas from a perspective of the practice of sports activities, where hiking is one of the most important.

The proposed subject of study requires a holistic and coordinated vision of the different interest groups that interact in specific and interdependent spheres and fields of work. Therefore researchers, professionals, political leaders, citizens, managers, etc. all of them must be included. For this reason, as will be observed throughout the work, the object of study is approached from various specialized fields of work.

Parallel to this, the author's training, skills, and abilities have a great influence from the field of Sports Science and Tourism Management. This characterization has modulated and influenced this profile, so, the great challenge of depopulation is going to be addressed from this perspective.

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It is for this reason that the doctoral thesis "Hiking as a tourist proposal to fight against depopulation: the case of the interior of the province of Castellon" will represent a study of the phenomenon of depopulation in relation to one of the most important activities of the regional, national, and international economy, the tourism. At the same time, it will be linked to one of the activities that is having the most success in the tourism field, sports activities in nature, more specifically, hiking.

In short, it will try to answer some of the following questions: What role does hiking play within the tourism paradigm? What is the relationship between the heritage of rural areas and hiking? What role do new technologies play in tourism? All this will be framed in a specific region of the Valencian Community: the interior of the province of Castellon. A unique space, which due to its natural, heritage and cultural characteristics can represent a perfect test bench that generates a turning point for the application and replication of tourism products and services to the rest of the Spanish regions.

As it has been observed, this project is based around three main pillars or themes. These three major sections could be considered as entities with a life of their own due to the great repercussion and importance they have in the socioeconomic, political, and environmental fields, on the national and international scene.

In this way, depopulation, hiking and the region of the mountains of Castellon will coexist in a very complex network of complementary and interdependent relationships. Depopulation, conceived as a demographic problem; hiking, within the field of tourism and health; and the area under study, will be conceived from an integrated vision with the aim of understanding the present to propose a better future.

For this, it is considered essential to explain, in greater depth, the reasons why these three pillars have been chosen and thus support the need to conceive this work as a great challenge for the Social Sciences in the 21st century.

Depopulation, Center of the Object of Analysis

Currently, society is witnessing great socioeconomic, geopolitical, and environmental changes. The health crisis of COVID-19, the War in Ukraine, or the Climate Crisis, among other issues, represent just a series of events on a long list that is putting global society in a state of continuous alert.

Demographic changes and specifically depopulation in rural areas represent a headache for the various regional, national, and international governments. This demographic process entails other problems that also concern policy makers, such as the distribution and management of resources in cities or pollution, to name a few.

In this sense, during the last decades, the different governments have created specialized working groups to address this type of problem. At the regional level, in the Valencian Community, you can find the General Directorate of the Valencian Anti-Depopulation Agenda¹, which is assigned, among others, functions for the creation and application of strategies to fight against depopulation. At the national level, there is the Ministry for the Ecological Transition and the Demographic Challenge², whose functions are very similar to the previous ones, although with a more global vision. Finally, at the European level, there is a European Committee of the Regions³, whose functions include

¹ <https://avant.gva.es/es/avant>

² <https://www.miteco.gob.es/es/>

³ https://european-union.europa.eu/institutions-law-budget/institutions-and-bodies/institutions-and-bodies-profiles/cor_es

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addressing the problem of the demographic challenge from a coordinated vision between the different member countries of the European Union.

The existence of all these organizations and all the work they are doing only confirms the extreme need and urgency that exists within this area of work. The demographic problem is one of the work priorities at the international level and represents a great challenge for society.

Many of these organizations have proposed that this unequal distribution of the population in favor of the cities is having and will have great negative repercussions on the quality of life of the population. In the medium and long term, it is being suggested that cities will not be able to satisfy the basic needs of all citizens.

All this has a great connection with the current climate crisis, which places living conditions, globalization, and the use of resources to satisfy demand as responsible for a process that has no easy solution. There is a strong connection with this reality and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development⁴ proposed by the United Nations Organization. In it, the UN proposes a series of Goals for Sustainable Development, which are strongly related to the theme of this work. Directly, depopulation has a strong connection with objectives 3 (Health and Well-being), 6 (Clean Water and Sanitation), 7 (Clean and Clean Energy), 9 (Industry, Innovation, and Infrastructure), 11 (Cities and Sustainable Communities), 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production) and 13 (Climate Action). And indirectly, as is obvious, there is an important link with the rest of the proposed goals. Therefore, there is a strong relationship between the problem of depopulation and the climate crisis. One of the possible solutions to this problem involves

⁴ <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/es/development-agenda/>

the redistribution of the population and the spatial reorganization, where rural spaces become more important.

In this sense, this is where the role of researchers and professionals in the Social Sciences is needed, insofar as the object of science must be placed at the service of society, trying to provide solutions to the great socioeconomic and environment that is presented. It is for this reason that this project has a strong social and moral commitment to providing solutions to this great problem described.

Hiking is Health

Tourism has been and represents an activity with a very large weight in the Gross Domestic Product⁵ (GDP) of countries on the international scene. For the year 2019, just before the COVID-19 pandemic, the percentage of tourism within the Spanish GDP was 12.4%, a figure that reflects the importance of tourism in our country. It is unquestionable that tourism has been a development tool for many countries and without a doubt, it has also allowed an exchange of cultures and an inspiring space for improving people's quality of life.

Like any activity, tourism can also have a series of negative repercussions for society and for destinations. As it has been observed in recent years, there is a current of opinion that attributes tourism to be the cause of some problems of overcrowding and irresponsible use of resources. The tourist activity must be conceived within a scale of grays and not as an all or nothing. Tourism should be seen as an activity that can improve spaces, if a balance is sought. In the search for that difficult balance is where hiking can be a very interesting activity.

⁵ <https://www.oecd.org/>

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Political, social, economic, and environmental characteristics have had a great influence on the development of tourism internationally. These factors cause tourism to develop at different speeds. In Spain, for example, tourism did not develop until the second half of the 20th century, while other countries such as France and Germany already had a certain tourist tradition, both in the issuance and reception of tourists.

What does seem common to most countries is that trends change, depending on how society changes. It is for this reason that where a few decades ago visitors were attracted by tourism called "sun and beach", now there are other trends, where the practice of sports and leisure or cultural activities are in strong demand. In this sense, activities such as cycling, or hiking are presented as authentic products and services with a very high demand.

This type of tourism, also called 3.0, focuses on a type of sustainable tourism that is based on three basic pillars. Firstly, the tourist themselves offering them the chance to participate in healthy and attractive activities. Secondly, the activity - which aims to produce added value for the tourist and for the space. Finally, for the geographical space which in most cases, the activity itself considers the variable impact on the environment.

Sports activities and hiking thus represent a type of healthy (for people) and sustainable (with the environment) tourism that can be developed over time. Hiking, due to its characteristics, is an activity for everyone, which, when well proposed, can be linked to other cultural and social activities. In addition, hiking has a strong link and impact on people's health. Not surprisingly, the two most important organizations in the world on tourism and health (World Tourism Organization and World Health Organization⁶) have

⁶ <https://www.unwto.org/es/news/la-omt-y-la-oms-crear%C3%A1n-una-coalicin-de-salud-y-turismo>

signed a collaboration agreement to strengthen the existing links between tourism and health.

In this sense, this project has a strong moral and personal commitment based on the academic and professional profile that characterizes it.

Geographic Identity

The third of the pillars that support this project is the chosen geographic space. Undoubtedly, one of the most important reasons when choosing the theme is the strong moral commitment and the responsibility that exists towards the territory and all the variables that surround it.

The rural spaces of the Valencian Community and of Spain represent unique and special spaces that must be researched and preserved. Spain is made up of very diverse regions and as such, in-depth knowledge of its territories can allow actions and decisions to be extrapolated to the rest of the European Union and the World.

In relation to the above, the territory has witnessed how different societies have been adapting to social, economic, political, and environmental changes, sometimes voluntarily and other times due to surrounding circumstances. From the production of raisins in Roman times, through the creation of terraces in Arab times and the construction of dry-stone elements for transhumance. All of them have left a wide repertoire of heritage, cultural and natural elements, which in most cases were proposed to solve unknowns of a very diverse nature.

For all these reasons, this project carries with it that personal and moral commitment to preserve and improve those spaces that sparkle with so much tangible and intangible beauty. Because many of the solutions to the problems that arise reside in these spaces.

Justification of the Doctoral Thesis

The doctoral thesis "Hiking as a tourist proposal to fight against depopulation: The case of the interior of the province of Castellón" is postulated as research that aims to enhance the knowledge of the object of study that is generated at the intersection between depopulation in rural environments and hiking as a tourist activity.

Having said that, in order to contextualise and justify our proposal, we will now try to establish and describe the elements that make up and characterise this research work.

On the one hand, depopulation is one of the great challenges of the 21st century for different public bodies of various kinds, as well as for many private entities. These interest groups are witnessing how rural areas in many regions are increasingly losing population and, above all, are losing the opportunity to create a vital project in the medium and long term in these areas.

On the other hand, tourism represents an economic sector with a great impact on the regional, national and international economy. In recent years, the tourism industry has undergone great development, making the quality of the experience one of the most important elements. This factor, together with society's need to experience sensations in natural spaces, has allowed rural areas to experience a great growth in the number of visitors. Within this paradigm, the practice of activities and sports in the natural environment, such as hiking, are presented as a very powerful tool for the tourist dynamization of these spaces.

In relation to the above, we can see that depopulation and tourism can have a very powerful fit, insofar as the latter has a direct implication in the former, since the social

and economic benefits can help to slow down and even reverse the demographic crisis that is being experienced in some rural areas.

In addition to all the above, this doctoral thesis is also based on the researcher's background and knowledge. Firstly, because he belongs to the Mountain Sports Research Group: Health, Inclusion and Society, as the subject under study is part of one of the group's lines of research, with a track record of more than 10 years and which has resulted in the achievement of several collaboration agreements with various entities in the rural world. Secondly, because the researcher has professional experience in the field of tourism and mountain sports. This undoubtedly allows him to know the reality of the service industry and, therefore, to deal in a more surgical way with the continuous ups and downs generated by the research process. Finally, the object of research is based on the moral and social commitment that arises from the need to do our bit in these times, where society needs the best professionals to provide solutions to the problems and major challenges that arise.

Part 1. Building the Theoretical Framework

Chapter 1. Depopulation, a Serious Problem for 21st Century Society

1.- Depopulation, a Serious Problem for 21st Century Society

Today, there is a major demographic problem that has a very negative impact on many societies. Demographic changes, including population loss in specific geographical areas, represent a real headache for various public bodies at regional, national, and international level (Markkula, 2016).

The loss of population in a specific geographical area may be due to a variety of factors, including the death of the population and the consequent decrease in the total population in that area, or the redistribution of the population itself, which migrates to other regions. In the vast majority of cases, these migrations are associated with the search for better life opportunities and have a strong influence on rural-urban population movements in favour of the urban (Pinilla et al., 2008).

Tzitzikostas (2020), president of the European Committee of the Regions, highlights the major challenge facing the European Union in the 21st century in his opinion on demographic change and proposals for quantifying and tackling the negative effects on the EU's regions. For this expert, demographic change, its consequences, and solutions can have a direct impact on other very important variables, including climate change and all the actions set out in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

At European, national, and regional level, various public bodies are trying to tackle this problem by implementing measures and strategies to combat this demographic problem: specialised groups of professionals and researchers, the creation of aid for specific regions, investment in R&D&I, etc. are just some of the few initiatives that are being carried out.

1.1.- A Conceptual Approach

1.1.1.- Depopulation vs Depopulation.

There is some controversy when it comes to using terminology that refers to one of the most pressing demographic problems of the present day. The dichotomy between depopulation and depopulation transcends the informal sphere, formed by citizens who are not specialised in demography, and sometimes entails certain difficulties in areas which, a priori, are more versed in the subject, such as policy makers, researchers, and professionals, among others.

For this reason, it is considered of vital importance to establish a conceptual approach that serves as a basis and support for the different arguments and questions that will be dealt with. The aim is therefore to make a first approach to the basic concepts that will be the backbone of the problems described in this doctoral thesis.

The starting point or one of the first equations to be cleared up is that between the concepts of depopulation and depopulation: what does depopulation refer to, what about depopulation, and can there be a process of depopulation without there being depopulation?

To lay the groundwork for this controversy and to give the reader a strong sense of security when using the specific terminology, we will use, with Dumont's (2008) permission, a first approach that provides clear clarity. To understand, from a scientific point of view, these two concepts require understanding that:

We speak of depopulation when the natural balance is negative, i.e. when the number of deaths is greater than the number of births. But only when the total demographic balance, which combines births and deaths, as well as immigration and emigration, is negative does one speak of depopulation. A country can therefore be characterised by depopulation without depopulation (in this case, the migratory surplus compensates the natural deficit) and a depopulating country may

not be depopulated (in this case, the natural surplus is still insufficient to compensate the migratory deficit) (p.3).

Undoubtedly, this definition perfectly delimits and specifies each of the concepts of depopulation and depopulation and makes it possible to respond to the questions previously mentioned. In this way, different scenarios can exist in a region or a country: that there is a depopulation process without depopulation, that there is a depopulation process without depopulation, or that both problems coincide.

Having said all this, it seems that we have managed to establish a starting point for a more succinct understanding of the object of study and all the variables that affect it. Continuing with the task of better understanding reality, it seems that most authors agree on the strong link between the concepts of depopulation and depopulation and the term "rural" (García Corral et al., 2022; Pinilla et al., 2008).

For this reason, when talking about depopulation, it is inevitable not to associate it with the rural component, since many of the studies on depopulation focus their efforts on the analysis and understanding of the factors inherent to the demographic problem in very specific geographical areas, which in the vast majority of cases represent rural areas (Alamá-Sabater et al., 2021; Martínez-Abraín et al., 2020; Reynaud et al., 2020; Sáez Pérez et al., 2016; Szymanowski & Latocha, 2021; Viñas, 2019). Having said that, to continue structuring the object of this thesis, it is of great importance to establish a conceptual approach to the term rural.

1.1.2.- Depopulation and Rural Areas.

There seems to be a certain connection with the demographic processes of depopulation and depopulation and the "rural", insofar as these are associated with eminently rural communities, to the detriment of the urban.

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There is another element that is of general interest, as it represents the tool to try to change or complement the rural paradigm, which is none other than the role played by sporting activities or tourism in the rural context. To this end, it is also necessary to bring clarity, from a scientific point of view to the concept of rural tourism.

Defining the concept of "rural" is not an easy task, as its meaning may vary depending on the field of knowledge from which one wishes to approach it. One of the most complete definitions is provided by Collantes and Pinilla (2019), which is based on the postulations of the sociologists Falk and Lyson.

For them, the term "rural" from a demographic point of view refers to small population centres with low population densities. From an eminently occupational point of view, "rural" refers to economies that have specialised in the agricultural sector. Whereas, in its cultural version, "rural" is understood as a homogenisation of culture in terms of its values.

1.2.- Depopulation in the European Union

The group of countries that make up the European Union is probably the best example of the interdependence and complementarity of both theoretical conceptions. In general terms, it could be said that the European Union, taken as a whole, faces depopulation problems, i.e. the birth/death balance is declining due to deaths, while there is no depopulation problem, i.e. the total demographic balance remains positive (Dolton-Thornton, 2021).

However, when we study and understand this demographic problem in greater depth, we come to the conclusion that there is great variability in the different geographical areas that make up the common European space (Szymanowski & Latocha, 2021).

There are different casuistries among the repertoire of countries that make up the European Union, where diachronic differences have been found, which will be mentioned later in the explanation of the historical factors that have made these demographic changes possible; differences between the specific demographic problem, or in other words, a distinction between countries that suffer depopulation processes and others that suffer depopulation; and even demographic differences in the regions of the same country.

In relation to the above, the work done by Dumont (2018) is to be welcomed, as in his in-depth analysis he provides a very comprehensive perspective which he qualifies in the following statement: "Half of the countries of the European Union are depopulated, but only nine are depopulated" (p.3). According to the data derived from his demographic analysis, the following classification can be made.

Table 1

European countries in depopulation and depopulation for the year 2017

Depopulating European countries			Depopulating European countries	
Highly depopulated countries	Countries with average depopulation	Slightly depopulated countries	There is a natural and migratory deficit	There is a natural deficit that is compensated by migration.
(natural deficit greater than 4 per thousand)	(natural deficit between 1 and 4 per thousand)	(natural deficit between 0.1 and 1 per thousand)		
Bulgaria	Alemania	España	Bulgaria	Grecia
Croacia	Estonia	Finlandia	Croacia	Hungría
Letonia	Grecia	Eslovenia	Letonia	Italia
Lituania	Hungría		Lituania	Portugal
	Italia		Rumania	
	Rumania			
	Portugal			

Nota. Fuente: Dumont, G. (2018)

In the case of depopulating countries, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Estonia, Slovenia, and Spain increased their population in 2017 due to a larger migration balance than that generated by the natural deficit.

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The table shows certain trends and groupings that are indicative of the different formulas and circumstances that are currently emerging in the European Union in terms of depopulation.

Broadly speaking, we can observe a grouping of countries that are losing population (depopulation) because they are societies with an ageing population and a higher mortality rate than the birth rate, to name but a few factors. While other countries, especially in Eastern Europe, have undergone a significant process of migration to other countries in search of better economic opportunities (Szymanowski & Latocha, 2021).

1.2.1.- A Historical Overview of Depopulation in Europe.

The study of the problems inherent to demography has been on the agendas of different decision-makers for several centuries now. The problem of depopulation has been a matter of concern for public and private organisations in advanced economies since the end of the 18th century (Reynaud et al., 2020).

According to Bocquier and Costa (2015), understanding depopulation means understanding that there is no single key factor to explain the problem. Depopulation has affected different areas in different ways. And each of them has fought it with different strategies. Despite this, it can be observed that many of the elements causing these processes are common to many Western countries. In this sense, it seems that there is a very close relationship between the industrialisation processes of the different countries and depopulation. Historically, the economies of the advanced countries were based above all on primary and agricultural economies where production and manufacturing were the most consolidated activities.

With the confluence of an increasingly worn-out sector and the emergence of the industrial revolution, political agents saw an opportunity to professionalise new market

sectors and start producing in large quantities, thus generating greater economic wealth in the country. Moreover, alongside this, greater social wealth was also promoted, resulting in improved working conditions for citizens (Lasanta et al., 2017).

It is for this reason that public bodies promoted industrial development in geographical areas on the outskirts of large cities, as urban planning ensured better conditions in terms of spatial planning and the creation of and access to infrastructures. Based on this and with the aim of satisfying the need generated in the form of jobs, political agents encourage a process of urbanisation where large masses of rural citizens migrate to urban and industrial areas (Doignon et al., 2016).

It seems that the most important factors that have caused these demographic problems are similar in many countries. However, researchers point out that there are differences between countries over time, as well as differences and particularities between different regions within a country (Capello, 2011).

The starting point is the mid-18th century with the emergence of the First Industrial Revolution. At that time, England and France saw the creation of and investment in this economic sector as a tool to modernise the country (Viñas, 2019). These major socio-economic and political changes brought with them the gradual abandonment of rural areas in favour of urban areas. In terms of urban planning, large peripheral cities and industrial belts are being developed. This has a major impact on the rural/urban population balance. However, industrial development brings with it powerful social and economic benefits (Huggins et al., 2021).

Soon, other developed countries decided to invest in industrial development, and this was gradually consolidated throughout the West. And finally, it reached the countries of the South, which saw, well into the 20th century, how their respective governments

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tried to invest in industrial development. As is evident, the late industrialisation of these countries is one of the factors that have boosted this demographic problem in countries such as Spain, Greece, Italy, and Portugal, among others. In relation to the above, in this same century there will be an international event that will have a direct impact on this. The Second World War had a major impact on the territories, causing great destruction, which will have an impact even in countries such as Germany, whose industrial development was already more than consolidated. This will also affect neighbouring countries, due to the large migratory movements that exist to satisfy the development of the Germanic country (Szymanowski & Latocha, 2021).

1.2.2.- Different Realities of a Seemingly Common Problem: a Review of European Case Studies.

As can be seen, it seems that the problem of depopulation is common to most Western countries. However, the strategies that have been followed differ as much as the needs and realities of each region.

According to Kroll and Haase (2010), the demographic question is closely related to land management policies, which are strongly determined by the decisions and strategies of public administrations. In their research they were able to show that in the case of western Germany there is a correlation between land use, natural population growth and net migration. In other words, land use and land management can help to make the area economically dynamic.

For Willemen et al. (2010) it seems that the territory and the interactions that occur within it represent a key factor for the generation of a socio-economic impact. In their research on the role of territory in the Gelderse Valley region in the Netherlands, they have observed that the interactions that are generated between the various landscape

functions (residential, intensive livestock farming, cultural heritage, plant habitat, herbaceous production, and leisure cycling) can provide a series of goods and services that are important for the social and economic dynamisation of the region.

Undoubtedly, spatial planning is a fundamental aspect of balancing the urban-rural balance. In this sense, research specific to individual rural communities is necessary to understand how they have adapted and, in some cases, maintained their population. In some rural communities in southern Italy, the reinvention of the agricultural sector in novel forms such as agrotourism has been key to reversing the depopulation process. In either case, public policies should encourage investment and development in these areas (Rizzo, 2016).

Another case study that is particularly striking is the case of the Alps. It is surprising that, given the complexity of its orography, half of Alpine Europe has experienced demographic and economic growth in recent years. According to the researchers, there are several reasons for this change, including generally good connections and infrastructure, and tourism in the case of the higher areas of the Eastern Alps. Nevertheless, there are still some areas that require coordinated action between public bodies and private companies in order to develop these regions socially and economically (Bätzing et al., 1996).

1.3.- Depopulation in Spain

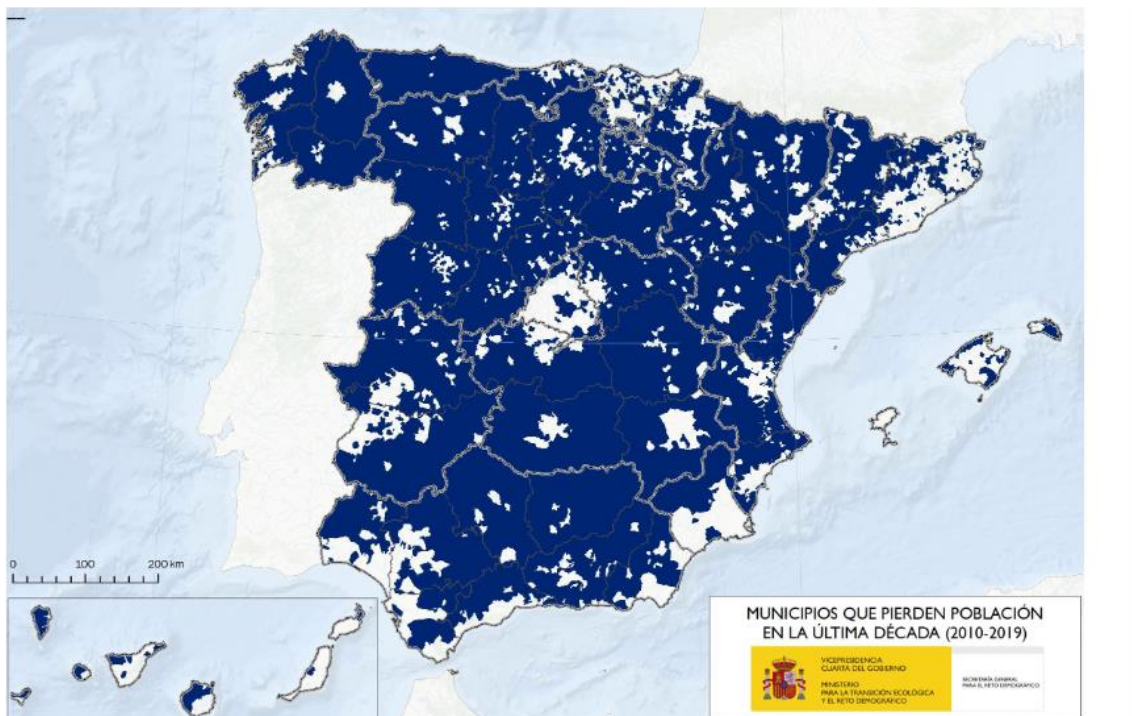
Depopulation in Spain is one of the major concerns of public bodies. As in the rest of southern European countries, the demographic decline in some areas is causing really social and economic disasters. According to the report "The demographic challenge and depopulation in Spain in figures" produced by the Secretaría General para el Reto Demográfico (2020), the 21st century has witnessed an intense decrease in population,

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especially in the Autonomous Communities of Extremadura, Galicia, Castile and Leon and Asturias. In addition, in the 2010-2019 period it has also spread to Aragon, Cantabria, Castilla La Mancha, the Valencian Community and La Rioja. According to the same report, the local reading is even more worrying, as of the 8,131 municipalities in Spain, 6,232 have lost population in the last 10 years. This problem affects small rural municipalities to a greater extent.

Figure 1

Municipalities losing population in the last decade (2010-2019)



Note. Source: Secretaría General para el Reto Demográfico (2020)

As can be seen in the map above, only large urban areas and key geographic locations are not being affected by this problem.

In relation to the above, as indicated by Pinilla and Sáez (2016) in the CEDDAR report, a large part of the Spanish territory is currently sparsely populated, with densities well below those considered critical, such as 5 h/km². Along the same lines are the conclusions of the report of the Federación Española de Municipios y Provincias (2017)

(FEMP, from now on) which state that in Spain there are currently a total of 4,995 municipalities with less than 1,000 inhabitants, of which 2,562 have less than 500 inhabitants and 1,286 have no more than 100 inhabitants.

In this sense, depopulation is not the only problem, and the close relationship with other underlying problems such as population ageing and the effects of the floating population highlight the need to create a strategic plan that encompasses various areas of knowledge in order to tackle this problem (Comisionado del Gobierno frente al Reto Demográfico, 2019).

1.3.1.- Depopulation in Spain From a Diachronic Perspective.

As has already been shown, depopulation is closely related to the industrialisation processes in various Western countries. In Spain, the percentage of the active population working in the primary sector in 1850 was 70%, whereas 50 years later it fell to only 68%. This situation is striking when we observe that, for the same time frame, France and the United Kingdom experience variations from 52% to 43% and from 24% to 10%, respectively (Collantes et al., 2014).

Undoubtedly, Spain, compared to other countries, experienced a process of late industrialisation. It was around the middle of the 20th century when a major process of migration from rural to urban areas took place. Undoubtedly, one of the determining processes was industrialisation. As Slomp (2004) points out:

The decline in the number of people working in agriculture implies a shift to other sectors. Between 1900 and 1950/1971, the secondary and tertiary sectors show growth. The industrial development (secondary sector) and the growth of the tertiary sector takes place mainly in urban areas (...) The concentration of economic activities in urban areas has had an influence on the reason for migration in Spain. Industry needed labour, which was present in rural areas in

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abundance, as a result of a return of employment in agriculture. Thus began a stream of migration from the countryside to the city (p. 32-33).

Although there are some reports that date the beginning of the 20th century as the start of depopulation in Spain, it was not until the middle of the 20th century that depopulation became a major problem. This economic and social process was accompanied by other political and historical circumstances that marked the development of Spain. In the 1950s, Franco's dictatorship was already in place and during the 1940s a dying agricultural sector and excessively interventionist policies worsened the situation of the rural world even further. For this reason, Franco's government, in a bid to develop the industrial sector, promoted and encouraged the creation of industries in the peripheral areas of the large cities, which to a large extent promoted a rural exodus to the cities (Paniagua, 2016).

In relation to the above, it is also essential to mention that the accelerated process of industrialisation allowed for the professionalisation of the primary sector through mechanisation and the development of new techniques and products that increased its production. However, the greater attractiveness of business initiatives coming from the city was, in most cases, much more attractive than the primary sector. Moreover, as Collantes and Pinilla (2019) point out:

The non-agricultural rural sector did not grow strongly enough for the rural economy to cope with the intense urban pull effect and the labour-saving nature of the technological innovations introduced by farmers. These economic bases help to explain why emigration to the cities was also part of the adaptive strategy of the rural population in the face of the important transformations that were taking place in post-1950 Spain. (p.111).

These realities modulated and shaped what is known today as depopulation. However, they also brought several social and economic benefits that probably laid the foundations for the later development of a modern welfare state.

1.3.2.- Different Realities in the Face of an Apparently Common Problem: a Review of Case Studies in Spain.

As can be seen, the problem of depopulation is common to most territories at national level. Although there are many joint and similar strategies, as has already been seen in the European case, each region proposes individualised strategies depending on the determining factors that characterise their areas. In this sense, the case studies represent an excellent source of information and a test bench for a deeper understanding of the different interactions generated between the various territories and demographic processes.

According to Viñas (2019), the case of Cantabria represents a somewhat paradigmatic example. Unlike other Spanish regions, depopulation in Cantabria began some years before the middle of the 20th century, and was most acute in the 1960s, as was the case in many other Spanish regions. The orography of this region also represents a major handicap, as many of the rural populations are in mountainous areas, where physical accessibility, facilities and basic services are deficient or non-existent. Based on the characteristics and circumstances of this region, it seems that one of the key aspects in the fight against depopulation is political will, in the form of investment and development of these areas.

In the case of Galicia, Martínez-Filgueira et al. (2017) also highlight the important role of administrations in designing effective strategies against depopulation. In their research they try to cancel out the effect of past depopulation in order to better understand

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how these dynamics interact in recent years. This analysis allows them to observe that there are some rural areas that are being able to slow down or even reverse depopulation processes. They conclude that spatial planning and regional development and the quality of connections are factors that, if well managed, can help to reverse this demographic process.

Of course, the process of depopulation can be combated by means of various strategies. Tourism represents an economic engine that can dynamise rural areas, but there are other strategies such as the promotion of second homes, which also have the capacity to fix the population in the territory.

According to research in the rural areas of Alt Empordà in Catalonia, there is currently a process of demographic change where, as a result of underlying social and economic changes, the peri-urban population is growing in rural areas to the detriment of large population centres (Cuadrado-Ciuraneta et al., 2017). These findings may help governments to replicate this model in other geographical areas.

In relation to the above, Pinilla et al. (2008) have observed that tourism and residential development are key to socio-economic development. In their research in the province of Aragon, they observe that tourism is one of the activities that favours repopulation. However, there are differences between the mountain systems of the Pyrenees and the Iberian Cordillera. The former, by offering ski-related tourism, is much more competitive and has therefore benefited to a greater extent than the southern area. Whereas in the case of residential tourism, one of the key factors for the development of rural areas has been the investment and improvement of transport infrastructures, which has generated better connections with cities with more services. The confluence of both

factors is driving an urban-rural movement that will probably be known in the future as the great urban exodus.

With the same objective and on a more local scale, the actions of local action groups, made up of small entrepreneurs and citizens who see in the environment of their villages and traditions a possibility to generate an economic and social impact on their populations through tourism, should serve as inspiration. This is the case of the "Village Brand" project, which aims to develop initiatives to enhance the value of villages by combining economic, social, and environmental aspects. According to some research carried out in the province of Almeria, it seems that this set of coordinated actions can represent an element of socio-economic dynamization (García Corral et al., 2022).

Undoubtedly, understanding the environment and the economic dynamics that occur in rural areas is a key factor. In the case of the analysis carried out by Dolton-Thornton (2021) in the Community of Murcia, it has been observed that the financing of some traditional activities related to agriculture represents an ineffective strategy in the medium and long term. In this sense, they propose that it could be more interesting to finance the conversion of these activities to new activities that are in demand in these environments, including ecotourism, cultural activities, and the exploitation of other products and/or services.

In short, there is a wide variety of cases that explain the phenomenon of depopulation in the national territory, as well as different strategies for its management. What seems to be common to all of them is that the coordinated action of the different public and private initiatives is necessary.

1.4.- Depopulation at Regional Level: the Valencian Region

In the case of the Valencian Community, the rural exodus is linked to two stages. On the one hand, during the first decade of the 20th century, when the magnetism of the cities was an attractive factor that made the inland population migrate to the coast. And on the other hand, the mid-century stage, where the growing urban industrialisation and the tourist development of the coast meant a great opportunity for social and economic development for the citizens (Cerdà, 2017).

According to Alamá-Sabater et al. (2021) the geography of the Valencian Community follows very specific patterns. In the east are the large urban and coastal areas and, in the west, the rural areas, characterised by mountainous environments. While population densities in coastal areas are very high, only 40 kilometres inland there are certain areas with serious demographic problems.

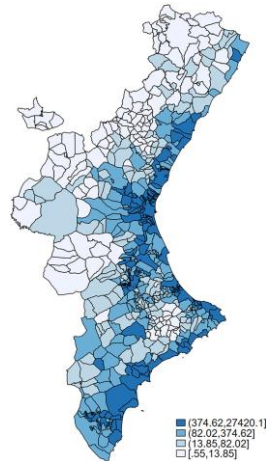
It is for this reason that the problem of depopulation is a concern for the public institutions of the Valencian Community. As pointed out in the report on the Valencian rural environment drawn up by Comité Económico y Social de la Comunidad Valenciana, (2020):

The dynamics of the population and its evolution in the Valencian Community has shown since 1999 a confirmation of the depopulation of the rural environment, since while the overall population of the whole Valencian Community has increased by 23.37%, from 1999 to 2019, in the 171 municipalities at risk of depopulation considered in this report, this rate has been negative, to a greater or lesser extent, as can be seen, for example, in Els Ports, with a negative rate of 23.37%, in the 171 municipalities at risk of depopulation considered in this report, this rate has been negative, to a lesser or greater extent, as can be seen, for example, in the regions of Els Ports with a negative rate of -15.92%, l'Alt Maestrat with -19.87%, Alto Mijares with -8.22% or Rincón de Ademuz with -21.94%. In Alicante, the population growth rate in all the comarcas is positive during this period, which is why no examples are cited (p.24).

As can be seen in the figure below, population density is much higher on the coast and in the southern areas of the Valencian Community. The regions with the lowest population density are in the western and northern regions.

Figure 2

Distribution of population density in Valencian towns and villages

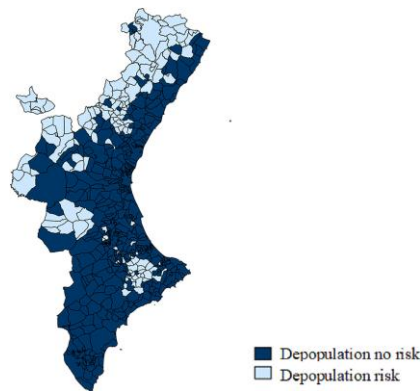


Note. Source: Alamá-Sabater et al. (2021)

In this sense, Alamá-Sabater et al. (2021) have produced a graphic model that provides valuable information on the geographical areas most prone to depopulation. As can be seen in the figure, the area of the inland counties of Castellón is the most affected.

Figure 3

Risk of depopulation of Valencian towns and villages



Note. Source: Alamá-Sabater et al. (2021)

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According to research by Marco and Soriano (2020), the province of Castellón is the most affected, as the mountain areas have suffered a significant population decrease. While at the beginning of the 18th century the population in the inland counties represented 49.8%, the data for 2018 indicate that this figure has decreased to only 9.46%, although a certain recovery can be detected in the towns of Alcora and Segorbe.

Table 2

Evolution of the provincial population by comarcas (the inland comarcas are shaded).

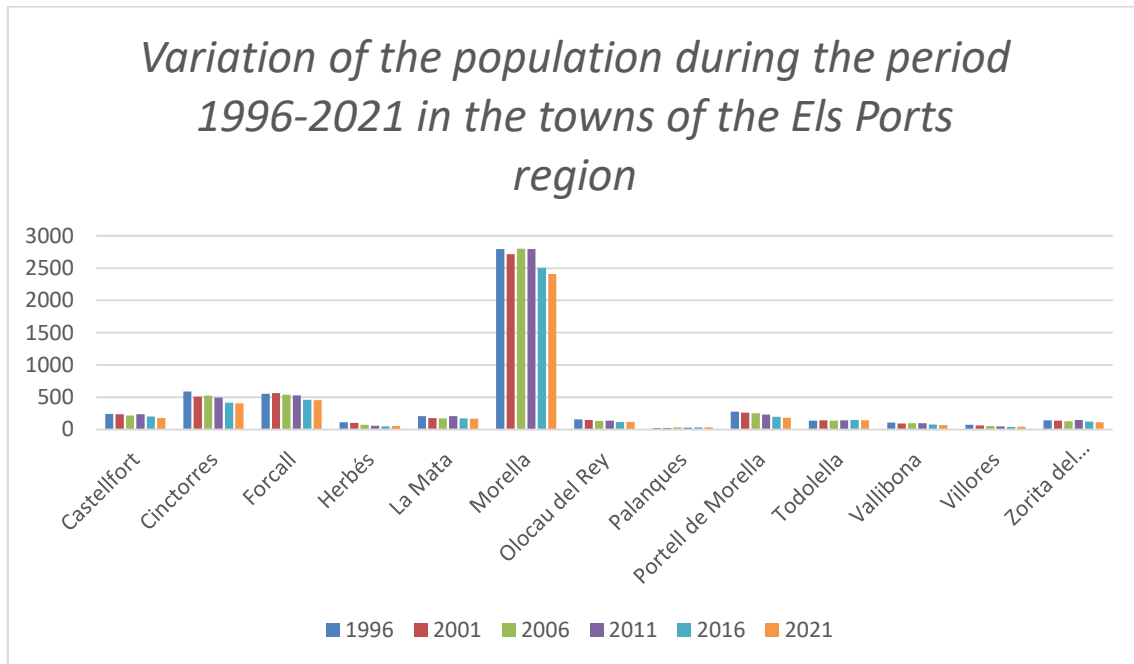
Comarcas	1900	1940	1991	2018
Plana Baixa	68.447	81.007	150.291	190.312
Plana Alta	69.444	84.341	182.551	250.981
L'Alcalatén	20.520	17.561	14.663	15.626
Alt Maestrat	19.377	16.440	8.765	6.745
Baix Maestrat	54.768	48.835	59.881	81.343
Els Ports	21.020	15.607	5.422	4.404
Alto Mijares	19.760	16.457	4.157	3.784
Alto Palancia	37.492	33.098	22.452	23.703
Total	310.828	312.346	448.182	576.898

Note. Source: Marco, P., y Soriano, J. (2020)

As can be seen, the regions of Els Ports, Alto Maestrato and Alto Millares are the worst affected. The figures they indicate are really worrying.

Figure 4

Variation of the population during the period 1996-2021 in the towns of the Els Ports region



Note. Source: Instituto Nacional de Estadística (2022)

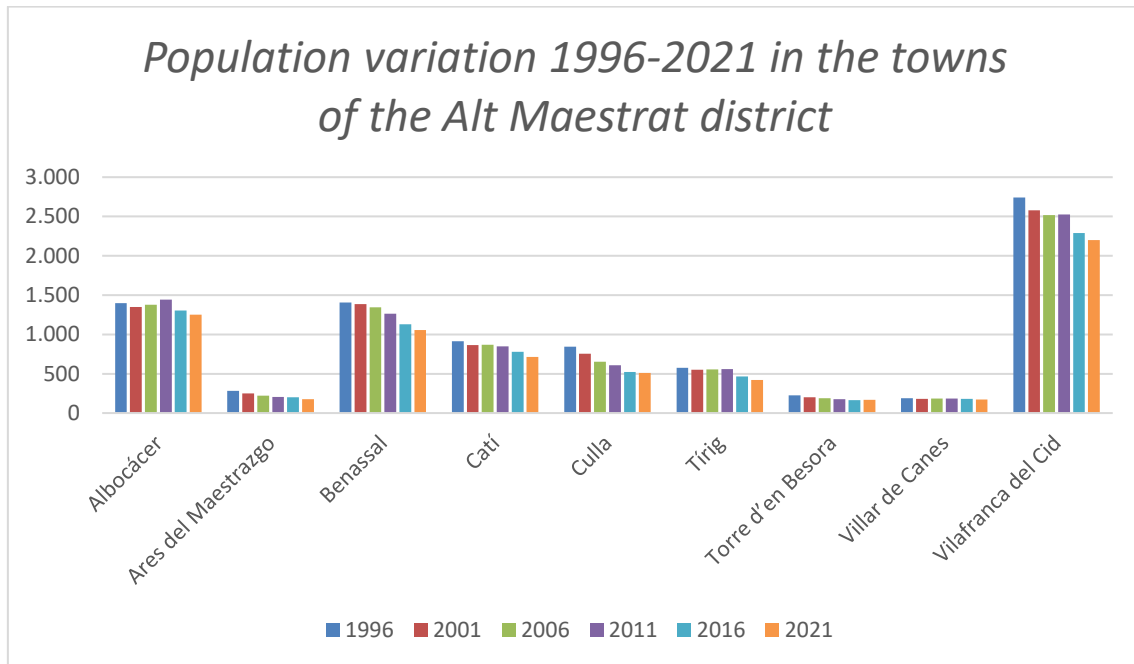
As can be seen in the figure above, all the towns in the county of Els Ports have been losing population since 1996. Only the town of Palanques has achieved a different process and has grown from 23 to 36 registered inhabitants from 1996 to 2021. In some cases, the 2006 census indicates growth in some towns, which is linked, among other factors, to the immigration that Spain experienced during those years.

In the case of the Alt Maestrat region, the towns are, on average, based on larger population centres. Some of these towns are home to private logistics centres, such as the Marie Claire company in Vilafranca del Cid, important health tourism destinations, as in the case of Benassal, or important public facilities, such as the Albocácer penitentiary centre. These entities undoubtedly represent elements of economic dynamization due to the great attraction of labour that they represent.

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Figure 5

Population variation 1996-2021 in the towns of the Alt Maestrat district



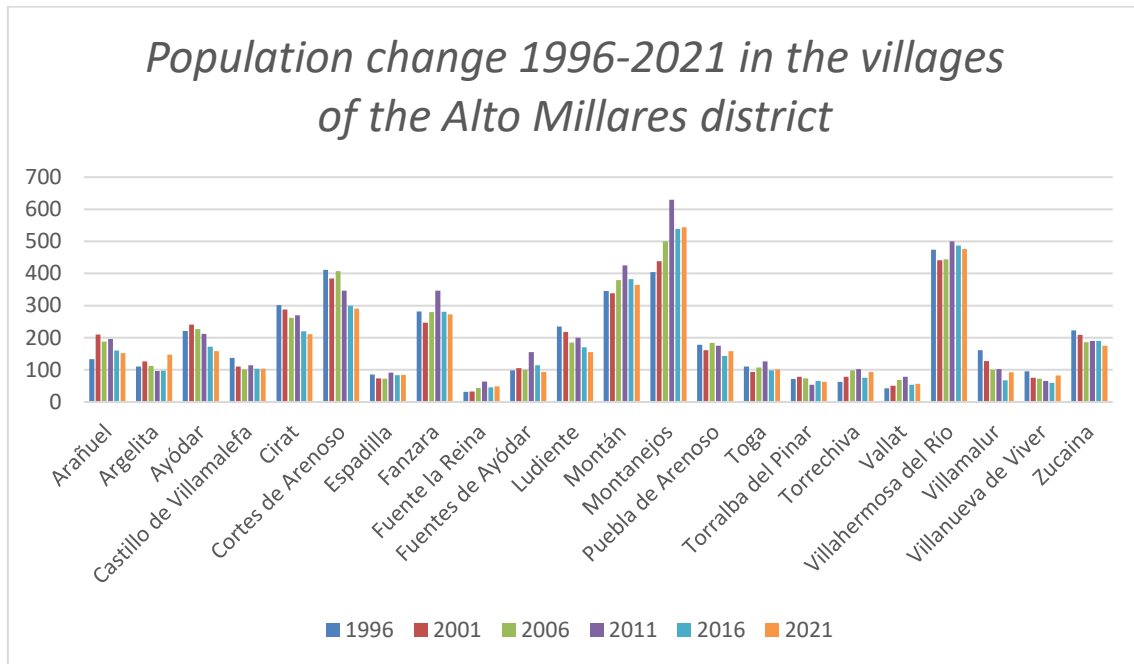
Note. Source: Instituto Nacional de Estadística (2022)

As can be seen in the figure above, all the towns in the Alt Maestrat district, without exception, have lost population in the period 1996-2021.

In the case of the Alto Millares district, the situation is no less worrying. The populations of this district are located in very complex natural enclaves and have been characterised by being very small in terms of number of inhabitants. In many cases, the villages have been losing population since 1996, although it has been observed that some villages such as Argelita, Fuente la Reina, Montanejos, Pueblo de Arenoso, Toga, Torrecita, Vallat, Villamalur or Villanueva de Viver, have increased their population. In the case of Montanejos, this can be explained by a growing private investment in the sports tourism sector, while in the rest of the towns it would be necessary to determine whether this is due to the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, where a sector of the population has registered in small towns in search of different types of benefits, including tax benefits.

Figure 6

Population change 1996-2021 in the villages of the Alto Millares district



Note. Source: Instituto Nacional de Estadística (2022)

Finally, the Alcalatén region presents figures that are also worrying. Although it seems that the population loss between 1900 and 2018 has not been so great in this region, if we go deeper into the data, we can see that this is because the population of Alcora groups a large percentage of the population of the region, thanks to the important economic engine it has due to the ceramic production sector. In this sense, the data also indicate that towns further inland, such as Vistabella del Maestrazgo, Xodos, Les Useres and Lucena, among others, are being affected by depopulation.

In relation to all these figures, it seems that the future trend is also worrying because several factors coexist, such as the ageing of the population or the lack of services, among others, which do not generate an interest in young people to start up life projects in rural areas (Collantes et al., 2014).

2.- Public Strategies for Combating Depopulation

According to the analysis of the scientific literature on the origins and causes of depopulation, as well as the strategies carried out in different geographical areas throughout Europe, the problem of depopulation requires an enormous commitment on the part of the public administration. In this sense, many initiatives and strategies have been promoted by the different European, national, and local administrations.

In the European Union sphere, the promotion of and investment in a series of initiatives and programmes are highlighted in the following table.

Table 3

Initiatives and Programmes developed in the field of the European Union for the development of rural areas.

Initiatives and Programmes	Period	General goals
LEADER I	1991-1993	Rural tourism
LEADER II	1994-1999	Rural tourism and environmental conservation
LEADER Plus, PRODER I	2000-2006	Promotion of services to the population. Rural tourism. Enhancement of the cultural and natural heritage. Networking
FEADER-LEADER	2007-2013	Economic diversification of the rural environment, through the use of territorial resources. Business promotion. Training and innovation. Emphasis on sectors developed in previous programmes.
FEADER-LEADER	2014-2020	Balanced territorial development of the rural community, through job creation and preservation.

Note. Source: (Agenda Valenciana Antidespoblamiento, 2021)

At national and regional level, there are different bodies dealing with the issue of depopulation. The Ministry for Ecological Transition and the Demographic Challenge at national level and the Valencian Anti-Population Agenda at regional level are the bodies that channel and materialise the implementation of the various initiatives and strategies, depending on the existing priorities. Ultimately, in the public sphere, there are the different local corporations (Comisionado del Gobierno frente al Reto Demográfico, 2019).

Finally, with a more local and not necessarily public character, there are the Local Action Groups, formed by private initiative. These groups receive strong funding from European bodies and among their main objectives is to develop actions that improve the socio-economic impact in the various areas. Interest in these groups is growing, as they represent bottom-up initiatives, all of them backed by the empirical character of the needs of local citizens and residents (Red Española de Desarrollo Rural, 2015).

3.- New uses in the rural world: tourism

Rural development depends to a large extent on local economies being able to diversify into sectors other than agriculture. Thus, there are various formulas that can generate a positive socio-economic impact in rural areas, including the impact of immigration (Collantes et al., 2014), the organisation of sporting events (Botella-Carrubi et al., 2019), the practice of hiking as a sport-tourism practice (Ramshaw, 2014; World Tourism Organisation, 2019), better territorial planning by public administrations (Kroll & Haase, 2010; Rizzo, 2016), investment in infrastructure (Martínez-Filgueira et al., 2017) or the promotion of second homes in rural areas (Cuadrado-Ciuraneta et al., 2017).

The aim of this research is to analyse the interactions that exist between sports tourism and the rural environment to generate a socio-economic impact that manages to slow down and even reverse the process of depopulation in rural areas.

Chapter 2. A Tourism Paradigm

Shift: The Rise of Sports Tourism

1.- Physical Activity is Synonymous With Health

According to the World Health Organisation (2021), physical activity refers to any bodily movement produced by skeletal muscles, with the consequent consumption of energy. This movement can occur in a leisure or recreational environment, but also in a sporting or training environment.

Global physical activity practice differs greatly by region and therefore the World Health Organisation aims to promote physical activity in regions where rates of physical activity are lowest (World Health Organisation, 2021).

In the European context, the practice of sport is much more consolidated, as a result of greater economic and social development, as well as well-defined public policies that have managed to promote sport in the vast majority of countries. Undoubtedly, policy makers are aware of the great health benefits of physical activity (Eigenschenk et al., 2019).

According to a Eurostat (2022), almost 80% of the EU population walk from one place to another, while 20% of the population cycle. Aerobic sports are practised by 44%, while weight training is practised by 1 in 4 Europeans.

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Table 4

Population aged 15 and over practising sport in the different countries of the European Union in 2014, according to various categories: walking, cycling, aerobic sports and/or power sports (expressed in percentages).

Country	Walking to get to and from place	Cycling to get to and from place	Aerobic sports	Muscle-strengthening
European Union 27	79,4	21,2	42,8	23,8
European Union 28	78,4	19,7	44,4	24,2
Bulgaria	91,4	10,0	10,8	10,5
Czechia	92,2	35,5	34,7	19,3
Denmark	79,1	47,1	73,8	48,3
Germany	77,7	32,3	65,7	44,1
Estonia	80,1	24,2	35,2	15,4
Ireland	86,2	13,6	45,8	34,3
Greece	81,2	9,0	22,8	12,6
Spain	81,7	10,5	46,3	14,9
France	70,9	12,0	49,0	23,7
Croatia	85,7	30,2	21,6	9,6
Italy	74,3	16,5	25,5	13,9
Cyprus	16,5	2,2	38,8	9,1
Latvia	89,3	23,0	38,6	21,7
Lithuania	76,5	19,2	24,1	13,2
Luxembourg	88,6	17,4	65,4	36,8
Hungary	84,7	40,4	33,5	23,7
Malta	73,0	3,9	51,8	8,0
Austria	81,0	24,9	72,0	44,3
Poland	84,9	26,6	22,0	7,7
Portugal	60,7	5,8	35,0	13,0
Romania	99,0	12,8	4,9	1,9
Slovenia	83,1	34,2	54,7	37,5
Slovakia	89,2	33,3	33,7	16,6
Finland	82,7	25,9	74,1	52,8
Sweden	82,2	32,7	71,3	51,6
Iceland	56,2	13,1	70,3	57,3
Norway	66,0	26,6	70,0	35,7
United Kingdom	70,8	8,3	57,3	27,3
Turkey	75,5	5,3	7,5	3,3

Note. Source: Eurostat (2022)

As can be seen, there are large differences between countries and the type of sporting practice. On the one hand, we are particularly struck by the percentage points that countries such as Bulgaria, Romania, Slovakia, etc. present regarding the practice of walking, especially considering that on many occasions the climate in these countries can be considered as an adverse factor.

On the other hand, we would also like to highlight Denmark, Finland, Sweden, and Norway as countries whose practice of aerobic sports is more consolidated.

Evidently, these countries accredit a greater consolidation of the practice of physical activity in the collective imagination (Margaryan & Fredman, 2017; Sievänen et al., 2011).

In the case of Spain, 81% of the population say that they walk, which is a positive figure as it is a few percentage points above the European average. Undoubtedly, Spain has experienced a large increase in the number of people practising physical activity, which is closely linked to an increase in awareness of the importance of physical activity for health.

In Spain, from 37% to 46.2% of the population over 15 years of age who practice sport on a weekly basis between 2010 and 2015 (Ministerio de Cultura y Deporte, 2019). The overall data are very positive, and it is likely that the trend will continue to grow in the coming years.

Having said that, two aspects are particularly noteworthy: on the one hand, the increase of almost 14 points in the female sex. On the other hand, there has also been an increase in sporting practice in the older age groups.

Table 5

People who practise sport in Spain on a weekly basis according to personal characteristics (years 2010/2015).

	WEEKLY SPORTS PRACTICE	
	2010	2015
TOTAL	37,0	46,2
SEX		
Men	45,4	50,4
Women	28,8	42,1
AGE		
15 to 24 years old	57,9	76,1
From 25 to 54 years old	40,2	53,3
55 and over	22,2	26,0
LEVEL OF EDUCATION		
Primary or secondary education	33,2	39,4
Higher education or equivalent	54,9	64,1

Note. Source: Ministerio de Cultura y Deporte (2019)

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The increase in the practice of sport in older age groups is closely linked to the growing awareness that sport has great benefits for the health of the elderly. One of the activities that is becoming more popular among all age groups is hiking (Ministerio de Cultura y Deporte, 2019).

2.- Tourism in the 21st Century: a New Paradigm

Tourism represents an economic activity that has had a great impact on the dynamization of the economies of many countries. The development of tourism in each country has gone hand in hand with the evolution of other economic, social, political, and environmental factors. Moreover, it continues to be influenced today by the confluence of all these variables.

In the case of Spain, the commitment to this economic sector was made in the middle of the 20th century and very quickly experienced great growth. The Franco government's open-mindedness, very favourable weather conditions and greater purchasing power on the part of citizens from countries such as Germany, England, and Switzerland, among others, are factors that make Spain a very attractive tourist area (Vallejo, 2002).

Over the coming decades, Spain will experience an intense growth in demand for what will be known as sun and beach tourism, which will see its greatest exponent in the Mediterranean coastal areas, but which will soon be in danger. As indicated by Baños (2016):

In fact, after the phase of intense growth in supply and demand which led to the consolidation of the Alicante tourism model, a series of imbalances and contradictions appeared in the territorial, functional, environmental and sectoral dimensions. The causes of these imbalances and problems are well known, and can be summarised in a development model that was unplanned, excessively rigid and standardised, specialised in a massive holiday product of a real estate nature and scarcely

diversified. In short, it was a product that was not very specialised, which was in marked contrast to a global context in which there were profound changes in the segmentation of demand, the emergence of new destinations whose take-off was based on the same comparative advantages that justified the development of the Spanish Levante region, and the flexibilization and reorganisation of the tourist production systems. Therefore, already in the last decade of the last century, the need to maintain and qualify tourist activity based on principles such as sustainability and competitiveness, the rationalisation of growth processes and the adjustment to the capacity of the territory (limit in the consumption of resources), the improvement of the quality of the current tourist areas and destinations which, on occasions, will have to face real restructuring and reconversion processes (p.269-270).

Undoubtedly, the tourism sector is positioned at a crossroads where it is necessary to understand the changes in the lifestyle of citizens, where healthy practices such as physical activity or the need to be in nature, are positioned as factors of attraction for tourists and the concepts of experiential tourism and healthy leisure become vitally important (De Oliveira-Matos et al., 2017).

This new tourism paradigm focuses on the diversification of tourism as a tool for tourism promotion and customer segmentation, where different destinations specialise in different tourism products and services. As Richards (2018) rightly points out, cultural tourism is one of the segments experiencing a very large growth and that is why there is a growing interest in investigating how cultural motivations, heritage conservation and the creative economy converge with tourism.

In relation to the above, Gómez et al. (2016) highlight the wide variety of tourism segments that are emerging, among which they mention gastronomic tourism, ecotourism, large-scale travel tourism, etc.

Of all the proposals and segments that derive from tourism, there is one that, due to its experiential characteristics, is experiencing great growth. In this sense, Hinch and

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Higham (2001) state that the practice of sport represents one of the main attractions of the current tourism paradigm, thus positioning sport tourism as an alternative offer in constant growth (Filo et al., 2011; Ramshaw, 2014).

Therefore, as Ito and Higham (2020) argue, sports tourism represents an opportunity to experience sporting activities in nature that are often linked to other specialisations such as culture or gastronomy. In practice, sports tourists can enjoy experiences that combine the practice of activities such as cycling or hiking in combination with cultural spaces and gastronomic experiences.

2.1.- Sports Tourism, a Complex Concept

Defining the concept of sports tourism is not an easy task. Although it appears to be the union between two basic concepts, tourism and sport, the synergy that is created between them often transcends reality itself. The confluence of tourism and sport and the interactions that are generated at the intersection of both concepts sometimes have meanings that go beyond the palpable.

In relation to the above, Lamont (2014) starts from the concept of authenticity to define what sports tourism represents. According to him, the experiences derived from sports tourism must be authentic. However, categorising the concept of authenticity from a scientific point of view is a complex task, as the term itself has both objective and subjective connotations. In this regard, Wang (1999) proposes three categories on the basis of which authenticity can be conceived. First, the objective approach, which refers to the genius of the object itself, or as applied to tangible experiences in tourism. Second, the constructive approach, which relates to the social and personal constructions that each tourist makes of his or her experience. And third, the existential approach, which is

connected to the understanding of tourists' motivations and experiences. Based on this, it seems that experience and authenticity are key elements.

The tourism industry has been able to capitalise on these elements and has been able to integrate the concept of sport into the different products and services on offer. In this sense, the broad umbrella of sports tourism includes those who travel to participate in a sporting activity, those who travel to observe sporting practices and those who visit a sporting attraction (Delpy, 1998). This, in turn, has encouraged the tourism industry to diversify its offer into more specific segments, which can be divided into the following areas: sports tourism of attractions, resorts, cruises, tours or events, among others (Kurtzman & Zauhar, 2003).

Based on all this, one of the most interesting approaches to try to understand the concept of sports tourism is the one proposed by Pigeassou (2004):

Sport tourism appears in the first instance as an economic tourist activity before being seen as a sport culture experience. Of course, it is possible to have a sport experience in the residential environment, but by definition, it is impossible to have a tourist experience in the immediate environment. Variables (space, time) are important factors to take into account in tourism. Sport tourism is based on the introduction of some key variables such as destination and choice processes, i.e. the motivations and decisions of the tourist (p.287).

Undoubtedly, the above proposal focuses on the importance of travelling from one place to another. In this sense, Gozalova et al. (2014) show that the importance of tourism, in general and sports tourism, in particular, lies largely in the action of travelling, in its most geographical sense. In other words, for the activity to be considered as tourism, there must be travel. The motivation for these trips is always determined by the different intrinsic and extrinsic motivations of the potential tourist (Silk & Amis, 2005).

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Taking all these variables into account, sport tourism is understood as sport-based travel, outside the domestic environment and for a specific time, where sport practice is characterised by a unique set of rules, the prominence of physical prowess and the enjoyment of nature (J. E. S. Higham & Hinch, 2018).

In relation to the above definition, it is possible to understand and comprehend the existence of a very powerful market segment within the field of tourism. This is the one whose tourists are attracted by a sports and leisure offer where physical activity is the most important factor.

2.2.- Sports Tourism as an Element of Socio-Economic Development

As can be seen, there has been potential growth in sport tourism. The forecast seems to indicate that the demand for this segment of tourism will be increasing. One of the main reasons for this high growth is the economic impact generated, which has captured the attention of different stakeholders in the private and public sector across the international scene.

In relation to this, many governments and business corporations are committed to sports tourism as an engine of economic development for their countries, being aware that this economic development brings with it, in general terms, an improvement in other social, demographic, architectural, etc. variables.

In this sense, the Summer Olympic Games represent one of the most important sporting events in the international arena. For the different countries, hosting this event in their territory represents an important milestone that requires a lot of economic investment, but also brings with it great economic and, above all, social benefits, as it is an opportunity to modernise their countries.

On the economic side, the Olympic Games have generated many benefits in different countries in recent years. In the case of the Sydney Olympics (2000), the Organising Committee reported direct revenues of 2.86 billion Australian dollars. In the case of the Athens Olympic Games (2004), revenues of 2.09 billion Euros were reported. While for the Beijing (2008) and London (2012) Olympic Games, revenues of 1.62 and 16 billion dollars were reported, respectively. In relation to all this, all the organising bodies highlight a similar idea and that is the subsequent economic impact that hosting these events has generated and continues to generate in their countries (Overmyer, 2017).

Related to the above, another globally known event, the Football World Cup, also has a large socio-economic impact. According to estimates by the Dentsu Institute for Human Studies, the 2002 World Cup generated an impact of \$24 billion in Japan and around \$8.9 billion in South Korea (Matheson, 2006).

As can be seen, major sporting events have a socio-economic impact of billions of dollars. However, as Delpy (1998) has analysed in his research on the importance of sports tourism, events on a national scale also represent an important source of economic dynamism. The following table shows the socio-economic impact generated by various sporting events, the vast majority of which have been held in the United States of America.

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Table 6

Socio-economic impact of different sporting events

Event	Impact in \$	N° visitors	Additional data
Camp. Nac. Femenino de Fútbol	750.000	3.500	-
Camp. Nac. de Natación por grupos de edad	1 millón	1.200	1.000 noches de hotel
Camp. Nac. Femenino de Voleibol	4.9 millones	6.240 (249 equipos)	3 días / 4.462 noches de hotel
Camp. Est. Femenino de Baloncesto (Florida)	1 millón	-	4 días
Camp. Est. de Natación (Nueva York)	343.200	400	475 noches de hotel
Prueba Deportiva de Natación 10k	772.200	900	750 noches de hotel
Camp. Nac. Junior de Lucha	1 millón	8.000	4 días
Camp. Nac. de tiro con arco	400.000	2.500	3 días
Camp. Nac. Femenino de Lanzamiento	450.000	3.800	3 días
Camp. Nac. de Tiro al plato	-	400	Gasto medio por persona 500 dólares
Series Mundiales de Softbol	1.8 millones	-	4.907 noches de hotel
Camp. Nac. de Croquet	35.000	300	3 días
Camp. Nac. de Ciclismo	400.000	2.700	4 días
Camp. Nac. de Voleibol	800.000	4.000	3 días
Camp. Nac. de Hockey sobre hierba	1.65 millones	11.200	3 días
Camp. Nac. de Patinaje	3 millones	20.020	4 días
Camp. Nac. de Gimnasia	5 millones	8.000	5 días
Camp. Nac. de Natación	800.000	1.000	2.200 noches de hotel
Camp. Nac. de Boxeo	1.2 millones	3.150	7 días
Camp. Nac. de Shuffleboard	25.000	242	-
Camp. Nac. de Natación	640.000	800	1.200 noches de hotel
Camp. Nac. de Pista	-	1.200	-
Copa Mundial de Maestros de Nike	100 millones	55.000/75.000	100 países
Carreras de Resistencia de la Serie IHRA	-	600 equipos	4 días
Camp. de Rodeo de San Diego	6.1 millones	53.172	100% ocupación hotelera
Camp. de Golf de Arizona	1 billón	-	-
Liga Nac. de Beisbol	350 billones	1.8 millones	-
Copa Mund. de Paintball	-	1.500	-
Juegos Olímpicos de Policías	7-10 millones	10.800	6 días
Vacaciones del Deporte de Alemania	3.3 millones	-	-
Congreso Olímpico de los Estados Unidos	3.2 millones	1.400	-

Note. Source: Delpy (1998)

In this respect, the economic and social impact generated by some minority sports, as well as youth sport, is particularly striking.

In the field of sporting events, in addition to major competitions that generate billions of euros, one can also find smaller-scale events, but which also generate a socio-economic impact in specific regions. This is the case of the Festival des Templiers, a mountain running event held every year in the French commune of Millau, in the

department of Aveyron. As Lemoine and Pereira (2019) point out, the Festival des Templiers generates a large socio-economic impact on local businesses. Participants buy their supplies in the different establishments, while visiting the fairgrounds organised for the occasion. In addition, they also generate logistical costs, professional timekeeping, etc. In the impact study carried out in 2008, it was calculated that the average estimated expenditure per person is between 50 and 100 euros, with 1 in 6 visitors spending more than 250 euros.

Another example is the study by Duglio and Beltramo (2017) on the economic impact of the mountain running event Collontrek, a mountain running event held on the border between Italy and Switzerland every year. Among their findings, they highlight that there is:

A significant economic return on the public funds invested by the municipalities with an economic multiplier of €17.62 to €18.92 depending on the scenario adopted. In other words, for each euro invested by the public administration of the Unité de Grand Combin, an economic return of €17.62 to €18.92 has been estimated. Moreover, the higher percentage of the economic value of the footpaths, namely 32% (conservative scenario), 34.07 (medium scenario) or 36.47 (liberal scenario), can be considered as a direct benefit for the host community (p.14).

In addition, they also observed a high degree of visitor loyalty to the destination, which translates into a positive intention to visit the destination again. In relation to this idea, it is difficult to calculate the economic impact, but it undoubtedly represents an important social impact in the medium and long term.

But it is not only large and small events of a more regular nature that have a socio-economic impact. In the field of sports tourism, there are also different products and services offered to customers as part of holiday experiences that can have a significant socio-economic impact.

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One of the most significant examples is shared by Raya et al. (2018) in their research on the socio-economic impact on hiking in the Catalan region of Berguedà in the period from March 2014 to March 2015. Among their findings, several very important aspects stand out. First, the analysis of the socio-economic impact of hiking reveals expenditure of approximately 5,105,695 euros. This study includes day visitors and overnight hikers. Secondly, the balance between the cost of the investment made by the public administrations and the social, economic, and environmental benefits is very positive, in favour of the benefits. Thirdly, it is calculated that each euro invested by the public administration in the promotion and development of hiking products has a return for society of 5 euros.

In relation to the above, Bowker et al. (2007) in their 2003 study of the economic impact of hiking on local communities on the Virginia Creeper Trail concluded that spending per person per day was estimated at between 23 and 38 US dollars. While in annual terms tourists spent around US\$1.2 million directly in the two-county community around the trail, generating tourism spending in the local economy generates around US\$1.6 million in total economic activity.

Another study on the impact of outdoor sports activities in the state of Minnesota in 2008 concluded that the economic income associated with the practice of hiking activities was 1.27 billion dollars from visitors not registered in the state and 1.425 billion dollars from the resident population. This economic impact undoubtedly translates into the creation of new jobs (Venegas, 2009).

The findings of the Grupo Scott Wilson (2012) in their analysis of the economic impact of walking in West Cork, Ireland, are very positive. For them, tourism associated with walking is in high demand and is enabling the development of local communities

and job creation. Along these lines, it is estimated that in 2012 it generated an economic impact of €14 million.

2.3.- The Sports Tourist as a Central Element: Push and Pull Factors

Further developing the conceptual framework of sport tourism, the same authors propose three levels of sport tourist attraction (Weed, 2005). The first level or primary attraction refers to the direct influence that a particular attraction has on the visitor's decision (Perić et al., 2019). The second level or secondary attraction proposes that the tourist is aware of the destination's attractions, but they are not the deciding factor. While in the third level or tertiary attraction, the tourist is unaware of the attractions, although once at the destination he/she may enjoy them (Ito & Higham, 2020).

According to Newland and Aicher (2018) the motivations that drive tourists to travel have been extensively studied. There is a conceptual model that characterises these motivations in the binomial push and pull factors (Caber & Albayrak, 2016; Gibson, 2006; Moularde & Weaver, 2016). The former refers to the largely intrinsic motivations of sports tourists in their desire to relax, interact socially or experience a sporting adventure (Bordelon & Ferreira, 2019), among others. While the latter, eminently extrinsic, refer to the conditions that exist in the destination, such as location, landscape, sites, and culture (Kaplanidou & Vogt, 2010).

Both factors converge in a balance that enables certain groups of travellers to choose one or the other destination (Ramshaw, 2014). It is for this reason that stakeholders' detailed knowledge of how sports tourists make decisions is a key factor in guiding decisions and strategies in the context of sports tourism (Derom & Ramshaw, 2016; Moularde & Weaver, 2016; Weed & Bull, 2009).

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Research in this area makes a first approximation where four main attraction factors are characterised: accessibility to the location (Bourdeau et al., 2002), available accommodation options (Hallmann et al., 2010), quality and quantity of entertainment, in all its aspects (Buning & Gibson, 2016) and the novelty of the spaces (Kaplanidou & Vogt, 2010).

As suggested by Ito (2021), sport tourists are highly interested in exciting tourism experiences, most notably hiking in areas of high heritage value (Gammon, 2011; Ramshaw & Gammon, 2017; Timothy, 2011). Clearly, this trend represents a competitive advantage for destinations that combine the provision of hiking routes with environments with a rich tangible and intangible heritage.

3.- Hiking

3.1.- Hiking: an Activity of Great Interest to the Sports Tourist

Hiking is one of the most deeply rooted activities in world society. The new forms of work resulting from the development of industry in the 19th and 20th centuries, together with changes in the lifestyle of the population, emphasising healthy living, healthy eating, and the practice of physical activity in the 21st century, have enabled the emergence of a new leisure trend that lies in the practice of hiking (De Oliveira-Matos et al., 2017).

Furthermore, hiking has inherent positive aspects because it is an environmentally sustainable practice. Hiking is positioned as an ideal activity to reorient rural economies and at the same time maintain a coordinated pattern of land use in tune with the natural environment (Collantes & Pinilla, 2019).

In the current European context, there is a wide range of projects that are genuine tourism products, projects with a very strong socio-economic strength and that are able

to improve and enhance aspects such as: land management, the creation of an ecological awareness, the adoption of a sustainable attitude and the improvement of health, among others (Duglio & Beltramo, 2017; Edgell, 2016; World Tourism Organisation, 2018).

Spain, in general, and the Valencian Community has a very attractive orography, being one of the most mountainous countries in Europe. At the same time, it has a solid tourism model that can adapt perfectly to the demand being generated by sports tourism (Raya et al., 2018; Vidal-González & Sánchez, 2019).

3.2.- Hiking, a Sport for Everyone

Hiking is one of the most important recreational sporting activities available today (Fredman & Tyrväinen, 2010; Pomfret, 2011). According to research in the Nordic countries, North America and New Zealand, the beauty of the landscape, the natural heritage, the experience of nature, as well as tranquillity and solitude have proven to be important reasons for hiking (Kyle et al., 2004; Wall-Reinius & Fredman, 2007).

According to a longitudinal study on the socio-economic profile of the hiker, carried out in the 1980s and 2003 in the Swedish mountains, the percentage of hikers under the age of 40 was 65%. By 2003, the same group accounted for 38%, with a clear increase in the older population (Wall-Reinius & Bäck, 2011).

According to some authors, walking is a very effective tool for the prevention of diseases and the improvement of physical and psychological health in the elderly population (Houge Mackenzie & Brymer, 2018; Levinger et al., 2018). Walking has been shown to have a very positive impact on reducing levels of stress, anxiety, and depression (Mutz & Müller, 2016; Raichlen et al., 2016).

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Other research focused on the younger population has also found that hiking provides great physical, psychological, and social benefits that have a major impact throughout life (Gray et al., 2015).

Finally, more recent studies have shown that walking in populations with disabilities can be a tool to improve health from different perspectives (Eigenschenk et al., 2019).

Table 7

People who practise sport in Spain on a weekly basis according to sport modalities (years 2010/2015).

	TOTAL		MEN		WOMEN	
	2010	2015	2010	2015	2010	2015
WEEKLY SPORTS PRACTICE	100	100	100	100	100	100
Futbol 11, 7 y sala	8,0	7,2	15,3	13,7	0,9	1,0
Baloncesto	2,2	1,9	3,5	2,6	0,9	1,2
Natación	7,6	8,4	7,7	8,0	7,6	8,7
Ciclismo	6,7	10,3	10,3	15,3	3,2	5,5
Senderismo, montañismo	1,8	4,9	2,6	5,5	1,0	4,2
Carrera a pie	4,8	10,6	6,3	13,3	3,4	8,0
Hípica	0,1	0,5	0,1	0,5	0,1	0,4

Note. Source: Ministerio de Cultura y Deporte (2019)

In Spain, hiking is also experiencing a very strong growth from 2 to 5 percentage points in the 2010/2015 period.

To better understand the magnitude of these figures, it is worth mentioning that the practice of football, in all its aspects, is 7 percentage points for the year 2015. If this upward trend continues, hiking or mountaineering could undoubtedly become one of the most popular activities in the country.

It should also be noted that the above figures analyse walking and/or mountaineering from the point of view of sporting practice. Given the importance and growth of walking and hiking, the survey focuses on this practice. The main data obtained for the year 2019 indicate that at least 70.6% of the population practice this activity and 68.2% do it at least once a week (Ministerio de Cultura y Deporte, 2020). These results

are very interesting as they can be the basis from which to raise awareness of the sport of hiking and link it to cultural or heritage aspects, as well as to promote the health of the practitioners.

All of this research only reinforces that walking is becoming more and more widespread among all sectors of the population and that there is a need to invest financial and human resources in improving existing proposals for walking (Wu et al., 2017).

3.3.- Hiking as a Tourism Product or Service

Mountain regions and protected areas are of particular interest from a leisure and tourism point of view (Beedie & Hudson, 2003; Chhetri et al., 2004; Margaryan & Fredman, 2017; Sievänen et al., 2011). During 2019 in Finland the economic impact of rural tourism in the 40 national parks was 219.3 million euros, while in the 5 hiking areas it was 13.1 million euros (Metsähallitus Organisation, 2019).

Another study on the interest of nature uses from a tourism point of view carried out in Jotunheimen National Park in Norway indicates that the park was visited by tourists of 47 different nationalities in 2010 (J. Higham & Vistad, 2011).

This factor represents a great opportunity for companies offering products and/or services related to sports tourism and nature experiences (Duglio & Beltramo, 2017). One of the sports tourism products or services that most attracts tourists is hiking (Raya et al., 2018).

Hiking is a sport that does not require large financial investments for its practice or for the purchase of equipment (García Ferrando et al., 2017). However, some researchers have shown that hiking in mountain areas attracts people with a medium-high socio-economic level, defined by educational level, income, and occupation (Wall-Reinius & Bäck, 2011).

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The specific practice of hiking and/or mountaineering was the reason why almost 34,000 families travelled in Spain, which in percentage terms represents 1/3 of the total number of national trips whose motivation was leisure and enjoyment of free time (Ministerio de Cultura y Deporte, 2020). Evidently, there is a greater number of hikers, but they combine this activity with other types of sporting activities, cultural visits, and gastronomic experiences.

Table 8

Viajes de residentes en España en los que se realizaron actividades deportivas y gasto total asociado.

	ABSOLUTE VALUES		AS A PERCENTAGE OF THE TOTAL		As a percentage of total leisure, recreational or holiday travel inflows		As a percentage of total trips	
	2017	2018	2017	2018	2017	2018	2017	2018
TOTAL ENTRADAS (Miles)								
Senderismo, montañismo	33.744,8	33.963,5	63,9	65,4	34,4	33,7	17,4	17,2
TOTAL GASTO (Millones de euros)								
Senderismo, montañismo	7.033,4	7.062,8	55,2	56,0	27,1	25,0	15,9	16,0
GASTO POR VIAJE (Euros)								
Senderismo, montañismo	208,4	208,0	-	-	-	-	-	-

Note. Source: Ministerio de Cultura y Deporte (2019)

From an international point of view, the data indicate that Spain is one of many destinations for hiking. It is for this reason that one out of every four trips motivated by sport has been made for hiking. If we analyse the absolute values, we can see that hiking accounted for approximately 4% of trips whose motivation was leisure (Ministerio de Cultura y Deporte, 2020).

Table 9

International tourist arrivals where sporting activities took place and total associated expenditures

	ABSOLUTE VALUES		AS A PERCENTAGE OF THE TOTAL		As a percentage of total leisure, recreational or holiday travel inflows		As a percentage of total trips	
	2017	2018	2017	2018	2017	2018	2017	2018
TOTAL ENTRADAS (Miles)								
Senderismo, montañismo	3.027,5	2.622,5	28,4	26,8	4,3	3,6	3,7	3,2
TOTAL GASTO (Millones de euros)								
Senderismo, montañismo	3.708,2	3.283,0	28,8	27,4	5,0	4,2	4,3	3,7
GASTO POR VIAJE (Euros)								
Senderismo, montañismo	1.224,8	1.251,9	-	-	-	-	-	-

Note. Source: Ministerio de Cultura y Deporte (2019)

Clearly, data on international tourist arrivals for trekking are relatively low. However, this factor represents a great opportunity for companies to create products and services related to sports tourism and hiking to offer higher quality (Lee et al., 2015; Weed, 2005; Weed & Bull, 2009).

As indicated by Rokenes et al. (2015) sport tourism products and/or services, among which hiking is one of them, have to be understood as an overall experience with high added value (Reimann et al., 2011). The added value of the experience can be understood as the satisfaction and utility that customers/tourists obtain when paying for such a product and/or service (Nagle & Holden, 2002).

In this sense, the role of the guide or accompanying person is highlighted as a very powerful way of providing added value to the sport, adventure activity or hiking itinerary, as the case may be (Mykletun, 2018; Rokenes et al., 2015). According to different authors, the guide has several roles, including planner, storyteller, cultural interpreter, or

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environmental conservationist. In short, the guide is conceived as an expert who knows all the necessary elements to make the experience of the hiker an experience with great added value (Curtin, 2009; Mathisen, 2012; Periera, 2005; Pomfret, 2011).

One of the strategies to promote hiking as a tourist/sporting activity that has a socio-economic impact on the destination is to generate an offer based on quality, where the positive experience of the customer is a fundamental aspect (Cánoves et al., 2004; Reimann et al., 2011; Stoeckl, 2008).

There are some studies that segment the tourist/trekker in a very detailed way: according to the motivations of the visit (Beh & Bruyere, 2007), the activity (Mehmetoglu, 2007), the motivations of the trip (Park & Yoon, 2009) or the satisfaction of the tourist (Bigné & Andreu, 2004), among others.

However, the potential growth of hikers associated with tourism activities is very large, so it is essential to deepen the knowledge of this market segment. With this information, companies that develop their activity in this area can create tourism/hiking experiences adapted to the characteristics and interests of their customers (Sievänen et al., 2011).

3.4.- Hiking, an Activity that has a Positive Impact in Several Dimensions

Hiking represents an activity that has a great impact not only at an economic level, developing and generating employment in rural areas. In this sense, Raya et al. (2018) postulate that nature-based tourism, apart from generating an economic impact on communities, has associated social and environmental benefits. In addition, there are also other benefits such as nature conservation and health promotion. The combination of these elements has made it possible for governments to see in this activity an opportunity to work in various areas.

In relation to the above, De Oliveira-Matos et al. (2017) focus on hiking as an activity that generates large and important benefits in the economic, social, environmental, cultural and even health fields. Some of these benefits can be seen in the table below.

Table 10

Benefits of hiking in various fields

Areas	Benefits
Economic	Low investment required Increases the length of stay in the destination Promotes tourism entrepreneurship Create new tasks and specific jobs
Environment	Helps plan, manage and control visitor flow It promotes the control, maintenance and cleanliness of natural areas. Improve the environmental education of locals and visitors. Extend the practice to all appropriate routes and areas. Promotes nature conservation
Cultural	Establishes a breakthrough in the preservation of cultural heritage and local traditions Improve access to routes with outstanding heritage elements. Encourages the dual tourist experience, residents and tourists
Health	Promotes enjoyment of the biological diversity present in nature. Improved physical health through contact with nature, less pollution They influence the physical and psychological health of the user. Generates relaxing experiences with the environment, landscape and attractions of the routes.
Social	Improving the self-esteem of the local population Integration of the urban population in practice through the media Creates grouping of the individual with the other hikers (independent of age and gender). Accessibility of the activity for the general public, regardless of physical and mental capacity and age.

Note. Source: De Oliveira-Matos et al. (2017)

There are many inherent benefits of walking that, apart from the economic impact, have a positive impact on society in general. Many of these benefits are also very much in line with the sustainable and inclusive strategies and initiatives proposed by governmental organisations.

In relation to the above, the benefits of rural tourism associated with hiking have a very positive impact on local communities both economically, socially, and environmentally. Associating leisure activities with nature, if well managed, can be a very

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important tool for promoting attitudes in favour of nature conservation. Moreover, as indicated by Cánoves et al. (2004):

It can certainly help to diversify farm incomes on family farms, inject additional benefits into the rural economy, counteract out-migration from rural areas, encourage increased cultural exchange between urban and rural areas, and enhance the values inherent in rural life, as well as contribute to the overall diversification of the economy. (p.767).

These eminently economic benefits will lead to development in other areas such as the social and environmental spheres, among others. In relation to this, the different stakeholders must understand that the full integration of the local community in the tourism industry is a very important factor.

4.- The Heritage

4.1.- The Role of Heritage in Enhancing the Quality of the Experience

Territories in rural areas have various elements that can potentially be exploited for tourism, such as cultural heritage or local gastronomy, to mention a few. In the rural context, local and regional tourism and its development can have a very interesting economic and social impact and can even fix the local population. The rural environment has a wide variety of heritage elements of different kinds that can be perfectly linked to the tourist sector. The natural and cultural heritage of these territories represents another tool for creating tourist services capable of generating very significant experiences (Hermosilla & Iranzo, 2004).

Heritage tourism is one of the tourism segments that has grown the most in recent years. This type of tourism has an inherent educational or cultural component, associated with the natural and heritage elements of the territory (J. E. S. Higham & Hinch, 2018; Van Rheenen et al., 2017).

Heritage is directly linked to the development of many cultures throughout history. For this reason, many physical elements, customs, and traditions have survived to the present day (Timothy, 2011). Tourism and heritage have a significant relationship. This has led various public and private bodies to put in place a body of legislation to protect elements that are part of the identity of territories (Derom & Ramshaw, 2016).

The synergy between tourism and heritage has also generated interest in the tourism industry. Stakeholders have seen heritage tourism as an opportunity to make their existing products and services more attractive (Ramshaw & Gammon, 2017). Many businesses, both accommodation and activities, are adapting their offerings and taking advantage of the heritage elements of their geographic space to add value to their products and services. At the same time, they are maintaining and protecting the most characteristic elements of their local and regional culture (Gammon, 2011).

There is also a growing consumer demand for heritage-related tourism products that is capturing the attention of a very specific type of audience (Loureiro, 2014). In this sense, heritage elements play a dual role. On the one hand, they represent one of the attraction factors that attract the attention of specific segments of tourists. On the other hand, they are complementary elements that add value to existing tourism products and services (Chen & Chen, 2010).

As Timothy (2011) points out, one of the deciding factors in tourists' motivation to travel internationally is to experience and learn about heritage. It is for this reason that heritage plays a fundamental role in the quality of the tourism experience (Derom & Ramshaw, 2016).

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Tourism resources, however, should not be confused with tourism products, the latter being understood as the experiences designed and offered, valued economically and, therefore, marked with a determined price that the tourist is willing to pay.

There is a wide range of studies on the relationship between heritage and tourism. Many of them focus on quantitative analysis of the satisfaction that each element provides to the tourist. Others study the relationship between heritage and tourism by surveying the different service providers. For this reason, it is essential to propose novel research studies from a variety of perspectives, aimed at better understanding the interactions between the variables that characterise the environment (Timothy, 2011).

4.2.- The Relationship Between Tourism and Heritage

The relationship between tourism and heritage is very significant. As Murzyn-Kupisz (2012) points out, creating a synergy between heritage and tourism helps to conserve artefacts, monuments, objects and landmarks. The development of products and services with heritage at their core is an effective tool for the recovery, conservation, and promotion of tangible and intangible heritage (Ducros, 2017).

Many global public bodies and private companies in the tourism sector have seen heritage as a tool for the promotion and development of their own tourism market (Little et al., 2020). Countries such as India, through dark tourism (Sharma & Nayak, 2020); Japan, with the promotion of the service areas of the imperial shukuba machi routes (Murti, 2020); Saudi Arabia, with the UNESCO World Heritage Sites (Al-Tokhais & Thapa, 2020); USA, through the eco-village of Arcosanti (Doğan, 2019); Hong Kong, through an urban walking proposal (Barber, 2019); Indonesia, with the enhancement of the Sultan's Palace in Yogyakarta (Wijayanti & Damanik, 2019); Malaysia, by enhancing the intangible heritage of George Town (Foo & Krishnapillai, 2019); Turkey, with the

Museum of Innocence in Istanbul (Hannam & Ryan, 2019); South Korea, through intangible cultural heritage (Kim et al., 2019); Tanzania, with the promotion of the cultural heritage elements of Dar es Salaam (Kisusi & Masele, 2019); France, through the proposal of heritage reconstruction through technology in the Abbey of Cluny (Rueda-Esteban, 2019); or Spain, through the proposal of the enhancement of ancestral pilgrimages in the province of Castellón (Vidal-González & Sánchez, 2019).

They have all created tourism products and services linked to the different forms of heritage that exist in their geographical areas. This has generated a social and economic impact in many regions. In addition, a body of regulations has also been generated to ensure the conservation and promotion of these elements (Al-Tokhais & Thapa, 2020).

However, tourism can have a negative impact on heritage. The deterioration that tourist overcrowding can generate in spaces can represent a risk for the tourism product or service itself (Frey & Steiner, 2011). For this reason, strategies for the conservation and regulation of heritage use contribute to maintaining and preserving the different heritage elements. This factor can help to generate long-term tourism flow (Little et al., 2020).

4.3.- The Quality of the Tourism Experience

There are different conceptual models that try to characterise the most important variables in tourism. The quality of the tourism experience is one of the variables that is currently generating most interest (Wong, 2013; Žabkar et al., 2010). Quality of experience can be defined as tourists' affective responses to their desired or expected socio-psychological benefits (Chen & Chen, 2010). Quality of experience is a subjective, dynamic, and intangible variable. Therefore, its measurement is more complicated than other variables studied in the framework of tourist satisfaction (Aho, 2001; Heimtun &

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Abelsen, 2012). Despite the difficulties, more and more researchers are trying to analyse the tourism experience and the quality of the experience itself because of the great interest and impact it has on understanding tourists' motivations and interests (Chang & Horng, 2010).

All this information has a direct impact on plans for the promotion, development and implementation of products and services linked to the field of tourism, in general, and to all tourism sub-sectors among which cultural and heritage tourism stands out. Studies consider that the quality of the experience has a significant effect on the value and satisfaction perceived by tourists in the destination (Loureiro, 2014; Quinlan Cutler et al., 2018). Therefore, an in-depth examination of quality of experience is important for the better performance of the tourism industry (Campos et al., 2020; Domínguez-Quintero et al., 2019). The quality of experience perceived by tourists is highly valued due to its ability to act as a driver of tourism business success (García-Fernández et al., 2018).

In short, a quality experience represents the synergy created between the attributes that the provider can offer in its product and/or service and what the tourist expects to obtain (Sharma & Nayak, 2020). Deepening the understanding of the importance of the quality of experience paradigm, it is essential to make a distinction between another concept widely studied in the tourism field: the quality of service.

While service quality is objective, in terms of measurement, quality of experience has a much more subjective component, more related to external variables inherent to the cognitive and emotional aspects of the tourist (Jin et al., 2015; Klaus & Maklan, 2013).

Although it is essential to establish a theoretical distinction between the concepts of quality of service and quality of experience, one should not make the mistake of

understanding them separately. In practice, both concepts should be understood as a whole, and their good performance translates into a complete tourism experience. Research into quality of service and quality of experience is necessary for tourism establishments to improve internal variables and take advantage of the inherent characteristics of the tourist.

4.4.- Heritage as a Differentiating Element in the Quality of the Tourist Experience

The use of heritage in tourism has very positive implications for heritage conservation and promotion (Al-Tokhais & Thapa, 2020). Tourism products and services associated with heritage promote significant social and economic growth and development, particularly in rural areas (Labadi, 2007; Laing et al., 2014). Most importantly, the use of heritage in tourism generates added value to the quality of the tourist experience (Klaus & Maklan, 2013; Sharma & Nayak, 2020). The consumption of these tourism services and products represents an opportunity to create a window into the past. According to Park and Yoon (2009) tourism experiences in a heritage environment generate a strong attachment of the tourist to the environment and represent a space to contribute to the knowledge of history and culture. Therefore, these experiences are positioned as a tool that allows reworking the meaning of the past to understand present changes and development (Little et al., 2020; McCoy, 2011).

In relation to the above, the concept of the experience economy is of particular importance (Alexiou, 2020). According to Pine and Gilmore (1998) the experience economy is a stage in the progression of value creation by businesses. In tourism it has a very significant connotation because the key factor of its product is the experience itself that tourists will enjoy (Cetin & Bilgihan, 2016). Thus, one of the key elements for tourist satisfaction is the quality that the service provider is able to provide in its tourism products or services (Minkiewicz et al., 2014; Pegg & Patterson, 2010). According to various

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research on tourist satisfaction, tourism experiences directly related to proposals of any kind of heritage element tend to have a very special effect on the tourist him/herself, being considered a memorable experience (Willson & McIntosh, 2007).

The facilities and services in the heritage space generate a strong attraction for visitors. The work of the service providers is important to provide a satisfactory experience for customers. Some of these aspects are security, access, cleanliness of the site and, most importantly, the tourist attraction of the product and/or service (Ung & Vong, 2010).

Therefore, the customer experience is placed at the centre of the tourism process (Hirschman & Holbrook, 1982). The experience as a central axis must represent a meeting point between the interest of visitors and what the tourism industry can offer in the form of products and services (Harris & Ezeh, 2008).

According to Ebejer et al. (2020) the inherent characteristics of the space, where many heritage elements are found, represent an important aspect of the tourism experience. However, what is more relevant are the interactions that the tourist has with that space. Thus, interactions with the environment, interactions with others and interactions with oneself are fundamental. Related to the above, the key factor is more how the heritage is used and less how much of the heritage exists. A space that offers several types of interactions is more likely to provide a meaningful experience for the tourist.

Providing service quality is one of the strategic advantages of companies. According to Dong and Siu (2013), this process is not easy as it is not just about offering a product or service. The process involves a first part of analysis and research of the

different market segments targeted by products and services, i.e. asking potential customers what they want.

In this sense, research and innovation are positioned as essential elements for the development of new products in heritage tourism. One of the most important aspects for the generation of value of these products is interpretation and promotion in particular segments. The incorporation of professionals and experts into the tourism product is positioned as one of the key elements, as they can generate greater connections between the tourist and the heritage element, thus improving the tourist experience (Schofield, 1996).

5.- The Role of New Technologies in the Context of Sports Tourism

Today we are living in what is known as the age of technology. New technologies are fully integrated into today's society, even in developing countries. These technologies have revolutionised the lives of citizens in different spectrums of life, from the way they communicate, to the way they consume products and services, to the way they work (D. Wang et al., 2016).

According to Chekalina et al. (2021), a study on the use of new technologies contrasted how in Norway access to smartphones increased from 57% to 95% from 2012 to 2018. Similarly, it was predicted that by 2020 almost three billion people worldwide will have access to smartphones.

In the same vein, the number of available mobile apps is truly staggering. According to some research, by 2019, the number of smartphone apps available was 2.47 million and 1.8 million on the Google Play Store and App Store digital distribution platforms, respectively (Clement, 2019).

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In this sense, new technologies are covering all major aspects of human life and tourism and outdoor recreation are no exception. In the field of tourism, new technologies are providing greater flexibility and a great development both in the products and services offered, as well as in the different internal management processes of the different companies (X. Wang, 2015).

In relation to all of the above, the wide variety of existing technological applications includes applications for route planning, for managing health parameters (Yuan et al., 2015), for promoting tourism products and services, or for launching environmental preservation campaigns, to name but a few.

5.1.- New Technologies and Internal Business Management

New technologies have made it possible to develop and professionalise some of the elements of the internal management of tourism companies. As Chekalina et al. (2021) point out, from a business perspective, the most important value of new technologies is the ability to respond to travellers' needs. Communication or service needs in a direct and immediate way that build, maintain, and improve relationships between destination providers and their customers.

In addition, new technologies help to segment customers in greater detail, allowing customisation of recreation, accommodation, food, infrastructure, transport, and other services (Pan & Ryan, 2007). This information helps in the creation of smart tourism packages tailored to the needs and motivations of visitors, creating true tourism experiences (Buhalis & Amaranggana, 2015).

In relation to the above, Buonincontri and Micera (2016) highlight how tourism destinations have rethought their role and business logics based on the evolution of society. Currently, different companies have developed strategies to involve tourists as

co-creators of their own experiences through the different uses and advantages provided by new technologies (Munar & Jacobsen, 2014). In this sense, there is a new type of destination known as Smart Destinations, in which new technologies represent one of the most competitive elements.

New technologies not only allow the management of processes prior to the arrival of visitors and management while visitors are in the space. These tools have also been developed in the post area where visitor information is valuable for building customer loyalty for future visits (Höpken et al., 2015). In this regard, Fuchs et al. (2014) highlight the Destination Management Information System as a tool that "drives knowledge creation and application as a precondition for organisational learning in tourism destinations" (p.198). This tool, among other functionalities, could be used to obtain information from visitors in real time, which further helps in the adaptation of products and/or services.

5.2.- New Technologies in Communication Processes

New technologies have also revolutionised the field of communication and marketing in different organisations, both private and public (Trunfio & Della Lucia, 2017). In the private sphere, new technologies have made it possible to connect service providers and consumers in a very strong way, making it possible for the latter to know almost instantly the new products and services that companies offer (Trunfio & Della Lucia, 2019). In addition, new technologies have a wide scope in the promotion of destinations among international customers, which represents an advantage over more traditional promotion costs (Hays et al., 2013).

These benefits have also had a positive impact on businesses with fewer financial and human resources, allowing them to reach their potential customers directly. As Tervo-

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Kankare (2019) points out, mobile applications are very interesting for nature-based destinations, which are mainly composed of small businesses with very limited resources for product development and promotional activities.

In relation to the above, other researchers have observed how establishments propose very specific products according to the social and economic profile of their customers. All of this is fully adapted to different sports such as hiking, mountain biking or climbing (Crublet et al., 2021). As proposed by Dickinson et al. (2016), it is now possible to manage any tourist booking from an electronic device.

In this sense, Buonincontri and Micera (2016) in their empirical analysis of Smart Destination practices in the European cities of Venice and Salzburg conclude that technological tools enhance the co-creation of tourism experiences, with more interaction with tourists, more active participation and more promotion of experience sharing among tourists themselves.

5.3.- The Use of New Technologies in the Hiking Field

New technologies have also had an impact on the field of hiking, both on the tourist side, where various services such as overnight stays, diets or tourist activities and experiences are offered, as well as in the group of day visitors. For Chekalina et al. (2021):

For tourism destinations and activity providers, the benefit of learning more about outdoor activities through mobile apps is to see opportunities to use third-party apps to promote the location, its routes, trails, and itineraries (p.232).

In relation to the above, although the use of new technologies in natural areas may entail great benefits. Some of the benefits include the wealth of information that the correct use of digital tools can provide. Information on tourists that subsequently helps to make better decisions in terms of internal management of accommodation, market

segmentation or promotion of new products and/or services in the field of outdoor experiences (Hills & Thomas, 2020).

It is precisely this wide variety of information provided by new technologies that makes it possible to create products and services related to outdoor sports activities. According to Li et al. (2020) in a study on the motivations of hikers in China, they found that the social aspect of hiking and the health benefits of hiking are two of the most important factors. Based on this information, service providers can emphasise these benefits in the promotion of their tourism products.

In addition, the use of new technologies and the information they provide can also help to minimise the potential risks associated with some sporting practices. According to Shaker et al. (2021) in their study of hikers in the Hoge Kempen National Park in Belgium, the use of specific mobile applications can help hikers in the different phases of their experience: pre, during and post. This comprehensive monitoring translates into a better overall experience.

New technologies also have a major impact on the development of economically depressed regions. We have already seen in other sections that tourism and sporting events can help regional development. In this case, new technologies and the benefits derived from them can represent an element that can contribute to regional development.

As Del Vecchio and Passiante (2017) point out in their analysis of the impact of new technologies in the Italian region of Puglia:

Smart specialisation is a strategy to support the socio-economic development of the European Union, based on the identification of regional professional areas and industries, and on the promotion of business development (p.163).

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This region, the authors continue, is achieving smart, sustainable, and inclusive development through the implementation of smart specialisation strategies. This is confirmed by the reconfiguration of the various economic sectors present so far towards tourism-related areas.

Part 2. Methodology

Chapter 3. Methodological Aspects

1.- The Research Framework

Scientific research has facilitated great advances in the history of humankind. Whenever a new unexplained phenomenon has appeared, a new problem difficult to solve or the need to improve already known aspects, science, through the scientific method, has tried to shed light to improve people's lives.

This research work, in the form of a doctoral thesis, aims to do its bit by trying to provide solutions to one of the major problems that exist in Western societies in the 21st century, depopulation as a demographic problem. The aim is to tackle the problem of depopulation as a process that has formed part of the social and economic evolution of society and which is now presented as a great challenge, due to the large number of negative impacts that derive directly or indirectly from it.

In relation to the above, this research work also seeks to deepen the understanding of the field of knowledge of tourism. Tourism, as a productive sector and economic engine, has enabled the development of regions and countries and has brought about improvements in people's quality of life. At present, we observe the great changes that are being generated and that need to be studied.

Based on these two major themes, depopulation and tourism, the need arises in us, as researchers, but also as responsible citizens, to address both issues from a joint perspective and try to provide an answer and a solution as to whether there can be a positive relationship between the two. In other words, could sports tourism and hiking be a tool to combat depopulation?

Undoubtedly, there seems to be a very close relationship between the two phenomena. This research will try to improve our understanding of the synergy that may exist between the two concepts.

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1.1.- Depopulated Spain vs. Empty Spain

At present, we are witnessing how depopulation has entered fully into Spanish society and, by definition, into the agendas of public bodies. Depopulation, as a demographic and social problem, represents one of the concerns of governments even at European level.

We have already seen in the scientific literature that European countries have suffered the effects of this demographic problem throughout their history. There is no common time pattern among the various countries in terms of depopulation, which means that each state has experienced a very specific situation. What does seem to be common to all of them is that the processes of depopulation of the rural world have gone hand in hand with processes, in most cases encouraged by governments, of industrial development in the urban and peri-urban areas of large cities.

This leads us to try to understand the concepts of "Depopulated Spain" and "Empty Spain", insofar as they are also linked to the general problem of depopulation. The concept of "depopulated" refers to the evident process of depopulation that exists in many rural areas, where the result is the abandonment of villages. As far as "Empty Spain" is concerned, it specifically refers to a process encouraged by public bodies during the 50s and 60s of the last century, where massive emigration to the big cities took place in order to satisfy the needs of the incipient industrial development.

There is a certain appreciation that those decisions were somewhat ill-advised and generated the problem we have today. However, posteriori assessments of the problems are very simple and the reasons for those decisions should be analysed. We can imagine that, following in the footsteps of other European countries, the country opted for a

process of industrialisation whose expected result was to compete with the most advanced countries and to improve the living conditions of its citizens.

In this sense, the circumstances of each moment define the needs and problems to be solved. In the case of our approach, it is about tackling the problem of depopulation as a current problem with a proactive vision.

1.2.- The Rural World

When we talk about the rural world, we can make the mistake of conceiving it from a very specific point of view. From a geographical point of view, we could mistakenly consider that rural necessarily refers to inland areas, and when asked about the city of Madrid we would not know what to say. In the case of trying to understand it from a demographic point of view, we would probably limit ourselves to population density and concluded that the city of Madrid is not rural from a demographic point of view, but from a geographic point of view. If we approach the rural concept from a sociological point of view, from a rural mentality, we could mistakenly think that it is linked to inland areas, while there are towns and cities with a long tradition in the agrarian world, which today continue to have a rural mentality. From a biological or natural point of view, there are coastal areas with very extensive natural landscapes.

It is therefore clear that the use of the rural concept entails certain difficulties, and it is necessary to be very skilled in its use. In the case of our research, the rural concept refers to a very specific geographical area: the inland mountains of Castellón, specifically the Comarcas dels Ports, the Valencian Maestrazgo, and some villages in the Alto Millares. From a demographic point of view, these towns would be considered rural given their low population density.

1.3.- Sports Tourism

Tourism represents one of the most powerful economic sectors in the world. In the case of Spain, tourism represents around 13% of GDP and has been one of the driving forces of development that has allowed Spain to catch up with other countries in the world in terms of economic growth and quality of life.

Tourism in Spain developed in the middle of the last century with very strong public sector investment in infrastructure and promotion. Sun and beach tourism in Spain experienced great growth and became one of the most powerful and interesting destinations for visitors.

Nowadays, this tourism model has generated many opposing opinions due to the impact it has had on many coastal and natural areas. Again, we think that it is easy to make value judgements after the event, but that the conditions at the time would have required such an economic driver. Moreover, we are aware that tourism development was also determined by the demand and interests of visitors.

Another of the current criticisms, which have been reinforced by the pandemic, is the excessive dependence our country has had on tourism and all the negative consequences that COVID-19 has had for the economy of families and occupational health. We are certainly aware of this, and our work aims to take these variables into account.

However, we are convinced that the way forward is not to industrialise the country overnight, as this would not only be impossible, but also very costly. We do believe that the improvement of the tourism sector must be based on rethinking the sector and improving its characteristics based on quality, digitalisation, and training, among other strategies.

This doctoral thesis, influenced by the researcher's training and interests, aims to make improvements in the framework of tourism, specialising in sporting activities to achieve a healthier, more responsible and sustainable tourism.

1.4.- The Inland Mountain Areas of Castellón: A Brief Description

The province of Castellón is part of the Valencian Community region and is in the eastern part of Spain, on the shores of the Mediterranean. Due to its geographical location, its climate is predominantly Mediterranean in its coastal area, but eminently continental in the mountainous areas. Castellón is the second most mountainous province in Spain. A large part of the interior of Castellón is located more than 1,000 metres above sea level (masl), while its highest mountain, at 1,813 masl, is the Peñagolosa.

The orographic and climatological characterisation has meant that the population of this area throughout history has had to adapt to relatively difficult conditions to generate an economy and a livelihood. The predominant economic activity has been extensive livestock farming, finding in this area a large vestige of "cañadas reales" and "azagadores", paths along which transhumant activities were carried out (Vidal-González & Sánchez, 2019).

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Figure 7

Map of the inland mountains of Castellón.



Note. Source: <https://diadia.cat/nace-la-iniciativa-maestrazgo-els-ports/>

At present, there is a diversification of economic activities, including honey production, truffle harvesting and the incipient tourist/sporting approach to which numerous public and private entities have committed themselves. These have seen in the natural and heritage environment and in these formerly used paths an opportunity to promote hiking (Vidal-González & Vidal-Matzanke, 2020).

There is also a wide repertoire of tangible heritage resources such as medieval constructions (walls, castles, watchtowers, etc.) (Portela-Valls et al., 2020), dry-stone constructions, cave paintings, (Mesado et al., 2008) and intangible ones, such as pilgrimages (Vidal-González & Sánchez, 2019), customs and traditions, etc.

1.5.- A Successful Rural Tourist Destination: The Case of the Matarraña Region

There is a growing trend towards sports tourism in rural areas. Activities such as hiking, mountain biking or cultural excursions around heritage elements represent determining factors in the value proposition of companies in the tourism sector.

In relation to the above, in the field of tourism we speak of the destination as a space that brings together the offer of different populations in an integrated manner. This strengthens the various spaces in a more solid way in an environment as competitive as the tourist one.

The case of Matarraña represents a successful model of a region located in a rural area. This region is in the extreme north-east of the province of Teruel. Matarraña is a mountainous territory where the foothills of the Iberian Mountains converge with the mountain ranges of the Catalan coast. Made up of 18 towns, Valderrobles is the largest in terms of population, while Calaceite is the cultural capital.

The success of this region lies in the fact that it has managed to position itself as a consolidated tourist destination. Leaving aside individual economic and political interests, they have managed to create a very complete and integrated offer that represents a competitive advantage over other destinations in the area. Furthermore, the tourist industry has been able to understand the needs of society by offering a wide range of leisure and sporting activities. In its portfolio of activities, we can find the practice of equestrian activities; activities related to hiking, with an offer of more than 50 guided routes for all levels; very interesting cycling routes. In addition, there is a strong specialisation in cultural and family tourism in Matarraña, where you can experience and visit many heritage elements of all kinds.

2.- The Construction of Knowledge Based on the Object of Study

An object of analysis is not only limited to the study and understanding of a single scenario in a social reality. The construction of the object of analysis must consider the interdependence and synergy that exists between the many elements that make up the social reality itself.

This reality is determined by the prior conceptions held by researchers and specialists. These prior conceptions represent basic premises from which to approach the object of study, as these ideas are supported by the researchers' experience and training in the field they intend to study.

In this way, the analysis of the object of study is developed based on the projections or hypotheses that the researchers make in the construction of the object of study itself and the synergy between the different realities observed, analysed and understood, in other words, the approach to the object of study as a scientific construction.

This doctoral thesis will therefore attempt to carry out a complex scientific analysis of the interactions that exist between all the variables that make up the object of study. In its case, we will start from depopulation as a demographic, social and economic problem to reach the intersection with one of the strategies that can help to solve it. At this intersection, we find sports tourism as an economic engine of social, economic, and sustainable development, accompanied by other variables of interest, such as digitalisation and quality. Variables that can have a positive influence on the contribution of solutions to our problem and that, therefore, must be conceived with a careful treatment.

Having said all this, before trying to establish the hypotheses of our research work, it is equally essential to develop some previous considerations and interesting ideas.

2.1.- The Objectives

The objectives represent the path to follow in any research work or project. They determine the steps to be taken and the goal to be achieved. Especially in research work, they should be conceived as goals whose object is the deepening of the analysis of the question under study. The objectives of the doctoral thesis "Hiking as a tourist proposal to combat depopulation: The case of the interior of the province of Castellón" are the following:

1.- To analyse the role played by tourism, in general, and sports tourism through hiking in the region of the inland mountains of Castellón.

2.- To characterise the key elements of the sports tourism sector in the region of the inland mountains of Castellón to identify the degree of maturity of the sports tourism industry.

3.- To determine the visitor profile associated with sporting activities and hiking, in order to understand in more detail, the trends and factors that determine the decisions of sports tourists.

4.- To study the degree of implementation of new technologies in the different hiking accommodations, as well as the advantages and disadvantages they generate. New technologies represent one of the main elements in the development of the tourist industry.

5.- To understand how the tourism industry uses heritage elements to dynamize and generate competitive advantages in the quality of the experience of its visitors, as well as the advantages and disadvantages derived from the management of these elements.

2.2.- The Initial Considerations Underpinning the Formulation of Hypotheses

All exploratory work, as in the case of the present study, may have certain limitations. Given the magnitude and extension of this study, our approach also presents certain limitations that must be considered and developed prior to the establishment of the hypotheses. If we do not do so, we could make the mistake of not focusing our efforts on the fundamental aspects that form the backbone of our object of analysis and, therefore, our work would lose its essence. This means that our approach must be carried out within the scope of our possibilities and always following the starting point, i.e., what our hypotheses are going to mark.

Having said that, the main problem we may encounter is the great variability of factors that revolve around the demographic problem of depopulation, and which have a direct impact on the area under study. In addition, during the development of our work we will also have to avoid the temptation to analyse other variables which a priori may be of interest to us. This means that there are probably factors that also impact and affect our object of study, such as political, cultural, or personal factors. But this does not mean that we should give up on our initial objective, which will be characterised by the variables that we want to study.

To this end, we intend, by way of a reminder, to re-launch the basic question that shapes our doctoral thesis and thus record in our roadmap what our work is: Could sports tourism and hiking represent a tool for combating depopulation? From this question we establish the basic pillars on which our work is based and which, extrapolated to study variables, will underpin our analysis. Below, we establish a relationship between these variables, in the form of an outline, to help us understand their interaction to a greater extent.

Figure 8

The objects of analysis of the doctoral thesis



Source: Own elaboration

As can be seen, the objects of analysis of this doctoral thesis are based on depopulation as a predominant demographic problem in the rural world. And how, in this case, sports tourism can help to generate an economic impact on the region. In this sense, tourism and tourist have a very strong relationship, which translates into what the tourism industry can offer and what the tourist intends to obtain through his or her tourist experience. To this end, heritage and the use of new technologies are presented as a competitive advantage for both. There are other factors such as cultural, political, legislative, etc. influences, which may be interesting to study, but which will not be the subject of study, at least not in this doctoral thesis.

2.3.- The Hypotheses

Throughout this paper we have developed the issues of concern to us and their importance in a social, economic, and political context. Based on all this, we consider it

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fundamental to specify all these questions in the form of hypotheses. This simplification, which is not easy, will undoubtedly allow us to focus our analysis on much more specific issues and, above all, to approach them as rigorously and scientifically as possible. In line with this idea, the hypotheses proposed are as follows:

H.1.- Tourism in general, and sports tourism through hiking, is an economic engine capable of generating economic and social development that can help to combat the depopulation processes that exist in different rural areas. From a tourism point of view, the area under study is very competitive and is in a phase of consolidation. This places it as a tourist destination of special relevance in the Valencian Community. The profile of the visitor is a person between 35 and 70 years of age, of national origin and attracted by outdoor sports activities.

H.2.- The different establishments that make up the tourism sector in the area under study use different technological tools to improve their management and communication processes.

H.3.- The tourism industry in the area under study has a wide range of products and services in which heritage represents a differentiating element of the visitor experience.

3.- The Empirical Material

3.1.- The Review of Scientific Papers and the Exploitation of Secondary Data

The review of the scientific and academic literature represents one of the most important preliminary works when carrying out a research project such as the one presented here. As new research papers are created, more scientific knowledge is generated about an object of study, which allows the vision and conceptions about this object of study to be expanded to a greater extent. This process also helps to broaden the

research strategies of an object of study, either by proposing new approaches to the object itself, or by interrelating different fields of knowledge.

The body of knowledge represented by the scientific literature is also directly linked to the hypotheses, as it represents the scientific space in which to contrast the empirical material acquired in the research process. And, therefore, to support or discard the previously proposed hypotheses. The following is a description of the documentary sources we have worked on to create a robust and rigorous scientific and literary framework that gives meaning to our object of research.

3.1.1.- Review of Research Papers and Publications.

As mentioned above, the analysis of scientific literature is a vitally important task. In this doctoral thesis we have tried to establish a rigorous scientific framework represented by a wide variety of international and national documentary sources, with an interesting variety in the provenance of the sources.

On the international scene, we have consulted a wide repertoire of scientific journals specialising in the field of tourism. These journals are not strictly specialised in sports tourism, but it is true that they do try to address new trends in tourism, so we were able to find some very interesting papers. In this sense, *Current Issues in Tourism* has provided us with some examples of how sports tourism and other trends are generating very important market sub-segments within the tourism market, such as the work of Philippe Bourdeau and his collaborators. This source also has a high degree of specialisation in topics of interest for our work, such as the quality of the tourism experience with the works of Heimtun and Abelsen, among others.

Annals of Tourism Research, a source with a long history in the field of tourism, has been able to understand the trends towards which tourism is evolving and has worked

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on some aspects related to sports tourism and adventure tourism through the work of Beedie and his collaborators. Or the case of the International Journal of Tourism Research with the works of Hinch and Higham among others, who try to lay the foundations for a scientific systematic approach to the field of sports tourism research.

The scientific journals *Tourism Management* and *Tourism Planning & Development* are more general in nature and focus on how to improve aspects such as the quality of the experience, customer satisfaction and the generation of value from services. Here the work of Warwick, Caber, Albayrak and others has been fundamental to lay the foundations of the relationship between what an establishment can (and should) offer and what the tourist wants (and expects) to get.

The work in the *Scandinavian Journal of Hospitality and Tourism* has been instrumental in understanding and visualising the sports tourism segment within the tourism framework. Although this journal shares works on tourism, it focuses its interest on the Nordic countries, whose relationship with nature tourism is well established. It is for this reason that a large part of its literature focuses on this subject. The works of Mykletun, Rokenes and collaborators, and above all Fredman, have been fundamental in deepening the field of nature-based tourism and adventure tourism, without neglecting key concepts such as quality and experience.

In the case of the more specific scientific literature on sports tourism, we have also consulted a variety of specialised journals. This is the case of the *Journal of Sport Management*, which provides a vision of management in the field of sport and tourism. The works of Klapanidou and Vogt are very interesting because of the strong connection between sporting activities, in their various forms, and the socio-economic impact they have.

Along these lines, the scientific literature provided by Sport and Society is equally interesting because it attempts to lay the foundations of the social changes inherent to sporting activities and their relationship with new forms of tourism. Here we have consulted, among others, the work of researchers Vidal-González and Sánchez, who provide a vision of the new uses of the territory and its relationship with hiking.

That said, the works in the Journal of Sport and Tourism represent the most specialised works on sport tourism and all that this entails. From the proposal of the theoretical model of the pull and push factors of sports tourism, through the analysis of the economic impact of sporting events, to the analysis of sports tourism in specific regions. Authors such as Derom, Ramshaw, Newland and Aicher, among others, lay the foundations of a field of knowledge that is having an increasingly greater repercussion and impact on the scientific community.

For specific scientific literature on the use of heritage and tourism, we consulted the Journal of Heritage Tourism which, through many case studies, provides us with information on how different public and private organisations use heritage as a competitive advantage for the different products and services they offer. For specialised literature on new technologies and tourism, we consulted the works of Mobile Media & Communication, which, although it deals with the use of new technologies in a holistic manner, does have some research in the field of tourism.

We have also worked with more specific and extensive literature in the form of books specialising in sports tourism. In this case, we have consulted the works of Weed and Bull where, through their proposal Sports Tourism: Participants, Policy, and Providers, they analyse the importance of developing coordinated strategies between the different interest groups in the sports tourism industry. Or the proposal made by Gibson

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with *Sport Tourism: Concepts and Theories*, which lays the foundations for a rigorous scientific perspective in the field of sports tourism.

In terms of tourism and its relationship with nature, we have been able to delve deeper into the work proposed by Chekalina and her colleagues through the proposal *Nordic Perspectives on Nature-Based Tourism*. At the same time, it is closely related to the proposal *Hiking in European Mountains: Trends and Horizons* edited by Professor Vidal-González. In his work, he analyses the differences and synergies existing in different countries of the European Union in the field of hiking.

In this sense, Sharpley and Stone's *Tourism Experiences: Contemporary Perspectives* has also been fundamental in laying the foundations for quality tourism, quality of experience and everything that revolves around the visitor experience.

Finally, some of the projects proposed by international organisations such as the World Health Organisation and the World Tourism Organisation have also been of vital importance. In the case of the former, its report on *Physical Activity* has helped us to better understand the trends and strategies that are being developed at international level in terms of health promotion. In the case of the latter, the reports *Sustainable Mountain Tourism Opportunities for Local Communities* and *Walking Tourism Promoting Regional Development* highlight a pressing need for local development, which is directly related to the problem under study, depopulation. All this through proposals related to sports tourism, hiking, and sustainability.

There is not as large a repertoire on the national scene as the one mentioned above. Despite this, the ideas we have been able to consult in some specialised journals, such as *Ager. Revista de Estudios sobre Despoblación y Desarrollo Rural* because it has helped us to go deeper and understand depopulation as a process, as well as the solutions,

including tourism, which are currently being provided. Along the same lines are some of the works consulted in the *Revista de Ciencias Sociales*, in the *Cuadernos de Geografía de la Universitat de València* and in *Saitabi: Revista de la Facultad de Geografía i Història*. In the latter, the works on depopulation by Hermsilla stand out.

For the understanding of sports tourism and the new trends in the field of sport, the work collected in the book *Sociology of Sport* has been fundamental, among which Manuel García Ferrando and Ramón Llopis, co-director, the latter, of this doctoral thesis, stand out. As well as the work of Collantes and Pinilla and that of the Centre for the Study of Depopulation and Development of Rural Areas because it broadens the specific knowledge on depopulation in the national panorama.

Finally, the doctoral theses of pioneering researchers in the field of rural development and hiking have been of great help to us. This is the case of the sociologist Moscoso with his proposal "Reestructuración rural: Análisis de las Prácticas Deportivas de Naturaleza en el Desarrollo Rural en Andalucía", where he studies the growing demand for sports activities in the mountains and rural areas and how these affect the territory. Or the proposal "Información en la Práctica Senderista" by Sánchez, where he makes an extensive analysis of the situation of hiking and the hiker in our territory.

3.1.2.- Secondary Data Analysis.

This doctoral thesis also contemplates the search for and contrast of data of a secondary nature, as a complement to the whole scientific body that has been described above. In this case, a distinction is made between data of an empirical nature and data of a statistical and/or administrative nature.

3.1.2.1.- Data of an Empirical Nature.

At the European level, we have consulted and followed the guidelines established by the European Committee of the Regions, a consultative body of the European Union composed of representatives at local and regional level from the different member countries. In the exercise of its functions, this committee seeks to analyse, understand, and recommend strategies for action in the field of territorial development. The reports "The EU response to the demographic challenge" of 2016 and "Demographic change: Proposals for quantifying and tackling the negative effects on EU regions, 2020" of 2020, make an in-depth analysis of the situations of the various regions in Europe and propose a series of recommendations to the European executive bodies. In this sense, these reports have helped us to better understand the existing trends and what measures are to be taken in the future at national and regional level.

Another source consulted is Metsähallitus, a Finnish state-owned company whose main task is the administration of Finland's protected areas. Its research work includes analyses with other Nordic countries on tourism and the use of rural areas.

At the national level, one of the pioneering works that analyses the social reality of sport in Spain is the Survey of Sports Habits of Spaniards promoted by the Spanish Sports Council, directed by García Ferrando and Llopis, among others. The essence of this survey is very interesting as it tackles the reality of sport in Spain from different scientific and contrasted perspectives, providing data on sporting practice according to different variables, the impact of sport on the economic market, and new trends, among others.

This work has helped us to better understand the relationship between sport and tourism and how social trends are a good indicator for understanding changes within the

framework of sport tourism. In addition, it also provides information on citizens' interests and therefore future trends.

In addition, we have also consulted different reports and action strategies of the public bodies in charge of the demographic challenge and depopulation, both nationally, through the Ministry for Ecological Transition and the Demographic Challenge, and regionally, through the General Directorate of the Valencian Anti-Population Agenda.

3.1.2.2.- Statistical and Administrative Data.

In addition to the sources, other sources of a statistical and administrative nature, both public and private, have also been used, with the aim of having data with significant robustness and scope.

Firstly, we have consulted data from the European Statistical Office (Eurostat) because of its wide geographical scope and because one of its main objectives is the harmonisation of statistical data from the States that make up the European Union. In this sense, it has helped us to gain a better understanding of the consolidation of physical activity habits in the populations of the different countries, as well as trends in non-mechanical means of transport, among which hiking stands out.

Secondly, the help of the Spanish National Institute of Statistics has also been fundamental, insofar as it also has an extensive catalogue of statistical analyses that unifies the different regions. The information provided by this source is directly related to demographic information and the changes that depopulation has produced in specific areas.

Thirdly, we have also consulted the data of the Spanish Federation of Municipalities and Provinces (FEMP) for its clear interest in analysing the problem of depopulation in rural and mountain regions.

4.- Fieldwork

Prior to carrying out the fieldwork, we were faced with one of the most difficult questions to solve in this doctoral thesis. The decision on what type of methodology to use was one of the most important headaches.

This question has its origins in the great controversy that exists in the scientific field regarding the importance and rigorousness of scientific methodologies. Traditionally, quantitative methodology has had a greater application in the scientific field because it represents a more rigorous and objective way of proposing research designs. While qualitative methodology has been more questioned for being more subjective in nature and, on many occasions, lacking a specific method of study (Walle, 1997).

Over time, researchers and scientists have seen in the Social Sciences a broad field of knowledge that needed to be studied. The relationships and phenomena that develop in this scientific field are very complex and sometimes a quantitative view does not fully satisfy the need to understand these realities. This is where qualitative methodologies have developed and generated more rigorous methods of research. The virtue lies in the fact that qualitative methodology helps to understand in a more complete way many of the causal relationships that exist in the variables under study (Saldaña, 2011).

In this sense, the work of Dupuis (1999) highlights the need to approach leisure and tourism research from a qualitative perspective, as it helps to understand to a greater extent the different economic, social, cultural, political, environmental, to name but a few, interactions that may exist between them. In the same vein, other researchers also highlight the benefits of a qualitative view when studying variables within the services domain (Dong & Siu, 2013).

Based on all these scientific premises, there seems to be no doubt that our decision has opted for the use of a qualitative methodology, since our primary objective is to understand the relationships that exist at the intersection between depopulation, sports tourism and all its derivatives. In other words, rather than knowing "how much" tourism generates, we are interested in knowing "why" and "how" sport tourism may be able to generate a social and economic impact in the area under study (Newland & Aicher, 2018).

Having said that, we have decided to choose the case study as a research method for the fieldwork because of the interesting information it can provide us with. At the same time, the research techniques used are interviews and focus groups.

4.1.- The Case Study Method

In recent years, the case study has positioned itself as one of the most complete and important research methods in the scientific field (Hyett et al., 2014). The case study method can provide very relevant information when the object of study requires an in-depth study of the interaction that may arise between the different variables under study and from different fields of knowledge (Crowe et al., 2011). In the field of Social Sciences and more specifically in the field of services, where tourism is included, the case study method provides very valuable information, as the interactions that exist between the various pillars that support the interdependent relationships of the various stakeholders can be known in great detail (Harris & Ezech, 2008).

Related to the above, there is another fundamental argument why the case study method is posited as a rigorous and powerful way to address scientific questions. This is that there is a wide repertoire of research that has demonstrated its validity when dealing with issues such as depopulation and the analysis of the social and economic impact of tourism in specific regions. In the field of depopulation, the work carried out in the

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Valencian Community (Alamá-Sabater et al., 2021), Andalusia (García Corral et al., 2022), Cantabria (Viñas, 2019), Italy (Reynaud et al., 2020) or the Sudetenland in Poland (Szymanowski & Latocha, 2021), to name but a few, stand out. While in the case of tourism, one could mention the variety of destinations, events and spaces that have been analysed (Bordelon & Ferreira, 2019; Botella-Carrubi et al., 2019; Bourdeau et al., 2002; Derom & Ramshaw, 2016; Duglio & Beltramo, 2017; Klapanidou & Gibson, 2010).

Having said that, given the complexity of the geographical environment that we intend to study in this doctoral thesis, it is logical that this methodology has been selected, as it will provide a real knowledge of the interdependence not only of the main themes of the thesis, but also of other realities also present in the idiosyncrasy of the territory.

4.1.1.- Technical Elements and Implementation Strategies.

4.1.1.1.- The Research Techniques Used: Interview and Focus Group Discussions.

Research techniques in the scientific field and in the Social Sciences represent another of the fundamental pillars of the work. Any research proposal will be influenced by the variety of economic, methodological, temporal and research capacity resources available. In relation to the above, the reason for the choice of research techniques lies in the synergy created between the resources and the primary objective of this research.

Given the complexity of our objective, we have chosen two of the research techniques that best fit our approach: the interview and the focus groups. The importance of these two research techniques, each with its own particularities, lies in the fact that they allow us to travel to the core elements that are generated through the interactions of the variables under study. In other words, they not only allow us to obtain the information we are interested in, but also to contextualise and understand the information through the

observation of the climate generated during the execution of these techniques. Another strong argument for the choice of these techniques is the previous work already done by several authors in the field of tourism (Finn et al., 2000).

4.1.1.1.1.- The Interview.

The interview consists of a conversation between two or more people, where a communication space is generated with a sender (the interviewer), a receiver (the interviewee), communication channels, messages, registers, etc. The interview represents a very interesting research technique because it allows a deeper understanding of the reasons why events occur. Moreover, categories of information that directly affect the object of study and that had not been foreseen can emerge during the execution of the interview. According to Moscoso (2008), the use of the interview is very viable in order to go deeper into specific aspects that are transcendental for the research, which is why it is necessary to select very specific individuals who are able to provide the information that is needed.

In relation to all the above, it should not be lost sight of the fact that, as a research technique, the interview should be conceived as a scientific tool. It is for this reason that researchers try to establish a series of guidelines that confer rigour and validity to the interview technique (Jennings, 2005).

In the field of tourism, leisure and consumption, the connections with human behaviour and conduct are very close. And the risk of not being sufficiently rigorous in methodological approaches is very high. For this reason, Hirschman and Holbrook (1982) focus on the importance of the methodological design of the work.

The meticulousness demanded by researchers would translate into the entire meticulous process involved in the execution of interview research techniques. From the

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initial stage, through the training of the researcher and the selection of the sample, through the interview itself, where the interviewer must know how to conduct the process, to the handling and collation of the data, one of the most complex tasks of the whole process (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Having said all this, in our research work we also followed a very detailed process for conducting the interviews. First, we trained in the art of interviewing with the director of the doctoral thesis, who has more than ample experience in the use of these research techniques. In this line, we also went deeper in a theoretical (through the study of the geographical area) and practical (through the visit to different populations) way to understand to a greater extent the different historical, social, economic, and political realities that exist and that can undoubtedly condition the opinions of the local population.

Secondly, given the nature of our work and considering the specificity of the subject matter, it was decided to propose semi-structured interviews because of the double condition that this approach has insofar as a structured interview can leave out other subjects of interest, while using an open interview we could fall into the error of losing sight of our objectives.

Subsequently, based on the hypotheses and objectives of the work, the categories of information that are of interest for our work are designed. In total, four core categories of information are proposed.

1.- Profile of sports tourists and hikers. The aim is to find out the social and economic variables of the sports tourists who visit the area. One of the options we considered was to approach this question from a quantitative perspective, but as we have already explained, there are several studies on these questions and what we wanted to do was to find out why. Moreover, the profiles interviewed are sufficiently discerning to

establish profiling trends, as they have their own customer databases. The table below shows the basic questions in the interview script.

Table 11

Questionnaire for the category "socio-economic profile of the sports tourist (and hiker)".

Category "Socio-economic profile of sport tourists (and hikers)".	
Study variable	Issues
Gender	In sports tourism and trekking, is there a gender predominance? More women? More men?
Age	What are the most predominant age groups?
Groups	What are the most predominant groups of tourists? Couples? Families? Do some hikers come alone?
Origin	What is the origin of your visitors? National? Local tourism? Do you have an international public?
Federative licences	Do you have agreements with sports federations?
Sportswear	What kind of sportswear does the visitor/trekker wear? Good quality? What kind of brands?
Seasons	What are the predominant seasons, do you have visitors on public holidays, do they come during the week?
Bookings	How do customers book, do you see an increase in the use of new technologies, which social networks do you use for promotion?
Complementary activities	Do you offer the possibility of excursions, guided tours, picnics for hikers?
Socio-economic impact	Do you think there is a socio-economic impact because of the activity you develop? Do visitors consume in other businesses?

Note. Source: Own elaboration

2.- Analysis of tourist establishments and the situation of sports tourism in the region. On the one hand, the aim is to analyse the factors, in general, which may be attractive for potential clients: novelty of the environment, access, state of the establishments, etc. On the other hand, the aim is to analyse the degree of implementation of products and services related to physical activity in the different establishments.

This is connected to what the scientific literature refers to as the pull factors, i.e. what elements of the service offer the entrepreneurs create in order to attract the attention of their potential customers. The following table shows the basic questions of the interview script.

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Table 12

Questionnaire for the category "analysis of tourist establishments and the situation of sports tourism in the region".

Category "Analysis of tourist establishments and the situation of sports tourism in the region".	
Study variable	Issues
Situation of tourism and sports tourism	Is there a market segmentation towards sport/hiking tourists and are there specific campaigns to attract hiking customers?
Tourist attraction factors	What are the elements that you value in order to attract potential visitors? Is there a wide offer of services in quality and quantity? In your opinion, are there good connections to get here? Do you think that nature and the territory are key factors that attract the attention of visitors? Is there a wide offer of accommodation in the area?
Tourist push factors	Do you do market research among your customers and how do you know what they like or what you can offer them that is new?

Note. Source: Own elaboration

3.- Use of new technologies in internal management and promotion. According to the scientific literature, digitalisation is one of the tools that will most help economic development and that will have the greatest positive impact on the rural world. The objective is to understand how new technologies have been implemented in rural establishments. On the one hand, in aspects of internal management, such as bookings, sales channels, etc. And, on the other hand, in terms of promotion and marketing through social networks, mobile applications, etc. The following table shows the basic questions of the interview script.

Table 13

Questionnaire for the category "use of new technologies in internal management and promotion".

Category "Use of new technologies in internal management and promotion".	
Study variable	Issues
Internal management	Do you make use of digital tools to improve internal management processes? How do these tools help you? Can you refer resources to other departments or processes?
Promotion	What digital tools do you use to promote your establishment, do you have a social media presence, do you launch customer-specific marketing campaigns, do you use social media to reach different market segments, do you use in-house staff or do you outsource the activity?

Note. Source: Own elaboration

4.- The role of heritage in the field of tourism. Within the current tourism paradigm the experience plays a fundamental role. Heritage can be very closely linked to the experiences that tourists can live and this must be exploited. In this case, we observe how establishments make use of heritage to reinforce, improve and create new products and/or services that can attract visitors. The following table shows the basic questions of the interview script.

Table 14

Questionnaire for the category "the role of heritage in tourism".

Category "The role of heritage in tourism".	
Study variable	Issues
Existing heritage elements in the surrounding area	What heritage elements exist in the area? Is there a specific regulation on heritage resources? What are the most important heritage elements? Is heritage conservation and promotion carried out?
Use of heritage elements in the field of tourism	Is heritage used in the field of tourism? How is heritage tourism promoted? Is heritage a lure for tourists? Is there a strong heritage tourism market segment? Are there any problems arising from the use of heritage in tourism?

Note. Source: Own elaboration

In relation to the above, it should be borne in mind that the scripts are a standardised tool to guide the interview process. The professional variety and experience of the informants has generated different paths in the different interviews, which in turn represents a virtue due to the great heterogeneity of ideas that we have been able to record.

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Thirdly, the purely fieldwork is carried out. A total of 18 semi-structured interviews were conducted, lasting between 40 and 70 minutes. The interviews have been made possible thanks to the trust that has developed after some years of work by the Mountain Sports: Health, Inclusion and Society research group. Prior to conducting each interview, a rigorous method of explaining the academic purpose of the interview and the acceptability of audio recording the interview is followed. The need to conduct all the interviews individually is also explained, with the aim of standardising the process, being aware that allowing the presence of two informants in the same interview can alter the communicative process and bias opinions. During the interviews, we used scripts of questions designed ad hoc to follow the thread of the proposed categories. We have also tried to respect the moments in which the interviewees have left the proposed categories, considering that, from a scientific point of view, the information obtained could be interesting. The interviews were conducted between September 2019 and January 2021.

4.1.1.1.2.- The Focus Groups.

Focus groups are also an excellent way to collect information. They are also a more agile and economical way of collecting information, as it is possible to interact with a larger number of individuals. However, although these dynamics do not provide as much specificity of information as interviews, they do represent a good source of group information (Stokes & Bergin, 2006).

According to Kitzinger (1994) the essence of focus groups lies precisely in the group itself and in the interactions that are generated among them when using this methodology. Few research techniques provide as much as the dynamics of focus groups.

In this case, we also focus our analysis on the group as a social element. Given the great variety of elements that affect and interact in the environment we are studying,

which is affected by economic, social, environmental, political, personal variables, etc., the group construction of knowledge is fundamental. We must bear in mind that the proposals for the improvement of our problem under study require the contribution of solutions from different social spaces. Therefore, understanding the interactions between these profiles is a key aspect.

In the case of our methodological approach, two focus groups were proposed for the population of Culla. The first one before starting the interview block and the second one after the end of the interview block. The sense of this decision lies in making contact in the first case and consolidating the information in the second. The geographical location was chosen intentionally, as Culla represents a kind of geographical centre of the area we have studied, which allowed for the attendance of different people from different towns.

In both focus groups, a moderator was appointed. In the first one, held in January 2019, this role was held by the researcher and sociology expert Dr. Capsí, while in the second one, held in October 2021, this role was held by Dr. Vidal-González, director of the doctoral thesis and anthropology expert.

In both cases, we had previously worked on a thematic script which included, among others, the categories proposed for this research work. In this case, the most important aspects and reflections for our work were collected in the form of an observation diary.

4.1.1.2.- Working Meetings with Directors.

The working meetings with the directors have also been fundamental to establish the steps of a path that has not been easy. To determine and explain the process of

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knowledge construction reflected in this doctoral thesis, it is worth highlighting the three stages that have marked this work.

First, we could highlight the first two years of the doctoral thesis. At that time, my professional life was centred on a family business dedicated to tourism. Although I am aware that this was an impediment from a purely academic point of view and in terms of advancing my doctoral thesis. With hindsight, I believe that the experience acquired during that period has been fundamental for the development of the thesis and for the great variety of work and projects that we have carried out. It gave me a vision of the tourism industry that I would hardly have acquired from the academic sphere alone.

Secondly, there was the stage where COVID-19 entered fully into our lives and this had a very negative impact both on the organisation of our work and in the case of data collection, which was complicated by the restrictions that were in place at any given time. During this stage, the possibility of doing online interviews was considered, but was completely ruled out as we had done some of them and did not want to break the standardisation of our work. During this period, we were fortunate enough to be awarded a pre-doctoral contract for the completion of our thesis.

And so, we come to the third stage. During this period, we have been able to make many advances in all senses. From the initiation of teaching as an obligatory part of the pre-doctoral contract, to participation in projects, publication of scientific articles, etc. During this stage we have generated spaces for reflection and thought almost daily, which has allowed us to make great advances both in the doctoral thesis and in our academic and research profile.

4.1.1.3.- The Delimitation of the Sample: Human Resources and Geographic Space.

The delimitation of the sample also represents one of the fundamental aspects of our research. The correct choice of the geographical space and the meticulousness in the selection of human resources is very important, as the information they will provide us with is key to understanding the complex realities that exist and to being able to verify the hypotheses and objectives. The following is a more specific description of the procedures and motivations that we have followed in carrying out this work.

The Actors

Both sports tourisms, the subject of study here, and other social, economic, demographic, etc. sciences have a direct impact on the realities of the environment being studied. Approaching our subject of study from a very particular point of view, for example, sports tourism, can lead us down the road to failure. It is for this reason that the selection of the actors with whom we interact has had to include a wide variety of professional and non-professional profiles that encompass all the agents involved in this issue: businessmen in the tourism sector, political leaders, association managers, members of the associative fabric, and even neighbours.

The role of tourism entrepreneurs represents the core element of this doctoral thesis. Entrepreneurs are those who, through their ideas, their concerns, their initiatives, etc., generate economic and social movement. From the incorporation of new products and/or services to the hiring of new employees, they have the real capacity to generate a positive impact on the populations where they carry out their activities. It is essential to know the information that entrepreneur's treasure because they can observe trends and realities that are difficult for other sectors, including the public sector, to observe.

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In the case of our research work, we call entrepreneurs all those who carry out any activity related to tourism, not only those who manage or run a hotel. For this reason, managers of hotels, hostelry, supply shops, etc., would be included in this block.

In relation to the above, we consider it fundamental to explain the reality that exists in the hotel sector in this region, and that is that the hotel offer is varied in that hotels, hostels, hostels, rural houses or campsites, to mention but a few, can be found. This reality makes standardisation more complex from a scientific point of view. However, it also represents a virtue insofar as this great heterogeneity provides us with much more information to understand the trends in sports tourism in a holistic way. It is for this reason that we have included in our sample the wide variety of profiles described above.

Active tourism companies play a fundamental role as they are the ones that improve and develop the overall situation of tourism by attracting potential tourists. We have decided to extract them from the previous block because of their own idiosyncrasy and great particularity.

Sports tourism in all its manifestations, be it hiking, cycling, excursions, climbing, etc., has its application in many of the services and products offered by these companies, which have very successfully linked their offer to many of the cultural, heritage and social contents of their territory.

In the case of our object of study, these companies can be found in different ways, i.e. some are directly linked to hotel establishments, while others only develop their activity in this field. In either case, their role is vital for generating the concept of destination in the space under study.

Political decision-makers also play a fundamental role in the task at hand. In relation to the management of accommodation, it is necessary to know that in many of these towns the hotel spaces for overnight stays have been built under the auspices of the local corporations with the aim of boosting tourism in the area. Once they have been built, a public and competitive process is carried out to subcontract their management. For this reason, although the local authorities are not directly dealing with tourists, it is true that they have an in-depth knowledge of many of the realities that take place there.

Parallel to this, the local authorities are also responsible for a wide range of administrative and political procedures in the field of tourism management. From obtaining subsidies for the improvement of facilities, to the overall promotion of the town as a destination, to the management of all the bureaucratic procedures with other regional and national administrations. Given this reality, we considered it essential to have the participation of a political leader in order to find out more about the day-to-day management of tourism and its relationship with the major problem of depopulation.

Tourist information offices also play a fundamental role in the tourism industry. In most cases, they are the first point of information where a tourist arrives physically, or where the potential visitor calls to obtain information. The growth or decline of tourism in the region depends to a large extent on the professionalism and training of the members of these organisations. These organisations also have other statistical and promotional functions for products and services, so that the information they handle can be very interesting for the tourism industry, especially for entrepreneurs.

In the case of our region, the consolidation of these bodies is not very high, and there are some populations that do not have these services at their disposal. This undoubtedly represents a handicap for many of these populations.

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The role of the local population is equally important. It has been observed that throughout the country, many tourist destinations have died of success. One of the factors leading to this has been poor management regarding the local population, leading to complaints, demonstrations, etc. Involving the local population is fundamental for the development of tourism activity. In our case, contact is also made with different members of the local population to find out their opinion on the benefits and detriments, if any, that tourism can cause.

Finally, we are also interested in the opinion of managers in sports federations, specifically in mountain-related federations. In this case, the Spanish Mountain Federation and its regional federations have a great responsibility in the field of mountaineering, not only for sporting activities in themselves, but there is also a strong connection with the promotion of tourism, sustainability, and heritage. It is for this reason that many federations develop specific sections for the study and work on these issues. In our case, we are also interested in knowing the opinion of these association representatives, as they develop many strategies and initiatives for the promotion of sustainable and healthy activities in the field of mountaineering. The tables below show the different profiles of the informants who took part in the individual interviews and in the two discussion groups.

Table 15*List of individual interviews conducted and informant information*

Reference	Interst groups	Sports practice	Sex	Municipality
E1	Entrepreneur	Si	Hombre	Vistabella del Maestrazgo
E2	Entrepreneur	Si	Hombre	Vilafranca del Cid
E3	Entrepreneur	No	Hombre	Vilafranca del Cid
E4	Politician	No	Hombre	Portell
E5	Entrepreneur	No	Mujer	Vilafranca del Cid
E6	Employee ⁷	Si	Hombre	Vilafranca del Cid
E7	Employee	No	Hombre	Ares del Maestrazgo
E8	Employee	Si	Hombre	Villahermosa del Río
E9	Entrepreneur	Si	Hombre	Cinctorres
E10	Employee	Si	Hombre	Forcall
E11	Tourist info	Si	Mujer	Morella
E12	Tourist info	Si	Mujer	Morella
E13	Entrepreneur	Si	Hombre	El Boixar
E14	Entrepreneur	No	Mujer	Pobla de Benifassà
E15	Entrepreneur	Si	Hombre	Vallibona
E16	National Federation	Si	Hombre	Valencia
E17	National Federation	Si	Hombre	Valencia
E18	Regional federation	Si	Hombre	Valencia

Note. Source: Own elaboration

Table 16*List of members participating in discussion group 1*

Reference	Interest group	Sports practice	Sex	Municipality
GD1(1)	Local population	Si	Mujer	Culla
GD1(2)	Entrepreneur	Si	Hombre	Benassal
GD1(3)	Entrepreneur	Si	Hombre	Vilafranca del Cid
GD1(4)	Entrepreneur	Si	Hombre	Adzeneta del Maestrat
GD1(5)	Politician	No	Hombre	Adzeneta del Maestrat
GD1(6)	Local population	No	Hombre	Culla
GD1(7)	Politician	Si	Hombre	Culla
GD1(8)	Politician	Si	Hombre	Culla
GD1(9)	Entrepreneur	Si	Mujer	Culla
GD1(10)	Local population	No	Hombre	Culla
GD1(11)	Local population	Si	Mujer	Culla

Note. Source: Own elaboration

⁷ For the purpose of stakeholder groups we consider the employees who have been our informants within the group of employers, as they represent the voice and interests of the tourism business sector.

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Table 17

List of members participating in discussion group 2

Reference	Interest group	Sports practice	Sex	Municipality
GD2(1)	Politician	Si	Mujer	Culla
GD2(2)	Tourist info	Si	Mujer	Culla
GD2(3)	Local population	Si	Hombre	Benassal
GD2(4)	Politician	Si	Hombre	Culla
GD2(5)	Entrepreneur	No	Mujer	Culla
GD2(6)	Entrepreneur	Si	Mujer	Culla
GD2(7)	Local population	No	Hombre	Culla
GD2(8)	Entrepreneur	No	Mujer	Culla
GD2(9)	Entrepreneur	No	Mujer	Culla

Note. Source: Own elaboration

The Territory

The geographical space represented through the territory is also a fundamental part of the exhibition. Each territory presents a very particular social, economic, political, and demographic reality. Trying to understand territories based on the realities of other spaces can be a serious mistake. This reality is what generates in us the need to study the chosen territory in detail, to generate our own hypotheses and, based on this, a scientific and process of study.

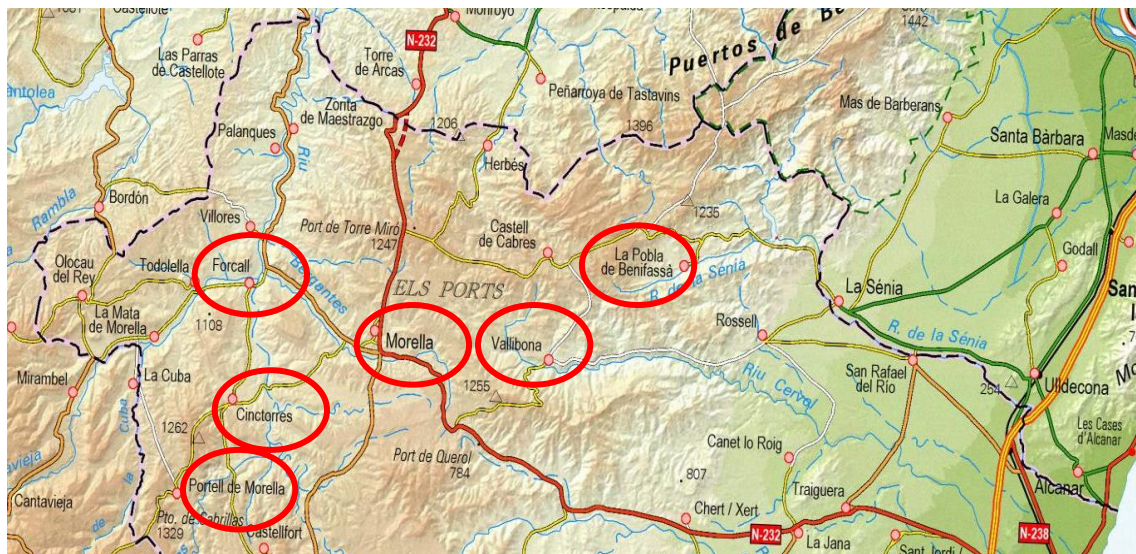
The choice of this geographical sample is based on two very important reasons. On the one hand, the regions we have studied treasure a wealth of cultural, social, and natural elements. Not in vain, it has been a region that history has given the opportunity to be part of it, having witnessed many changes and important milestones. And, on the other hand, given the complexity and interest in the area, this doctoral thesis attempts to follow the extensive work that the mountain sports research group has been doing in the area over the years and which has resulted in some collaborations and projects already carried out and others in the process of being completed.

In terms of political geography, the regions covered from north to south are the counties of Els Ports, Lower Maestrazgo, Upper Maestrazgo, Alcatén and Upper

Millares. In order to be more specific, the counties of Els Ports and Alto Maestrazgo are studied in greater depth, as well as the town's most closely linked to the Tinença de Benifassà and Penyagolosa Natural Parks. Below, different sections (north, centre and south) of physical maps of the region studied can be seen. The populations represented in the different samples are marked in red circles.

Figure 9

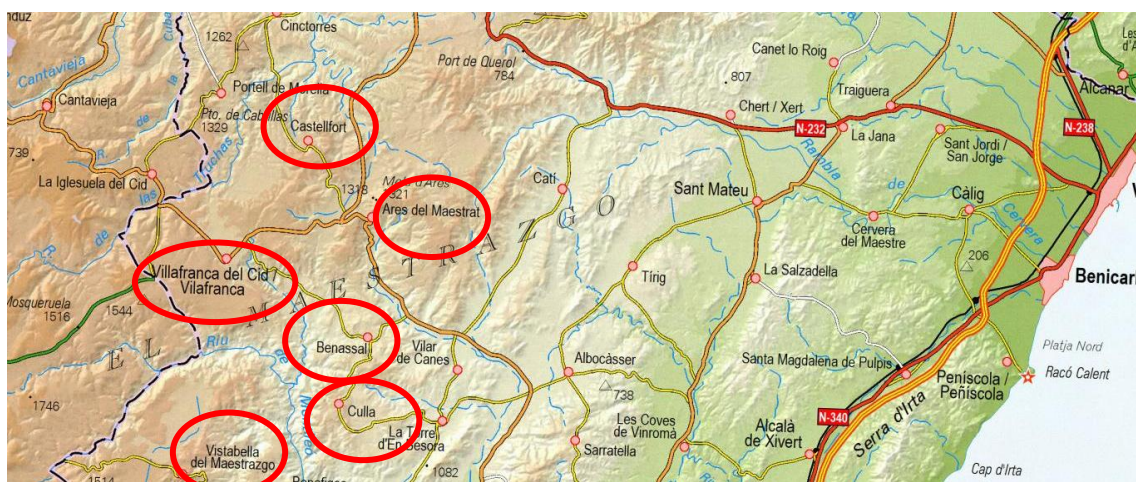
Physical map of the northern part of the study region



Note. Source: <http://www.ign.es/iberpix/visor/>

Figure 10

Physical map of the central area of the study region

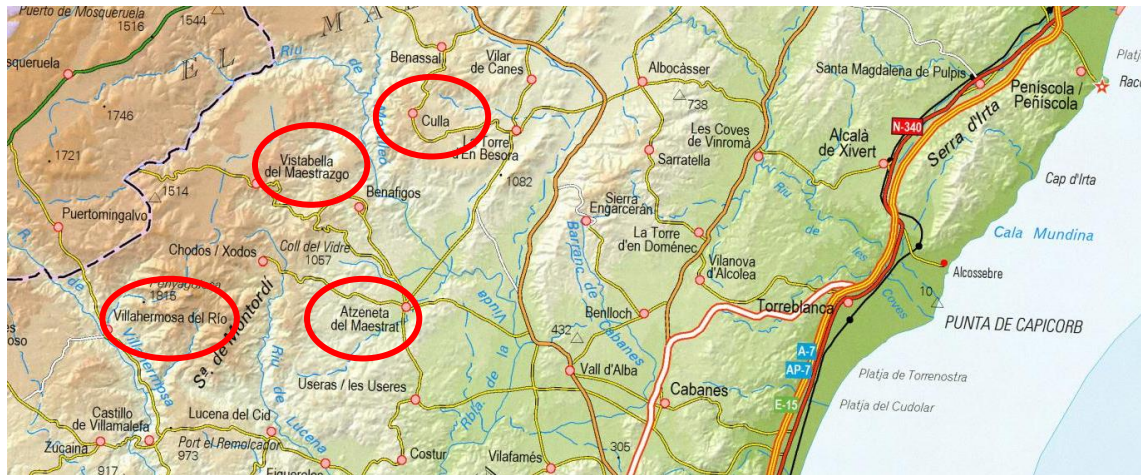


Note. Source: <http://www.ign.es/iberpix/visor/>

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Figure 11

Physical map of the southern part of the study region



Note. Source: <http://www.ign.es/iberpix/visor/>

As mentioned above, the region studied covers different populations in different comarcas. To make the information more specific, the following table specifies the counties and populations represented in the sample.

Table 18

List of counties and towns forming part of the geographical sample

County	Municipality
Els Ports	Morella
	Forcall
	Cinctorres
	Portell de Morella
	Castellfort
	Vallibona
El alto Maestrat	Benassal
	Culla
	Ares del Maestrat
El Bajo Maestrat	La Pobla de Benifassà
	Adzeneta del Maestrat
L'Alcalatén	Vistabella del Maestrat
	Villahermosa del Río
El Alto Millares	

Note. Source: Own elaboration

As mentioned above, most of the sample resides in the counties of Els Ports and Alto Maestrat. However, the representation of the other three counties and their respective populations is due to their proximity to the Penyalgosa and Tinença de

Benifassà natural parks. This factor makes their analysis and understanding very interesting from a scientific point of view.

5.- Information Analysis Procedure

The data analysis procedure represents one of the most important steps in any scientific research. The analysis of qualitative data brings with it an added difficulty. This challenge has created a long-standing debate between scientists who advocate qualitative and quantitative analysis techniques (Walle, 1997). Given the complexity of many of the research objects that exist in the social sciences and in tourism, the use of qualitative methodology helps to better understand the phenomenon under study and all the interactions between them (Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2007). Therefore, a very thorough process of data analysis has been followed to provide maximum rigour and reliability to the results (Jennings, 2005).

All interviews are audio-recorded and then transcribed into Microsoft Office Word 2017 software. Each of the transcriptions is made as soon as possible, to complement the information recorded with notes observed throughout the interview.

Subsequently, a classification of the qualitative data is carried out to divide them into different categories. Categorisation makes it possible to divide the topics of interest of the interviewees and thus to understand the interaction between the various elements that characterise the environment. In this process, the most important ideas are analysed, labelled, and marked to facilitate subsequent discourse analysis.

According to Phillips and Jorgensen (2002), discourse analysis forms an essential part of the information needed to establish relationships between categories of information. And this, in turn, ties in with one of the fundamental working procedures in qualitative methodology, the triangulation of results.

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For Lincoln and Guba (1985), the triangulation of results in qualitative methodology is fundamental as it facilitates the establishment of relationships between our data and what the scientific literature postulates. This helps us to systematise a scientific process that tries to establish the meanings that will be referred to in the relevant results and conclusions.

5.1.- Coding of Qualitative Information

All data collected through the different data collection techniques are coded, so that the type of technique and the professional profile of the informant can be identified. In the case of interviews, this is coded by (E) and in the case of focus groups by (GD), both accompanied by the number presented in the sample summary tables. For example, (E1) refers to interview 1 and (GD1-1) refers to informant 1 of focus group 1.

6.- Timeline

Timeline of the study: HIKING AS A TOURIST PROPOSAL TO FIGHT AGAINST DEPOPULATION: THE CASE OF THE INLAND AREA OF THE PROVINCE OF CASTELLÓN												
	ENE	FEB	MAR	ABR	MAY	JUN	JUL	AGO	SEP	OCT	NOV	DIC
2018									Literature review and documentary collection			
2019	Literature review and documentary collection											
	Preparation and conduct of fieldwork								Conducting fieldwork			
2020	Conducting fieldwork											
	COVID-19											
2021	Conducting fieldwork		Information processing and analysis							Conducting fieldwork		
	PARENTAL LEAVE											
2022	Information processing and analysis								Yale University - International Fellowship			
	Writing the doctoral thesis											
2023	Writing the doctoral thesis		Doctoral thesis deposit									
	Doctoral thesis defence											

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In this section it is essential to comment on some very important ideas that have made us change the timetable with respect to the research plan that once marked our path.

First, the impact of the COVID-19 health crisis on geographical mobility has played a major role, as the various restrictions on the movement of citizens had a major impact on our own mobility, especially at the beginning of the pandemic. In addition to this, the receptiveness of potential informants was not very high, as they were very wary of having meetings of this type. All interviews carried out close to the pandemic were conducted in accordance with the health regulations dictated by the competent authority at the time.

Secondly, during the months of April to August 2021, work had to be halted due to paternity leave for the birth of my first child, Daniel.

Thirdly, there is a very notable difference in the first years of the doctoral thesis when professional work is combined with the work on the doctoral thesis, without a research contract, and the period in which a FPU (University Teacher Training) contract is enjoyed, as all efforts have been focused on this work. During this period, although it is not reflected in the chronogram, we have been able to work and actively participate in different activities of a scientific nature, such as: participation in congresses, participation in research projects, preparation of publications, etc. All of them are included in the Doctoral Student Activity Document (DSAD).

Part 3. Results

**Chapter 4. Analysis of the Socio-
Economic Reality of Sports Tourism in
Inland Areas of Castellón**

1.- Characterisation of the Hiker/Tourist According to Stakeholder Perceptions: a Qualitative View⁸

Hiking is one of the fastest growing sporting activities in recent years. Hikers can be attracted for various reasons, from interpretative hiking, where cultural/educational aspects predominate, to those hikers who approach the activity as a sporting challenge.

Sports tourism has seen hiking as an opportunity to expand its range of activities and services, creating a real range of possibilities for its customers. The results of our research provide some detailed data on the profile of hikers in the area studied.

Hiking can be considered a sporting activity for all genders and for most age groups, if there are no functional problems that prevent its practice, which will also be conditioned by the level of the route to be followed. In the practice of hiking, it is also possible to observe different types of groups of people, which places great value on its own practice as an inclusive and integrating practice.

1.1.- Hiking Does not Distinguish Between the Genders

If we approach hiking from a gender perspective, the different informants seem to have a common opinion. As informant E14 indicates when asked about the percentage of women and men who visit his establishment for hiking, he answers:

"I think it's quite homogeneous, yes, I would say it's 50/50, yes. It could be that maybe a little bit more, men, but yes, basically there is not much differentiation by gender".

A similar distribution between women and men (50/50) is shared by informant E1, who claims that his audience is mostly made up of couples, with very occasional

⁸ En el anexo I se comparte la información ampliada sobre los resultados obtenidos de cada uno de los informantes de cada una de las variables analizadas en este apartado. En algunas de las variables estudiadas la esquematización aporta datos de carácter más cuantitativo.

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same-sex couples. The data provided by some other informants (E2, E3, E6, E7, E8, E10 and E15) are along the same lines. All these establishments have some factors in common, and that is that their degree of specialisation in sporting activities is lower than others who were also interviewed.

In the case of informant E4, it should be considered that he is a public official who does not know the socio-economic variables of the ramblers in as much depth as a professional in the hotel sector. He has been selected as part of the sample because he is an interesting profile, as he manages and makes direct decisions on tourism and walking. In the case of the management of his area, he is responsible for launching tenders for tourism areas, so he is directly involved in the field of tourism management. Informants E16, E17 and E18 are in a similar situation, as they are responsible for hiking in different sports federations. The importance of the latter will be discussed later in the analysis of the interactions that exist between the federations and the promotion of tourism and hiking.

That said, in contrast to the homogeneity in the distribution of sexes reported by some informants, we have been able to observe a great difference in terms of gender in the establishment of informant E13 who tells us that:

"We started out as a fairly demanding cycling and hiking activity company and then we set up the hostel. I would say that the male/female ratio is 70/30 and that 30% would be women who come for hiking or trail running".

Informant E9 also comments that in his opinion there is a slight difference between walkers, with a predominance of the male sex and referring to a very specific public: early bank retirees, early retired people, etc.

The conclusions of informants E11 and E12, both of whom belong to and work in a public body related to tourism, are along the same lines. According to their opinion, the male presence is slightly higher when it comes to hiking.

Finally, we found one informant who affirms that the female public is slightly in the majority when it comes to hiking. According to informant 5:

"We work with large groups of walkers, people who belong to or are associated with a walking club. In these cases you can see that there is a high number of women, more than men, although the differences are minimal".

It seems that the findings from a gender perspective do not suggest large percentage differences in the practice of hiking between women and men. These results are very similar to those presented in the survey on sporting habits in Spain (Ministerio de Cultura y Deporte, 2020). The large differences found are due to very specific particularities of the accommodations interviewed.

1.2.- Hiking, a Sport for All Ages

From an age point of view, broadly speaking, the results found seem to coincide with the fact that most hikers are between 30 and 60 years of age. However, we consider that for practical purposes and for application in the field of sports tourism, it would be useful to go more deeply into the information provided by the informants.

Informant E3 explains that his establishment has little or no influx of hikers. The target group of this establishment is couples looking to disconnect. Some of these couples go hiking because, once in the area, they know that they have the option.

Informant E1 comments that the age of his clients ranges from 30 to 70 years old, although if he must narrow down that age range, he thinks that there is a certain

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predominance in the 35 to 50 age group. Along the same lines are the results shared by informant E5: "My clients have very similar characteristics; the vast majority are between 30 and 60 years old and they tend to come in large groups to go hiking".

Similar results are shared by informant E10, who informs us that most of his clients who go hiking belong to the age group between 35 and 60 years old. Or informant E13, who also qualifies that the age group of hikers ranges between 25 and 60 years old. These results indicate certain trends in the age of hikers, although the age ranges are very wide.

There is another group of informants who have been much more specific when it comes to establishing the age ranges of hikers. Informant E2 sets the age brackets at a generic level, between 25 and 75 years of age, however, he qualifies in a very specific way that: "in hikers, I think so. In hiking from 40 upwards, 40/50 and 50/60, those 20 years". Similar results are shared by informant E6, who states that most people who are interested in hiking are between 50 and 60 years old.

Similarly, informants E7 and E8 specify that the age of hikers is between 40 and 50 years old. Informant E8 qualifies the information very well when asked if he only receives hikers between these ages or also hikers of a lower age range:

"Young people between 20 and 35 also come, but to a lesser extent. The 40-50 age group is the majority. The whole family unit comes, so it's a bit different, the model is different".

Informant E9 also establishes in a very specific way the age range between 55 and 65 years old. This information is closely related to that which the same informant shares with us about the type of public who visit him for hiking, where he states very clearly that "there are a large number of early retirees".

Finally, informants E11 and E12 specify the most predominant age groups of hikers as 50/60 and 45/55, respectively. Undoubtedly, these age groups coincide perfectly with those shared by most informants. And they are also in line with the general results presented in the different studies on the socio-demographic profile of Spanish society (Ministerio de Cultura y Deporte, 2019).

1.3.- Hiking is a Social Activity that is Practised in Company

From the point of view of hiking groups, all the informants report that there are different groups: large groups of hikers, small groups, families, couples, and individuals. Each informant refers to different percentages depending on the different characteristics of their environment.

The different types of existing groupings are couples, without distinguishing between genders, as according to the informants there are also couples of the same gender; families, which refers to different groupings of families, from 3 to more than 10 people; individuals, which refers to people who travel individually. This grouping is the least typical, but it is worth mentioning, as other research by the research group has shown that in the Nordic countries, Germany, England, etc. there is a certain tendency for this form of travel. Small groups, which refers to small groups of friends or colleagues. And large groups, which refers to large groups of friends or mountain clubs.

Some establishments report a diversified demand and a yearly presence of different types of groups. As informant E15 indicates:

"If we analyse over the course of a year, 40% of our visitors who go hiking are couples, another 40% are families, another 10% are small groups of friends and the last 10% are large groups of hikers or individuals. Individual walkers would be a residual percentage, but they do exist".

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Similar distributions are shared by informant E14. For her the percentages would be: 30% couples, 35% families, 15% small groups and another 15% large groups. Or informant E1 who tells us that most walkers are grouped in pairs (45%) or families (45%), while small groups (5%) or individuals (5%) are somewhat residual.

There is another sector of informants who share with us that couples who go hiking are their main public. As informant E9 says: "They are not great hiking experts, but people who come to disconnect and take the opportunity to do some basic hiking". According to the same informant, this group would represent 60%, while families would represent 20%, large groups of hikers 10% and individuals another 10%.

In the same line of results are those shared by informant E10. According to her, 90% of hikers are grouped in pairs, while the remaining 10% are families. Informant E12 also gives a leading role to couples with 80%, while another 10% would belong to families and the remaining 10% to large groups.

Another tendency of grouping forms would be those whose majority public are families, as in the case of informant E8, where the weight of families represents 80%, while couples and large groups represent 10% each. According to this informant, this large number of families responds to very specific issues:

"We offer rural tourism as a family. At around 10 o'clock in the morning we go on an excursion, which is like a walk with the family. There are some (people) who go jogging earlier, but then they do that excursion, that walk, with their family".

Informant E2 also attributes a large impact to families (50%), while the remaining 50% is made up of large groups of hikers. This informant makes an interesting nuance with regard to the families since, according to him: "Families do not only go hiking, but

also try to take advantage of the opportunity to make cultural visits and other types of activities".

Finally, there is another trend in the groupings where small groups predominate. According to informant E13, in his case, the predominance is in small groups of sportspeople (65%), while the other 35% would be made up of families, couples and individuals.

1.4.- Most Hikers in the Inland Mountains of Castellón come From Spain

The results on the place of origin of the hikers draw several very interesting conclusions. On the one hand, many establishments make special mention of the year 2020 with a common denominator: "the local tourist". There are several factors for the existence of local tourism at present, but the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and the relevant restrictions have undoubtedly made local tourism the key for these establishments. Even so, the informants were also asked about ordinary years, so the results shared here consider a situation of normality.

According to the results obtained, it seems that, in many cases, there is a great predominance of national tourism as opposed to international tourism. According to informant E5: "100% of my clients are nationals, I would say that 90% are from the Valencian Community and the remaining 10% are from Catalonia". Both regions are adjacent to each other. These results coincide with those shared by informant E10, although he clarifies that the 10% belonging to Catalonia would come from Tarragona (a province of Catalonia). Informant E11 also shares with us that 100% of the people who pass through the tourist office are nationals, using the previously mentioned concept of "proximity tourism".

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In the case of informant E3, the low specialisation of this establishment in sports tourism and hiking has already been mentioned in previous sections. However, the international public that visits this establishment is very interesting, as countries that do not belong to the European Union, such as the United States, are mentioned. It may be of interest to look further into marketing strategies to reach these countries.

Another group of informants mentioned that within their demand for hiking there is an international presence. Thus, informants E13 and E1 agree that "the great majority of our public is from Spain, although sometimes we have public from countries such as Germany, England, Switzerland, etc.". Another informant (E8) also says that their international audience is mostly from European countries. While informant E3 shares with us, very surprised, that he has had visits from international travellers from Australia and the United States, among others.

For informant GD2(2) there is a growing demand from the French public. In her opinion: "They should adapt the physical and digital information to this language, otherwise we run the risk of missing this train".

In contrast to a large presence of national tourists, there are other establishments whose percentage points of international presence are significant. It seems that each of them responds to specific marketing strategies. According to informant E6 there are:

"An important demand from an international public. In a quick comparison, we have had clients from Holland, Germany, Portugal, Switzerland, France, England, etc."

Informant E15 also shares that an important part of their audience is international. This can be explained by the strategic decision they made to work together with a travel organisation company:

"Yes, yes, yes, of course. Yes, yes. Also, now we work with a company called Olivia Travel, which sends us mostly Dutch people, from Holland, specifically I work with Dutch people. And many of them are usually women".

The same informant also shares with us that "they once hosted a writer for the Lonely Planet guides". For him, this type of strategy helps to publicise the places abroad. Lonely Planet is one of the largest publishers of travel guides in the world. By 2008 they had published around 500 titles in 8 languages, with annual sales of more than six million guidebooks, as well as television programmes and websites. Undoubtedly, having contact with such organisations can be a competitive advantage for the various establishments in terms of improving product sales and marketing channels.

These strategies are also part of the objectives of informant E9, who tells us that they have a collaboration with a travel agency to reach international audiences: "Some arrive through Oxford, well, which is like an agency, like a small tour operator that takes them with guides through nature".

In relation to all this, reaching international audiences is quite complicated without developing promotional strategies. As informant GD2(4) points out:

"One of the strategies of the local corporation is the adaptation of all advertising into English and French. We are working on it, but you know that it is often difficult to decide where to allocate resources. Another initiative is to train our staff in these languages, but as I say, we have a lot of ideas and few resources".

The results obtained are in line with the contrasted data on the growth of sports tourism in Spain, both nationally and internationally, although this specific region presents lower figures with respect to international tourism (Ministerio de Cultura y Deporte, 2020).

1.5.- Hiking, a Sport That is Under-Represented in Federation Licenses

The analysis of this variable is interesting for several reasons. On the one hand, the characteristics of each establishment may represent an element of attraction for potential visitors. An example of this can be seen in the situation generated by the COVID-19 health crisis, where rural establishments, campsites and open-air spaces have gained market share to the detriment of hotels. On the other hand, many regional mountain federations have specialised tourism and mountain groups, whose strategies include the signing of collaboration agreements with rural and mountain companies and establishments to promote nature tourism.

In the case of the establishments interviewed, there are some that have agreements with the Federation of Mountain Sports and Climbing of the Valencian Community. Some of the benefits for members of the federation in the tourist framework are a 10% discount on the price of the stay.

As for the variable of belonging to sports federations or associations, the results seem to be quite conclusive. According to many informants, clients/walkers do not belong to any sports federation or association. There are very specific cases where the establishments can check whether the hikers belong to a federation. According to informant E2 and informant E5, hikers who come to their establishments in large groups always tend to belong to a sports club and in some cases to a sports federation.

In the case of informant E15, he does establish percentages in terms of federated and non-federated hikers of 30/70, respectively. However, this information is known to him because:

"Clubs call us to make reservations for meals and accommodation because they are going to organise certain activities in our areas. However, we (as an establishment) do not have any agreement with any federation that gives the right to discounts on accommodation".

In relation to the above, it is particularly striking that many informants do not adhere to this type of agreement with the federation. This is a question that they have not even considered, either because they are not aware of them, or because they have not yet considered marketing through these channels.

In relation to this question, when asked if they have signed any agreement with the federation, informant E1 shared with us that:

"No, no. We don't have, come on, we don't have special fares for members of the federation because, well, because we haven't had the opportunity to do so and neither, neither are the people who come here, as I said before, people who are not members of the federation. These parents of young children, as a general rule, are not federated. And those who are federated as such, who could be those who are more dedicated, who do longer routes, those who spend more hours in the mountains and so on, well, as we don't have a very high percentage, we haven't had the opportunity to make special offers either, because it is a very small percentage".

In this sense, it is more than evident that there is a certain need to improve the working strategies of the different federations to reach a greater number of rural accommodations. The synergy between companies and federations in the creation and promotion of tourism can be very interesting. As informant E16 indicates:

"220,000 are federated in all modalities. The majority is hiking. We are talking about 100,000-150,000, I'm telling you 100,000-150,000 is not saying anything, but it is a range that could be real".

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These numbers place the federations as a very powerful potential market segment. But the numbers are even more striking, as the same informant points out:

"No, but for example in the area of trails, which is what I manage, there are phenomena that I say well, if this is happening here, here and here, we are going to do it with nuances, right? Where is the challenge? The survey on sporting habits says that there are 4,500,000 Spaniards who say that they go hiking-mountaineering".

Undoubtedly, it is quite difficult to observe a sport that brings together so many practitioners and that can have such a direct application in the field of tourism.

In this sense, one of the handicaps is the very functioning of the federations, whose work is often voluntary; perhaps it would be interesting to take advantage of other public bodies and business associations to generate greater synergies between the different interest groups.

1.6.- The Hiker in the Inland Mountains of Castellón is an Amateur Hiker.

Regarding the variable of type of clothing and footwear, informants are asked whether there is a predominance of technical or basic clothing. Both concepts are used and related to specific types of material brands, which will not be mentioned in order not to enter questions of marketing and promotion of materials. The analysis of this variable is very interesting because there is a strong relationship with the degree of knowledge and experience in the sport and the type of material used.

In the words of informant E5: "The vast majority of customers wear very basic brand clothes; however, I can see that the vast majority of them wear good shoes".

Having said all this, we have been able to identify three distinct trends. Firstly, those informants who do not see major differences and distribute equally (50%) the use of basic or technical clothing or footwear. Secondly, those informants who observe a

predominance of basic clothing over technical clothing. This is the case of informant E1, who tells us that 90% of his clients wear very basic clothing or footwear. According to him, this is closely linked to the characteristics of the environment:

"To do what they can do here, on the Penyalgosa, they have more than enough. If we were in the Pyrenees or in the Alps... at altitudes of 3000 and 4000 metres, they would probably need much more technical clothing".

Informants E6 and E9 make very similar assessments, alluding to the fact that the degree of specialisation in their environment is not very high, that very specific materials are not needed for hiking and that the public does not seem to be so specialised.

In contrast to these, there is another group of informants whose clients have slightly more specialised and technical equipment. This is the case of informant E10 who, when asked about the equipment of his clients, establishes a relationship between hikers and purchasing power:

"Whoever comes to a place like this and stays in a hotel like this... must have a medium/high income. People who go trekking usually have a medium/high income, because it's not something that costs Little".

Informant E2 shares similar observations regarding the type of clothing or footwear. According to this entrepreneur, although there is a predominance of basic clothing, it is difficult to establish a connection between this variable and purchasing power because "many weekends you are surprised by the vehicles they come with". In his opinion: "hiking is not necessarily an activity that is practised by people with low purchasing power".

In relation to the above, informant GD1(4) highlights that there are no clear purchasing trends. According to him:

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"It is clear that there are large retail outlets that are selling a lot of sports equipment of a slightly lower quality. In our case, it may have affected us, but the quality of our equipment is still interesting for a large group of more experienced hikers. I could tell you that the process is as follows: people first buy basic material and as they gain experience, they buy much better material".

In this sense, many hikers who visit the area studied wear basic clothing, while the areas where more specialised clothing has been observed are more related to specific geographical points (Penyagolosa and Tinença de Benifassà).

It seems that the hikers who visit these areas do so with an eminently sporting motivation. However, there is a common denominator in the vast majority of hikers, and that is that many coincide in making greater economic investments in footwear.

In relation to the above, it is obvious that there is a great heterogeneous variety of hikers visiting the studied area. And that it is often difficult to establish a pattern in terms of the degree of experience of the hiker, the type of clothing and their purchasing power. Despite this, the development of the sports industry and the growth in quantity and quality of materials has allowed segments of people with less purchasing power to access this and many other sports modalities⁹.

This socio-economic movement, known as the "democratisation of sport", has allowed large segments of the population to have access to various sports modalities. The study of this phenomenon is not only focused on the case of sports equipment, but also affects the access to and use of sports facilities, sports varieties, etc. This factor should be

⁹ A number of authors work in great depth on the issue of the democratisation of sport (Rodríguez Díaz et al., 2015).

promoted by public and private organisations, as well as by sport scientists, as it represents an unprecedented social advance.

1.7.- Spring and Autumn, the Preferred Hiking Seasons

Hiking is an activity that can be practised by most of the public. The sports tourism sector is aware of the great potential that exists in hiking as a product and/or service that enhances the tourist experience. For this reason, hiking represents one of the fastest growing tourist activities. There are various characteristics that facilitate or hinder the practice of hiking, among which the conditions of the orography or the weather conditions, among others, stand out.

In our research, we have been able to establish an approximation of which are the most predominant seasons for hiking. Knowledge of this information can help establishments to improve their strengths and counteract their weaknesses. Many establishments seem to agree on a general idea that extreme temperatures in winter and summer are not a factor that attracts hikers.

While spring and autumn temperatures are optimal for hiking. In addition to this variable, it is also necessary to consider the holiday periods of its customers, which will vary depending on where they come from.

According to the informants, within the time ranges, there are specific periods with high demand, such as public holidays and many weekends. As informant E1 comments:

"There is a high demand during the weekend. As I said, our clients are mostly people who work during the week and can get away at the weekend, on bank holidays or long weekends".

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Other informants, such as E3, E6 and E7, made similar comments. The same is true of informant E15, who says that the most popular seasons for hiking are spring and autumn. According to him: "in summer some hikers come, but the weather is more adverse, because of the heat".

At this point it is worth making a nuance, because according to some informants, the most powerful seasons are the summer ones, since "it is the season when school groups visit us, during the months of June and July". This is what informant E8 says, although he specifies that:

"These groups do not come exclusively for hiking, but rather to make use of the sports facilities and so on. The hiking excursions are more like cultural walks and never in the middle of the day".

The conclusions of informant E2, who specialises in school groups, are along the same lines: "As far as the hostel is concerned, we work with groups and the truth is that we have a good demand".

In relation to the above, there is a significantly seasonal demand, which sometimes leads to negative experiences, because of overcrowding and the lack of capacity of the spaces to meet the needs of visitors. As the informant GD2(2) corroborated, "I think we should maintain tourism, because it has revitalised the area, but we should start thinking about strategies to deseasonalise it".

Similar conclusions are drawn by informant GD2(9):

"In my case, I have a fairly small business. The truth is that tourism has helped me to go ahead with this project and we see that there can be a future. The only problem is that everyone comes at the same time and often we are not able to make forecasts with the

products. On some occasions we have not been able to sell what the customers wanted, because they had run out. You can imagine their feelings".

1.8.- The Use of Mobile Applications and the Internet to Manage Bookings

Without a doubt, we are immersed in what is known as the age of technology. There is a wide repertoire of mobile applications, technological tools, software, etc. that try to make people's daily lives easier. In the case of tourism, these tools help in the management of internal processes and promotion, as well as in the booking channel.

In this case, we characterise how these tools have impacted on the management of reservations in rural establishments. There are very different realities that will be conditioned by the capacity of the managers to adapt to these new technologies and, as can be seen, each space is following its own strategies.

Informant E15 is aware of the great impact that these tools have had on the tourism sector, although in his specific case:

"Bookings are basically made over the phone. Maybe 75% of the bookings are made by phone and the rest are made through digital tools. We don't use the web, because basically we don't have a website. We wanted to do it, but in the end we haven't done it, I don't know why. The truth is that I'm not much of a technology person. What we do use a lot is email. And WhatsApp, when we are there. But above all... by phone".

This reflection corroborates what we were just explaining, which is that there is a strong awareness of the benefits of new technologies in destination management. However, the management capacity of these technologies can be a barrier to their introduction, development, and use.

In relation to the above, informant E14 also explains how the predominant form of booking in the establishment she manages is by telephone.

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"We don't have... look, we are two people for everything. Plus, another person who comes to help us at specific times, she works part-time. Well, if there's a lot of work, we don't have time to go on the internet or look at reservations. And then they tell us that they have booked us on the internet and that we haven't answered. I always tell them that I hadn't checked that they should call me and we can talk on the phone. I prefer to talk to people".

According to this informant, the percentage of bookings would be approximately 95% by telephone and the remaining 5% via the Internet, in its different options. In this sense, it can be observed that the use of new technologies may represent a barrier to their introduction, as there is a certain reluctance to use them. In addition to this, the way in which online bookings are managed in this case may generate some dissatisfaction among potential customers.

However, there is a (majority) group of establishments that have decided to use technological tools and applications to manage bookings. This is the case of informant E1, who has been able to observe a great evolution in recent years, where "when I started managing the establishment, everything was done by telephone, whereas nowadays, everything is done online". As he tells us, in his case he uses different tools:

"In our case we use internet portals, like booking, we also do it via WhatsApp, because it's instant messaging. But as I said, nowadays everything works online, I would say that at least 80% of our bookings are made online. I'll still have 20% of the phone, but no, I only use the phone with clients, that is to say, people who repeat that they don't send you any message, they call you directly. Email is usually sent by people who want to come for the first time, but when they are repeat customers throughout the year, they usually use the telephone".

In relation to the above, informant E3 comments that the vast majority of bookings are made through digital tools (approximately 95%), while the remaining 5% are made by telephone. For him:

"Booking has been a very powerful tool to reach out to foreigners and it is a very convenient way to manage bookings. Internet management is key, I registered on different websites about rural destinations and it is having a good impact. Besides, my website is not very developed, so I don't have a good positioning on the internet. The only problem I see in the future is that Booking may raise commissions in the future, as 80% of my internet bookings come through this channel".

In the same line of development are accommodations such as those of the informant E7 or E10, who have seen in these tools an advantage in management and "a great saving in promotion and marketing. Nowadays we can do a lot of promotion through the web without having to make large investments".

Having said all this, we are struck by a trend in the form of bookings that we have been able to observe on several occasions during our work and which is confirmed by informant E9.

"There are clients who call us on the phone wanting to make a reservation and when asked how they found out about us, they tell us that they found us through Booking, but that they didn't want to make a reservation through this channel, as they are aware of the commissions charged".

We have been able to observe how the development and use of technologies in the booking process is very heterogeneous in the different tourist establishments. It all depends on various factors, including: the degree of development of the business, the capacity and interest of the managers, etc. What does seem to be common is that, on the

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one hand, new technologies represent a qualitative leap in the management of these reservations. On the other hand, their use must be carried out with a clear strategy to position the establishment itself with its own resources, not creating a strong dependence on web portals.

Moreover, the idiosyncrasy of the telephone seems to be positioned as an element that favours quality treatment and greater proximity between the establishment and the customer.

The results obtained indicate that there is a great growth in the use of social networks and technological tools in the tourism sector. These results are in line with the proposals contrasted in the scientific literature (Del Vecchio & Passiante, 2017; Li et al., 2020; Trunfio & Della Lucia, 2019).

1.9.- Complementary Activities: Excursions, Cultural Visits, Workshops, etc.

When we talk about complementary activities, we are referring to services and products offered by the establishments in addition to the overnight stay. Traditionally, many rural or mountain areas focused only on offering a place to spend the night, where the visitor had to be self-sufficient with food. This is perhaps the difference between the traditional mountain refuge and what is nowadays known as a tourist establishment.

The development and specialisation of tourism in the world and in Spain brings with it the diversification of the offer of establishments, as well as their specialisation. Along these lines, the vast majority of accommodation establishments also offer guesthouses. Firstly, because it represents a solution to one of the drawbacks that tourists may have. And secondly, because it is a way to generate a greater socio-economic impact. In general terms, we observe that the establishments analysed meet these conditions.

As the tourism sector develops and specialises, new services and products are being introduced in the form of cultural, sporting, and educational activities, etc., and it is here that we focus our analysis. Incorporating this part of the business into establishments, like pensions, means the possibility of generating a greater socio-economic impact, greater recruitment, greater visitor satisfaction, etc.

For this reason, we consider that the study and understanding of this variable represents one of the workhorses of our research. In other words, the introduction of this service offer may represent one of the competitive advantages of the establishments.

A summary of what each of the establishments offers and specialises in can be seen in broad outline. There are some establishments which, due to their own idiosyncrasies (they are not companies), do not specify what they offer. However, it is important to us because they have a more global vision of what the establishments offer and, above all, in the case of the Tourist Offices, what visitors demand.

In the case of picnics, this refers to a very specific type of service that establishments can offer. Hikers have very specific sporting habits: they start their routes in the early hours of the morning and spend the whole day in the mountains, having to take their food with them.

Many hikers prepare their own picnic to take with them. This dynamic can represent a market opportunity for the establishments, in that they can be the ones to prepare the picnics, so that a visitor staying in their establishment would make use of full board, rather than half board. Again, these initiatives increase the average spend per person and make the experience easier for visitors.

In the case of informant E1, he does offer these types of complements, although his specialisation is diverse. While he "dedicates almost all his time to the work involved

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in offering pensions", in the case of activities he does not have such a well-defined product, since, referring to the activities, he comments that:

"Well, I do one-off things. Occasionally we announce something on the website, but I don't announce it as such. But it is true that if a group comes and they don't know what to do and they want to do a route or they prefer to go with a person who knows the route well, I sometimes accompany them. I act as a guide without any financial reward, I volunteer to accompany them. Sometimes I accompany them and tell them a bit about the surroundings. Afterwards, we do have some other activities, which are excursions with 4x4s and hybrid and mountain bikes, at the service of our clients".

In relation to this informant's comments, we could not affirm that there is a very well-defined and professionalised product or service, as the offer is limited to occasional collaborations and without economic perception. The point is that this establishment is a rural house where the owner must do all the tasks, which prevents him from implementing a wide range of activities with the current means.

In relation to the above, informant GD2(5) argues that: "each establishment must exploit its strengths, what we know how to do". In her case, she sells supplies, but for her: "it is of little value that what I sell is very good if there is no integrated offer for customers". The same is said by informant GD2(9): "there is a restaurant, there is a shop, perhaps something related to people's experiences is missing, not just visits to the castle".

This is the line of thought of informant E2, who sees in this type of offer "a way for the visitor to have a greater socio-economic impact on the area". He tells us that:

"We are at an impasse at the moment because we are trying to set dates (for the excursions) and to go on outings. That is our next objective, because at the moment what we are doing is that when a large group comes and asks us to do it, we do it. Or when we

decide to set a specific date and whoever wants to sign up can do so. What we are not doing is that a client who is here for the weekend and there is nothing programmed for that weekend, nor has he/she contracted anything previously, we provide that service. We don't do excursions on the spot. Doing these excursions from today to tomorrow... It's a risk because if not many people come, having organised everything, it's not going to be profitable and we can't take a gamble like that".

The informant's comment is very clear, as there is not such a high turnover of visitors that excursions can be organised without prior reservation. This is one of the most important issues when it comes to diversifying the offer in rural areas, since, while in the very high seasons it could work at specific times, in the rest of the seasons it is very difficult to set up these collaborations. Above all, bearing in mind that for the organisation of these activities, everything must be prepared with qualified personnel and the appropriate services.

Undoubtedly, the human and economic resources available can be a key factor in the implementation of these activities. And the larger size of an establishment can be a determining factor for such a task. In the case of informant E8, we can see that apart from these circumstances of capacity, they have extensive experience in this section of services:

"We, for example, here in Villahermosa, apart from doing our excursions that we have in the surrounding area, we go down to the village, we do, for example, the Barranco de la Hoz, we also integrate ourselves in the village, we go to the village, we do a guided tour of the village, we pass by the bakery and we explain to them the history of the village. Some Sundays we go up to Puertomingalvo, which is also one of the most beautiful medieval villages in Spain. We also explain its history since there are notes. The person in the tourist office helps us. We also go, for example, to the abandoned village nearby, which is part of

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Villahermosa, which is Bibioj, we explain a bit about what they used to do, we go to a reconstruction of an Iberian village. We also talk about San Juan de Peñagolosa, that we are integrated within the massif, Vistabella, Vilafranca, Culla, etc. We are also close to the largest navigable underground river in Europe in the Vall d'Uixó. In other words, we not only focus on the surroundings of our establishment, but we try to integrate all the elements that exist in the area".

In relation to this, the establishment managed by informant E9 has also made a clear commitment to this branch of services. For him, activities are a key factor and he has always been "an advocate of activities as an added value to his product". He tells us that sometimes the debate arises as to which comes first: supply or demand, i.e. establishments offer so that there is demand, or else there is demand and then they offer activities. For him, it is the establishments that have to generate the change and in this sense they are pioneers in the offer of mountain biking. As he points out:

"For us now, for example, we've just gone into electric bikes, we've created a company. Well, it is part of our business portfolio, but we have managed it this way because of insurance issues and so on. We have opted for the electric bike because we see that it is the way to reach more customers, given the orography we have here. And the truth is that there is a lot of demand for it. We are happy".

For informant GD2(4) the supply of activities is also a key factor in the development of the tourist destination:

"From the town council we try to promote and create new tourist products and services, such as activities, guided tours, etc. You have seen the numbers of visitors and we are doing a good job. Alongside this, we need to motivate young people to set up small businesses and take risks. There can be work, but we need more initiatives".

The diversification and business strategies of informant E13 are also very similar, although in his case, the path is a bit different, in that he first created the activity company and then decided to generate more value by offering overnight stays and pensions. As he tells us:

"Yes, yes, no. We started the project in 2013. At that time, the house/refuge of El Boixar already existed, it was one of the pioneers of rural tourism in La Tinença. The owners, as they had been managing it for years, wanted to... they had the opportunity to transfer the business to us and for us to add accommodation and half board to the route. And to manage from here a sort of base camp or office for all the activities of 7 Pobles. And the truth is that, from the beginning until now, both things have gone very well for us".

The example of this entrepreneur is very special as he tells us that before creating his tourist product and diversifying his offer, he had to do a lot of hard work trying to create synergies with different establishments. What he did was to meet with the different businessmen from the different villages that make up the current route to tell them about his project and generate value to his proposal. At present, he has a fantastic relationship with them, even though they are his competitors in the restaurant business. Although, according to him, "more than competitors, we are all necessary to consolidate ourselves as a destination, to provide a quality service to our customers".

This only corroborates the importance of diversifying the offer of the establishments to consolidate the destination. We have been able to observe that many other establishments have not yet opted for this line for various reasons, including lack of training or lack of resources. In either case, there are various ways of incorporating these services into the offer of the establishments and they do not necessarily involve their own resources.

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In this sense, we think that perhaps the creation of companies specialised in the sector of sports, cultural activities, etc. should be promoted, as is the case of Itinerantur¹⁰, whose headquarters are in Benicàssim, but whose field of action reaches this region.

Although uneven development has been detected in the study region among the different accommodations, there is a strong awareness of the importance of providing products and services that complement the existing offer. Some of them, such as sports activities, are positioned as an element that provides quality accommodation (Duglio & Beltramo, 2017; Gammon, 2011; Ramshaw, 2014).

1.10.- Hiking Has a Positive Socio-Economic Impact on Mountain Regions

It is evident that sports tourism and hiking represent an economic engine in the area that has a certain impact. In this way, the synergy between all the variables analysed leads us to try to find a solution to the object of this doctoral thesis: Does hiking (and sports tourism) represent a tool for generating a socio-economic impact that helps to combat depopulation? This question involves great difficulties that will be dealt with later in the conclusions. However, it seems that many informants do see this market segment as an opportunity that has brought great changes and benefits to the region.

For informant GD2(1), tourism is representing an element that helps to economically dynamize the area. According to her opinion:

"Thanks to that you can live here. Now there are people and that's a joy. The shops have more product and it seems that little by little the local population is becoming more animated. I think there is still a lot of work to do, because tourism is very concentrated and sometimes we are not able to channel all the tourist flow with our facilities. I think

¹⁰ <https://itinerantur.com/>

we have to plan tourism and where we want to go. We have to maintain it (tourism), yes, but see how we can do it so that there is a constant flow”.

According to informant E2 there is an important economic impact, because:

"This flow of people makes money move in the town. They go to the bakery, they go to buy vegetables, they are spending and thanks to that the economy is moving".

For informant GD2(8), tourism has evidently been an element of dynamization in the region, although there are some nuances that should be considered. As she indicates:

"Every weekend of the season we have a lot of work, but sometimes there are people who don't eat, due to a question of capacity. I think we should open more restaurants in the village".

Interaction between all entrepreneurs is essential to achieve real socio-economic impact. One of the most important aspects is for entrepreneurs to understand that if one wins, everyone wins. The promotion of consumption in local businesses must be based on reciprocity and benefit for the whole. In relation to the above, informant GD2(6) argues that:

"A working group or commission or committee should be set up to bring together the interests of all entrepreneurs. In my case, I could perfectly link the sale of local products to other establishments and businesses. And this adds up and gives a positive image for all of us".

In the same vein are the conclusions of informant E1, who comments that this type of tourism has been fundamental in revitalising the area:

"Yes, yes, fundamental, fundamental, in the villages of these characteristics if it weren't for this, for the boom, if it weren't for the evolution and the large number of people who are now doing rural tourism. Rural tourism is where... where we could include the issue

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of hiking. If it weren't for that, many businesses would have closed by now, in fact, the vast majority of businesses that we are talking about, hotels, accommodation, restaurants, bakeries, shops, grocery shops, if it weren't for the people who come here at weekends, very few people live here during the week. They live thanks to the fact that at the weekend there is a large influx of people, they consume in the bakery, in the shops, in the restaurants, in the lodgings, etc. And if it were not for this, there would still be much more depopulation. If rural tourism did not exist, all the inland villages would be abandoned. Many of us survive, as in Vistabella, we survive thanks to this".

For informant GD1(11), the tourist promotion by the town council and the brand "the most beautiful villages in Spain" have been key. As she points out:

"There are some things that have been done by the town council that have increased the number of visitors. Now, at least, there are some businesses that are doing quite well and that helps the town's economy a lot. Let's hope it continues like this".

This growth in the number of visitors is precisely what has motivated informant GD1(9) to become an entrepreneur in the rural world. In her case:

"We were dedicated to the production of honey, and we had other livelihoods. When we experienced the increase in the number of visitors to Culla, we decided to adapt one of the family's farmhouses as a rural house. This is another complement to the family economy. Even so, we know that many visitors find it difficult at times to find accommodation. The demand is very condensed at specific times. You know, when it's a holiday for everyone".

Undoubtedly, rural tourism and hiking are helping to slow down this process of depopulation and to generate a socio-economic impact. However, we are particularly struck by an idea that the informant comments on the impact during the weekends, to the detriment of the week. Undoubtedly, the deseasonalisation of demand represents one of

the main objectives of these establishments. It is essential to design specific strategies to reach specific audiences: international, senior citizens, etc.

For informant E8, it seems that the impact that hiking is having as a fundamental activity that helps to improve the local economy is also clear, as in his opinion:

"Yes, I think so too. More and more people are practising hiking and these people really come to the mountain, stay for lunch in a bar up here and spend the day. This logically generates work and work generates jobs and obviously it is going to be noticed. It is going to be noticed, it is being seen".

For informant GD1(4), the increase in demand for nature activities has also benefited him. In his case, he has been able to observe "how every year there is a certain growing trend in the sale of sports equipment".

Without a doubt, hiking is one of the sporting activities linked to tourism that is having the greatest impact at international level. For informant E18, a manager at the federative level, hiking is very important:

"Logically. It gives a lot of dynamism to the rural environment, for example. The fact that hiking is practised in inland areas, well, it does a lot to boost activity in the economy of inland villages. As I was saying, for example, thanks to a trail, a village in the Serranía will have almost 100 people this Sunday. So in the same way, in other words, we have to promote the GR7 as a long-distance route, giving it the importance it has and as the route that it is, that's what it is. Just like the GR10, which passes through very small towns, the thing is, of course, that these towns must continue to have inhabitants and be able to offer their products".

In the same vein are the comments of informant E10, who highlights that apart from hiking there are other activities that also have a very positive impact:

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"Yes, yes. It's a way of bringing this to life. I think adventure tourism that includes hiking, cycling, mountaineering... everything that is adventure tourism, goes together with this area and with the rural areas, hand in hand. Because if people don't have that... What do they come here for? To spend the weekend sleeping in a room? To go and see the church? And you see the church and that's it. On the other hand, I think that adventure tourism, which encompasses all of this, within hiking, is an important factor for this to have and continue to have life".

In relation to the above, informant GD1(7) reflects on the importance of diversifying the offer of activities in order to capture different market segments. For him:

"When we make decisions in the town council about which aspects to dynamise, we always try to do so based on accurate data about what people are most interested in and, of course, trying to get advice from the local population. In the case of Culla we have several very interesting architectural elements, but there are also other intangible elements such as the pilgrimage that can be very interesting from an experiential point of view".

This idea also attracts our attention as it is important that there should be a diversified offer of activities including sporting activities such as hiking, cycling, adventure sports, cultural activities, gastronomic activities, etc.

In addition to these activities, informants also refer to other types of activities that are interesting for the dynamization of the local economy. On the one hand, the area has a long tradition and links with hunting, which attracts a public with a high purchasing power. On the other hand, mycology is another important activity, both as a one-day activity and as a tourist proposal and experience of more than one day. The results obtained are similar to those shared in other case studies across the international sphere (Higham & Hinch, 2018; Mykletun, 2018; Reimann et al., 2011).

2.- The Key Elements in the Offer of Hiking Accommodation: a Qualitative View of the Different Interest Groups

The four key elements or pull factors highlighted in their research have been identified and analysed in the various interviews conducted (Bourdeau et al., 2002; Buning & Gibson, 2016; Hallmann et al., 2010; Klapanidou & Gibson, 2010). In the following paragraphs, we will observe how they influence each other and how they are exploited by the different stakeholders according to the reality of each one of them.

2.1.- Accessibility to Localisation

The accessibility to the location is a fundamental factor for the development of socioeconomic activity, among which sports tourism can be highlighted. Marco and Soriano (2020) have been able to verify in their research that there is a direct link between depopulation and the decrease in public transport services, this factor reveals one of the possible strategies or lines of action to reverse this process.

It is considered essential to carry out an analysis of the information provided by the different informants, since on many occasions the conclusions obtained come from the opinions of individuals and have not been focused adopting an overall vision.

The global analysis of the data collected shows that accessibility is a key factor for socioeconomic development and the competitiveness of hiking accommodation.

As the informant E1 indicates regarding the population of Morella, it has an advantage over the others.

“Well, Morella is the inland town or city of the Valencian Community. It has many visitors, many businesses. It also has a main road and it has a lot of traffic.”

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It is evident that the access roads must meet a minimum quantity and quality for the proper territorial structure of the area. We have found areas on the northern slope where there is only one access and this was very precarious, which represents a disadvantage compared to other hiker accommodation establishments. As the informant E15 shows:

“Look, now... this past week we have had it, the paved rural road that goes from Vallibona to Rosell is a section that is in very bad condition. Of course, the ownership is municipal, so the mayor, who is very competent, has turned Vallibona around, since he has been in office for 4 terms. And in the end, the Provincial Council has obtained the money to pave the section”.

This initiative, in collaboration with public administrations, has allowed "increasing the flow of arrivals of people, either to come to our establishment or to go to other places further inland" (E15).

For the informant GD1(5), connections and accessibility are fundamental. For him, although its population has good connections, "structuring destiny in general must be a priority for administrations."

Another of the informants (E14) also values the initiatives that start from the administration to improve communication routes as a key element for accessibility to the area.

“But it will be where there is more population, more industry, more taxes... there it may be, but here we are more than 4... well, very little population, no industry, none at all. Well, they have fixed the road for us, they have made a huge investment there that favors us a lot, communications are important. Before, a bus could hardly pass over those

bridges, it had to maneuver because it wouldn't pass, they were narrow and now it looks like a highway”.

To better understand the opinions of these informants, it is necessary to contextualize the geographical space. Both have their establishments in Vallibona and La Puebla de Benifassà, two very small towns whose accesses are the most complex in the entire area studied. Despite this, as indicated by the informants, it should be valued that in recent years investments have been made to improve said accesses.

For the informant GD1(8) infrastructures are fundamental. One of the priorities of his work in the local corporation of Culla:

“It has been getting the regional, regional, and national administrations to help us improve the infrastructure in the area. We are aware that good access is key for visitors to see an appeal in us”.

In relation to the above, the informant GD1(10) defends the management carried out by the city council with regard to the facilities. Nevertheless:

"There is still a lot of work to be done, since some weekends the demand is very high and many times the population is not able to meet parking needs, for example”.

Sometimes the administration is a little less agile in correcting the accessibility of the establishments. This forces the private initiative to make small investments to improve the attractiveness of their business. As the E3 informant comments:

“The rural house is near a river and when it rains a lot the river erodes. We made a path; the town hall authorized me to walk the path through our farm and the truth is that the town hall has made things much easier for us. But now there are holes in the door and I'm still waiting to fix it. The other day some customers were blocked with the car and could not get out. And of course, what feeling do you think customers will have?”

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As is evident, poor accessibility conditions directly and negatively affect the tourist and the expectations previously placed in the establishment or accommodation. As the informant GD2(6) indicates: "The road to Culla is now relatively good. However, there may be a lack of facilities to accommodate all those who come by (by car), such as a car park".

There is another current of opinion that sees improving mobility as a threat that can lead to the loss of competitiveness of inland establishments compared to those on the coast. As reported by informant E12, "if before it took 45 minutes to get to the coast, now it will take just over half an hour." This can encourage inland destinations with good access to be spaces for one-day visits and overnight stays are discouraged.

Along the same lines, informant E2 expresses himself that, characterizing a large number of people who visit the area, he states that "some are large groups of hikers and other visitors who are in the coastal area and come to spend the day in the interior." This informant has his establishment in the town of Vilafranca del Cid, which together with Morella are the two towns with the best access roads. However, the ideas that this inland tourism businessman brings us are of great interest to us, because he proposes a strategy in the face of this threat.

"A specific package should be created that manages to attract tourists for at least a couple of days, do things around here, visit things they don't know and that the interior can be an alternative to the overcrowding that the coast suffers."

This strategy can represent an opportunity to capture the attention of new tourists and, above all, enhance the attractiveness of hiking establishments.

2.2.- Accommodation Options Available

As highlighted Hallmann et al. (2010) the accommodation offer is a fundamental factor within the framework of sports tourism. A specific area with a well-defined sports product, whether in the form of a sporting event or a typical hiking trail, will have little success if it is not accompanied by the accommodation offer necessary to cover the demand generated. Another key factor is the variety in the types of accommodation to cover different customer segments, as well as the quality of the services.

The offer of accommodation available in the area is very varied. The city of Morella represents the space with the greatest quantity and quality of accommodation available, many of which offer hiking products. As well indicated by the informant E11 who works in a municipal company for the management and sale of rural accommodation.

“We have been working for many years. Ours in Roset were one of the first houses in the Valencian Community to register as tourism, which is more than 25 years old. At present, the supply has increased a lot because there was a lot of demand. Another thing that we have greatly improved is the degree of specialization. Obviously, a lot has been invested in rural tourism”.

The specialization factor refers to sales and reservation processes, the services of the establishments themselves and the post-monitoring that is carried out to retain tourists.

Another of the populations with a relatively wide offer is Vilafranca del Cid, which has several hotels, rural houses, a campsite, etc. The informant E2 tells us that when they started their hostel at the end of the 90's there were few offers. However, "from that time until now there are 60 places in the hostel and about 100 more places among all the rural houses." It also highlights the great variety of offer that exists capable of reaching many customer segments.

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Informant E6, regarding the campsite located in the same town, tells us how on one occasion "we were able to accommodate 600 campers in a large event that was held in the area." Although in his opinion the camping project is "totally disproportionate because they have only managed to fill it that time". In this sense, the camping sector also represents a very important sector in terms of number of visitors. As the informant GD2(3) indicates:

“As a result of the pandemic we have seen the demand for camping grow. If you want to buy a motorhome or a camper van now it is very difficult, prices have risen a lot and there are none. That responds to the high demand. I think that the issue of motorhomes should be valued”.

Another of the informants (E15) believes that the accommodation offer is generally attractive. He tells us that: “a few months ago there was the council hostel, another hostel run by some young people, plus our establishment”. Without a doubt, three accommodations in a town with less than 100 inhabitants is a very attractive offer.

On the other hand, we find that the vast majority of the remaining towns have very little or no accommodation offer, which is a great disadvantage both for these towns and for the area to consolidate itself as a hiking tourism destination.

There are multiple factors that make the supply very small in many locations. We have been able to identify some: on the one hand, the geographical, weather and leisure conditions, among others, generate little attraction for starting up new establishments. In the words of the informant E15 “some young people came with great enthusiasm and started the shelter. They have only lasted 1 year.

On the other hand, many towns have an offer only of rural houses, as is the case of Culla. This typology does not offer complementary services such as meals, a factor

that makes it difficult for them to be integrated into a hiking product. As indicated by informant E9.

“It is very difficult to create a hiking product as it exists on the Camino de Santiago, on the Vía de la Plata or to go no further in La Matarraña. In these spaces there is a huge offer of accommodation”.

Regarding Culla, the informant GD2(7) also highlights "the need to expand both the accommodation offer and the restaurant offer". The informant GD1(1) also highlights the deficit that exists in accommodation in the town of Culla. For her, although as a result of the visitor boom the offer has been increasing, they are still not able to satisfy the demand.

“Culla has grown a bit due to the high demand. I remember some years ago that it was difficult to see so many visitors. Since the increase in the influx, some residents have been rehabilitating their farmhouses and others, but it is a pity that there is no hotel, as in other towns. The lack of supply sometimes creates a problem for us”.

The conclusions of informant GD1(10) are very similar. For this neighbor of Culla, the tourist influx they are having could be exploited much more:

“Although sometimes the neighbors complain about tourism and overcrowding, we are aware that this can help keep people in the town, generate new businesses. It is a pity that there is not more offer, but many of us are already old people and we are not old enough to set up businesses. We should persuade young people to take up this.”

This influx of tourists is having a certain impact on the area, as the local population is seeing a business opportunity. As reported by informant GD2(3): "they are going to open a rural tourism house in Benassal". Which means that the flow of tourists from Culla is also having a positive impact on the desire to undertake new projects.

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Even so, there is a deficit in the quantity and variety of accommodation. Despite this deficit in the accommodation offer, there are some strategies that are being copied from other consolidated models to improve the offer in the area. As well indicated by the informant GD1(7).

“La Matarranya is passing us at an impressive speed. Large investments are made in quality hotels, four and five stars, reconstructed farmhouses, etc. And in the vast majority of towns there are several accommodations”.

La Matarranya is a region located to the north of our study area that is currently establishing itself as one of the most visited spaces on the national scene.

Without a doubt, this overview can be a key factor in consolidating a destination. Another of the informants (E10), a hotel worker in a small town, tells us that:

“The advantage of this hotel is that it has an account (collaboration) with another hotel that is in Portell. It has a smaller hotel in Portell and belongs to a group of hotels, which is another in Morella, the Cardenal Ram. So, between the three of us, if, for example, there is a room that is not available in one, you pass it on to the other”.

Another of the informants, the first thing he did was create a sports product. So "I went to the different accommodations in the different towns and told them that I was going to do this journey and that I needed their help to provide accommodation for my clients". Subsequently, they have taken over the management of a house/refuge in El Boixar, which adds quality to their product.

Something similar is done in the hotel of the informant E9 who tells us how "we have created a company to offer bike tours." With the aim of correcting this deficit of accommodation in other towns "what we offer is the transport and collection service".

Accommodation and overnight stay are presented as key elements. For the informant GD2(8): “after 5 in the afternoon there is no one in Culla. This means that there is a demand for visitors, but that it is not taking full advantage of its potential. In this sense, for the informant GD2(5): "we must push together to create more facilities, both from the city council and administrations, as well as from the private initiative."

Therefore, all these initiatives that are being carried out by the different accommodations at a private level link perfectly with the analysis carried out on the third of the key factors in the tourist and sports attractiveness of the establishments, entertainment.

2.3.- The Quality and Quantity of Entertainment

Undoubtedly, the entertainment offer is becoming a determining factor in improving the attractiveness of different tourist accommodations, whether for sports practice, participation in events, hiking tours or cultural visits, to mention a few examples (Buning & Gibson, 2016; Filo et al., 2011; J. E. S. Higham & Hinch, 2018; Hinch & Higham, 2001; Ramshaw, 2014; Van Rheenen et al., 2017).

We have been able to see that there is a wide range of entertainment on offer, both in terms of quantity and quality of the activities themselves. One of the most noteworthy aspects has been to observe how each accommodation has generated and adapted its offer based on two criteria. First, the natural, cultural, gastronomic, etc. characteristics of the environment. And secondly, the experiences of each one.

For informant GD1(2), a member of the local Tourism Association, the range of activities on offer is key. For him:

"The establishments must have an offer of sporting, cultural and gastronomic activities. The experiences we provide represent a competitive advantage over other destinations.

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From the association we try to promote the creation of these experiences, but we are also aware of the limited capacity we have".

In relation to this, there are some who have decided to take risks in this area. For example, informant E15 tells us how "a guy from the Aragon part of the region is involved in organising tours with foreign people from England and Germany". In addition, he explains that there are several itineraries that are being used for the development of this type of tours, such as the GR7, the Camino de Conquista or the Ruta del Cid.

He also gives another example of a product aimed at cyclists that is working very well.

"There is the Pedals dels Ports¹¹. All of this together means that there is an attraction for the area, for travelling around it. Because, for example, there are routes that are not only in the region of Els Ports, but also in Maestrazgo, that enter through Teruel, Castellón, etc."

It seems that the product/service that generates most interest is the offer of multi-day packages where the tourist can follow itineraries either as a hiker or as a cyclist.

Informant E9, owner of a hotel in Cinctorres, also shares with us how they initially wanted to launch an ambitious hiking offer but demand made them opt for cycling through the offer of electric bike tours.

"We were one of the promoters of the GR-331 and the denomination of -Els Ports És Senderisme-, but at the moment the demand for cycling has shot up and hiking is on the back burner".

In relation to the above, the demand for cycling as a tourist activity is very interesting. Informant GD2(1) rightly points out:

¹¹ <https://www.pedalesdelmundo.com/es/rutas/pedales-de-los-ports>

"You seem to be focusing on hiking as the most important activity, but experience and visitors are demanding cycling-related activities. For example, electric bicycles are very fashionable and there is a large public that wants to go on excursions around the region with an electric bicycle because it allows them to discover new areas, which without the electric motor they would not be able to visit. At the end of the day, I think we have to offer a diverse offer. Look, for example, families love the village tours. There are many other people who come interested in gastronomy".

Very close to the area of informant E15 is the Tinença de Benifassà, where informant E13 started the 7 Pobles route. He tells us that.

"Some colleagues from Beceite have created a hiking product aimed at Belgians and Dutch people. They leave from Beceite, do several stages, spend two nights in La Tinença and finish their trip in Morella".

A similar product is offered by informant E13 with the Ruta de Los 7 Pueblos, which, as its name suggests, is a route that passes through different villages in La Tinença de Benifassà and can be covered both by bike and on foot.

As the informant GD1(6) shares with us: "sometimes there are scheduled excursions along the GR-331". Undoubtedly, this type of initiative is very interesting as it helps to generate interest and content for the tourist destination.

In the same way, during the registration process, the management company of rural houses in Morella (informant E11) offers the possibility of organising hiking itineraries.

"One of the most popular activities, apart from cultural visits, is hiking. Hiking routes start from any of our houses. These are usually very popular with people who have dogs".

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Another informant (E8) tells us how "they offer rural tourism as a family, at around 10 o'clock in the morning every day they go on an excursion/walk with the whole family". In addition, they also do other types of hiking excursions linked to heritage and historical aspects.

As a complement to the hiking activities, they also offer an extensive entertainment programme for children: archery, ping-pong, mini-golf, basketball, etc. and all of this "is included in the price that our clients pay for coming".

Another informant (E4), tells us that in his area there are several itineraries that are of interest to numerous groups coming from nearby towns in the province of Valencia, Castellón and Tarragona.

"There is a circular route that goes through the Pont de la Rambla, through the Paraje Natural Municipal Rambla de Celumbres and back to here. And there is another, which is the pilgrimage route that leaves them here and picks them up in Castellfort".

Informant E1 has also opted to offer activities focused on family hiking as a complement to his accommodation offer. He tells us that: "the main client who decides to visit them is the hiker. Families who come with their young children to go hiking".

There are other establishments that are taking advantage of the heritage to enhance the value of the different activities they carry out. Informant E2 explains that they also "usually do some hiking excursions, but they also offer other types of cultural, gastronomic, educational activities, etc.". As he shares with us:

"Vilafranca del Cid has positioned itself especially on the subject of the dry-stone landscape. In Vilafranca there is a spectacular dry-stone landscape, a Dry Stone Museum has been created, itineraries have been created, congresses and conferences are held, etc.".

For informant GD1(3) dry stone is also one of the values he tries to link to his accommodation product. As he tells us:

"Although I am not a specialist in heritage or in providing tours to my clients, I do try to provide information to clients so that they can visit the area".

This area is so important that even in the town of Morella, informant E12 tells us that "we always explain that Vilafranca is a very special place to visit because of its extensive dry-stone landscape". Along the same lines are the recommendations of informant E15, who recommends his clients to visit the Vilafranca area to observe "one of the wonders of the area, the dry stone, which is currently considered a World Heritage Site".

Another of the resources that are being used as an attraction are the cave paintings which, in the words of informant E4, "some tourist products are being created where professional guides interpret and explain the meaning of the figures".

As mentioned above, each establishment uses the resources at its disposal and the knowledge it has acquired, and it has been possible to observe the offer of activities related to customs, traditions and the ecological and environmental movement.

In the words of informant E14, there are accommodations that focus their activity on the production of natural products: "they have organic chickens, vegetable garden, bees, sheep, etc. and produce their own bread".

Along the same lines, informant E13 has made a virtue of sport and care for the environment, and on several occasions throughout the year: "we do a day of plogging, which consists of hiking while collecting waste".

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Something similar happens in the hostel of informant E2, who shares with us that "the origin of his hostel has a vocation for environmental education", so that they work with both children and adults on environmental education.

Others have seen gastronomy as an opportunity to enhance their attractiveness and, as informant E5 tells us: "we try to promote local products: chorizos, hams, truffles, etc.". Although the entertainment offer as such is already a bit far away, because: "in a few years we are going to retire and our children don't want to take over the business".

For informant GD1(11), gastronomy is a very interesting attraction for visitors. As she tells us:

"In the restaurants in the area, what we offer is the jack, the horse and the king. We offer what we know how to cook and it is also local cuisine. The truth is that visitors have a very good experience with the gastronomic theme".

In general terms, there are very few accommodations that, like informant E5, do not offer activities. Of those we were able to interview, informant E7 commented that "we don't need to do activities because we already have a lot of work to do". A similar comment was made by informant E6, who said that he had focused all his efforts on the gastronomic side of his accommodation, ignoring the issue of entertainment.

Informant E17 also defends the importance of creating experiences within the framework of sports tourism. In his case, hiking is one of the most versatile areas. As he indicates:

"Well, if we talk about hiking, I think it is interesting not only to get to know the rural environment where these trails are normally located, but also to try to develop something to go along with these sporting activities. I think that at the level of rural areas, new gastronomic establishments, restaurants, accommodation, etc. are being opened. So, well,

at this level, it is important to get people to discover the interior, which is where these trails are normally located. I can talk a little about the case of Malaga, for example, which has, through an action of the Malaga Provincial Council itself, developed a trail called the coastal trail that covers the entire province along the coast, from Manilva to the province of Granada".

In relation to the above, it is also very interesting to note the role played by mountain sports federations in the training of their trail technicians, who may well play the role of guide-specialists in helping to generate value for mountain establishments. As informant E16:

"Yes, there is a module called interpretation, which explains the general theory of interpretation and explains what the intention is. A person who walks if they see a natural space, an element... the idea is to create an empathic link between that person through interpretation and the element, so that when that person arrives home and has knowledge that if, for example, it is an environmental element that is in danger, having known it with their feet is the best motivation for that person to mobilise in its defence. TV documentaries are all very well, but if you watch and they explain to you that, if migratory birds pass here, and see that there is water underneath, etc., you see it and you understand it".

It is considered that the range of accommodation in the area under study has a wide range of entertainment on offer, covering all types of activities. Undoubtedly, there are many conditions for the Maestrazgo area to become an even more competitive destination.

2.4.- An Undiscovered Territory

According to Klapanidou and Gibson (2010), the novelty effect is one of the main attractions of tourist environments. An unfamiliar place always generates curiosity in

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potential tourists to get to know it. Moreover, the novelty factor also encompasses the products and services offered by the accommodation. We have already seen in previous sections how the use of the plogging activity can generate interest in a specific segment.

The novelty factor has been identified in the area as one of the most powerful assets. This lack of knowledge of the geographical area is being taken advantage of by different types of accommodation in a totally intentional manner. As informant E15 comments on the Tinença de Benifassà area.

"This is what people are discovering now. An area that is little known and little exploited. In terms of mountain tourism, people are discovering an area where there is a very personalised service. In fact, many national tourists who come here for cycling reasons value us in comparison with other more overcrowded areas".

Another informant (E13), who also works in the Tinença de Benifassà, values the area from a natural point of view and for its lack of overcrowding. In his opinion, these factors mean that "a lot of people are coming here who have already travelled all over the Pyrenees and are tired of living in the mountains with so many people". This novelty factor makes the destination attractive.

However, he believes that excessive overcrowding could mean that the Tinença could lose its current value: "we could lose the essence of this place, as many people come here in search of solitude". He also talks about the concept of sustainable growth as a fundamental factor in maintaining the attractiveness of the area.

Along the same lines, informant E14 tells us that on numerous occasions "there have been people, cases, who have come here and told me: Where do I have to go to La Tinença? Being already at the same destination. This factor shows that it is a very little known area, but at the same time that there is a lack of communication policies to be able

to reach customers. Policies and strategies that, in the informant's opinion, are scarce or non-existent, to the detriment of other areas. As she tells us.

"Here Morella and Peñíscola have been promoted a lot and we are right in the middle and as if we didn't exist, never, la Tinença, nothing at all".

As a counterpart to this particular area, there are other inland towns that are better known, such as Morella, Culla, Vilafranca del Cid or Villahermosa del Río, to mention a few. Informant E8 comments that rural tourism is gaining followers and that "interest in nature, the environment and ecology are attractive to this type of public".

Informant GD2(1) also refers to the interest generated by the destination, to the existing complementarity between rural and urban. As she indicates:

"The town of Culla is positioning itself as a reference point for rural tourism. Morella is undoubtedly the pioneer, but the smaller towns are making a name for themselves. I think the key lies in the combination of urban attraction and nature. In the particular case of this town we have a very attractive old town, as well as special natural areas. The combination of both can be a key factor".

As for the novelty factor, one of the reasons that has put the town of Culla on the map above all is that:

"Four towns in Castellón have been named "most beautiful towns in Spain" and this has put the province of Castellón and the interior of the province on the map".

Regarding the novelty factor, another attraction strategy could be to position the lodgings with specific aspects of their characteristics. For example, informant E6 comments that one of the options for differentiation could be "to make cabins with bio-construction criteria in order to reach a very specific segment of clients".

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In this sense, for informant E18 there is a kind of relationship between hiking and the human need to be in and experience natural spaces. As he indicates:

"Yes, it's one of our strong points, I think because of the people who make up the new federation and it's something important that has always been a little neglected. Hiking is not competitive, there used to be regular walks years ago, and now there are again. But I really believe that hiking is not competitive, it is more a discovery of the territory, it is man's desire to walk and discover the places where he goes".

In any case, the novelty factor depends on other factors, including communication strategies and the approach to the promotion of the tourist destination. It is not the same to talk only about Beceite as it is to talk about Beceite as a town integrated in the area of La Matarraña; nor is it the same to talk about Cincorres as it is to talk about Cincorres as a town integrated in Maestrazgo/Els Ports.

3.- Tangible and Intangible Heritage: Analysis and Use of Heritage Elements in the Field of Tourism

The information obtained from the informants belonging to the different interest groups seems to indicate that there is an extensive catalogue of heritage resources of various kinds in the area studied. This factor generates a great competitive advantage for the purpose of proposing a quality offer, as reported in the scientific literature (Foo & Krishnapillai, 2019; Frey & Steiner, 2011; Timothy, 2011). The fact that many of these informants are local people means that they know a great deal of information about these elements in detail. What does not seem so evident is that there is an integrated strategy for the promotion and use of heritage in tourism, among other aspects because the state of development of the tourism sector in the area is in a phase of growth.

Despite this, there do exist individual strategies or small collectives that try to use heritage as a tool for the improvement of the tourist experience of their clients. The most notable heritage elements in the study area and their interactions with the various stakeholders are developed below.

3.1.- The Art of Dry-Stone Construction, Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity by UNESCO

The art of dry-stone construction refers to the set of material elements built with this technique in countries such as Spain, Greece, Cyprus, France, Croatia, Slovenia, Italy, and Switzerland, among others. This construction technique is associated above all with the transhumant movement, which needed a series of elements to carry out its work. Roads flanked by walls, shepherd's huts and other elements can be found today in many rural landscapes in European countries. In 2018, UNESCO declared this age-old construction technique as Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.

According to informants, the heritage associated with dry-stone construction is one of the most characteristic elements of the area. Many of our informants use this heritage resource as a tool to enhance the tourist experience of their clients. Or at least, they recommend visiting it, depending on the role it plays and its proximity to the areas.

There are some towns that have seen in dry-stone an opportunity to give content to the tourist experience of customers. One of the towns with the largest repertoire of dry-stone is Vilafranca del Cid. According to informant E2:

"Vilafranca has positioned itself especially on the subject of the dry-stone landscape. There is a spectacular dry-stone landscape, a Museum of Dry Stone has been created, and itineraries have been created based on this theme".

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This has generated a growing sense of interest among the various stakeholders, who see dry-stone as an opportunity to increase the quality of their tourism services and thus increase the socio-economic impact of tourism in the area. The same informant adds that there are more and more common strategies for action in this area.

"The museum, the itineraries, the congresses, the talks... the different things that we have been organising in relation to dry stone have allowed this element to be valued, that there are people (local people) who decide to conserve these elements. As it has more and more repercussions and has been declared intangible heritage by UNESCO, interest is growing".

In the same line are the strategies carried out by informant E4. This owner of a rural house in the same village thinks that it is interesting to promote services linked to dry stone. He tells us that he intends to: "set up a route that is visible, that is close to the village". A route whose main theme is dry stone.

For informant E1, the heritage associated with dry-stone is an opportunity that enhances the experience of his customers: "Some clients ask me and as I know about heritage and dry-stone, I give them some talks and tell them some curiosities". Something like what informant E5 does, who always urges his clients to: "look at the environment where they are", because they can easily identify the dry-stone elements. This manager also promotes different excursions along the paths in his area.

Informant E8 also highlights the large amount of heritage associated with dry stone in his area, located a little further south of Vilafranca.

"There are many dry stone elements here. You can see them in the terraces, in the shepherd's huts. There is a lot here. But there is a lot, also in Puertomingalvo, in the

Maestrazgo area, etc. There are farmhouses (typical traditional house made of dry stone), mountain shelters for shepherds, etc."

In many other towns further north of Vilafranca, there are also some elements associated with this art, however, the interest groups themselves share with the tourists that the area with the greatest number of dry stone elements is in the Vilafranca area.

In relation to the above, informant E11 tells tourists visiting the Tourist Office in the town of Morella that: "the area of Forcall, Mirambel, Cantavieja, La Iglesuela, etc. is very interesting because of the large number of dry-stone elements that can be found".

For informant E13, the area has a very rich heritage that needs to be enhanced. He tells us that: "there is a very great material heritage, which we are trying to promote (in terms of tourism)". In fact, at the time of the interview, he is trying to organise a training course on dry stone in his village, El Boixar.

Informant E15 is also aware of the value of the heritage of his territory and uses it as a competitive advantage in terms of tourism. He comments that:

"We send people to Vilafranca, which is where the most powerful dry-stone walls are. Of course, here in Vallibona, there are a few dry-stone walls and very few shepherd's houses. The few that exist have either fallen down or are in poor condition because they have not been restored. That is why we send them to Vilafranca. In addition, they also have a Museum of Dry Stone, where they do a lot of activities".

Undoubtedly, there is a very powerful movement that seeks to promote one of the most important heritage elements of the area within the context of tourism, in its different modalities: rural, heritage, natural.

3.2.- Architectural Heritage: the Tinença de Benifassà Region, the Strategic Enclave of Morella and the Border Town of La Iglesuela

In many of the cities there are many architectural heritage elements that mark the characteristics of the period and are of course a differentiating element of the tourist experience today. Informant E13 shares with us that in this area there is a wide repertoire of architectural resources dating from the time of the Christian Reconquest.

"Well, we are talking about the Monastery, about the remains of Benifassà Castle. There are some remains of the Castle of Benifassà and then there was the Senovi, where the first monks were, before building the Monastery down in the valley, among others, Jaime I. There is also the Chapel of San Cristóbal, of Romanesque origin and one of the oldest in Valencia".

The town with the greatest architectural heritage is the city of Morella. This city represents a strategic enclave in the passage from the interior of Spain to the coast and in the different periods of history it has been coveted by the different kings for its strategic character. Nowadays, Morella has this historical character, but at the same time it is a new one. It is still a city where you can experience the passing of the centuries, but adapted to the tourist needs of visitors. For the informant E12 Morella is an impressive city:

"It is a completely walled town, as you can see, from the 13th-14th century. The structure inside the town is still the medieval structure, with narrow, one-way streets. There is no parking and, if you have noticed, there are not many buildings outside the walled area either. When the tourist arrives, the history is explained to him, its medieval character, the military fortress and the castle attract a lot of attention".

In this sense, informant E5 corroborates the weight that Morella has from a heritage point of view compared to other towns: "Morella has a castle, it has a wall, and it has its history".

Another place with a wide repertoire of architectural heritage is the town of La Iglesuela. According to informant E3:

"This town has a certain monumentality, because a bastard of the Catholic King (Ferdinand) was brought to La Iglesuela. Then the bastard came, the families got together around the bastard and some impressive palaces were built in La Iglesuela in the 16th century. It is a very beautiful town".

This businessman from Vilafranca sends his clients to La Iglesuela because it is only 10 kilometres away and the route from Valencia to Aragon. For him, this landmark is significant because: "It is the first land that James I stepped on". At the time, this crossing meant crossing a border, from Aragon to Valencia. Nowadays, there is also the Torre de la Aduana (Customs Tower) and a 13th century hermitage in Pobla del Bellestar.

3.3.- The Most Beautiful Villages in Spain¹²

The Most Beautiful Villages of Spain is a cultural association that promotes and transmits the most charming places in Spain. One of the criteria for choosing these villages is their unique landscape and heritage. In this sense, belonging to this select group has very powerful implications for tourism.

The main objective of this association is the promotion of preferably rural areas and small municipalities through this website and the different actions that the association will undertake through the internet, the press, and other media. The Most Beautiful Villages of Spain Association tries to involve the different administrations so that they support, care for and respect the heritage of the Spanish territory, as well as promoting

¹² <https://www.lospueblosmasbonitosdeespana.org/>

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cultural events associated with our villages. On the website you will find a selection of villages that stand out for their quality, excellence and, of course, their beauty.

In the region studied there are several towns which, due to their characteristics, have been selected to form part of this group. The different interest groups have seen this as another strategy for the promotion of tourism in their villages. According to informant E9:

"We, if you go to our website, for example, we are now playing quite strongly, even through the marketing of a pack, on the "Most Beautiful Villages of Spain. Because we have Morella, Cantavieja, Mirambel, etc. Now Culla and San Mateo. I mean that we are surrounded by this brand and therefore we are channelling this product which is working quite well".

This label is also used in the marketing and product and service creation strategies of informant E8's company. According to him:

"In the part of the cornice of Castellón, which is where we are located, there is a lot of heritage that is attracting the attention of tourists. Moreover, now that these four towns that have given us the distinction of "the most beautiful" have included Culla, Morella, Peñíscola and Vilafamés, it is a strength that is also helping us".

These four towns belong to the Association of the Most Beautiful Villages of Spain. This is a success for the promotion of tourism in the province of Castellón, as the rest of the provinces of the Valencian Community only have one village in both provinces. In the case of Alicante, it is represented by the town of Guadalest, while Valencia has no representative. Of the four towns represented: Morella and Culla form an active part of this study. This high level of representation undoubtedly means a competitive advantage

for the promotion of the area as a tourist destination, which is one of the strategic objectives of these towns.

Regarding Culla, the informant GD1(1) not only highlights the heritage and architectural elements of the area, but also the natural environment of the area. For her:

"Culla represents a unique space in terms of the variety of heritage and landscape elements. The hiking routes that exist for pilgrimage or to go to l'Escola del Canto, are truly marvellous. I think we should exploit it much more with visitors".

L'Escola del Canto, in the adjoining municipality of Benassal, is a special place because it gives the visitor an insight into the demographic organisation of the area, through the farmhouses and so on. At that time, the footpaths were the routes along which people used to move around. Nowadays, the adjoining town councils are trying to enhance the value of this area.

In the case of informant GD1(9) the experience provided to visitors is fundamental. Among her activities as well:

"We have tried to set up an experience related to beekeeping. We tell them everything about the activity, how we produce, what we do, how we package. In the end, these stories are the ones that remain in the visitors' experience".

In general, all the villages in the region have very interesting heritage elements. For informant GD2(2) regarding the town of Culla:

"One of the values of this village is the variety of architectural elements we have. For a day trip it is very interesting. I think that every village has some element and perhaps from an integrated tourist point of view, we should promote the destination in the same way. We should encourage clients to come for more days and to leave more money in the region".

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In relation to the above, the informant GD2(3) highlights the positive effect that the revitalisation of tourism in Culla has had on nearby towns. As he advocates in relation to the "Most Beautiful Villages of Spain" seal:

"The most attractive thing about Culla is how they have preserved the village. They have improved the visit to the castle. The title of one of the most beautiful villages in Spain has also brought a lot of flux to Benassal".

That said, there are a variety of elements that, if well managed, can help to complement and enhance the customer's tourism experience.

3.4.- Trail Networks: a Versatile Heritage Element

Spain has thousands of kilometres of networks of footpaths that have been used over the centuries for different purposes. The connections between valleys, the transhumance world, pilgrimages, etc. are just a few examples of the different uses that these networks have had, created based on the needs of the population at any given time. Although many of them have been lost through disuse, there is also a social and economic movement that is trying to recover them and use them for new forms of economic generation.

One of the most important uses is for hiking, both for tourism and for sport. The great majority of the paths are accompanied by very significant stories that transport the visitor to past centuries.

From all this, we could say that the networks of footpaths represent one more heritage element that should be conserved and that can be used in the field of tourism. As informant E16 points out about their use in the field of tourism:

"One thing is clear, in the network of footpaths what is being rescued is already a historical heritage, it is the historical paths. There is also a dichotomous situation in Spain,

the whole area where it is, where the population is concentrated, the network of historic paths has practically disappeared, but in rural areas, in the unpopulated area, which is two thirds of the... more or less remains, just the very fact of seeing a path with dry stone walls or cobblestones, for many is a sensation and leads them to a situation of naturalness, of pleasantness... it generates a positive feeling".

The reflections of informant E17 also highlight the importance of footpath networks as an important element of the environment. In his case, he raises one of the problems that exist in rural areas regarding the privatisation of these footpaths.

"Indeed, I think it is also important to recover old paths, livestock trails, etc., to try not to put gates to the countryside in order to reach areas where in the past anyone could reach and move from one village to another; apart from knowing a little about the cultural environment of this path or these villages, can also allow us to improve their conservation, a knowledge, in short. I can respect that this is recovered, or fight a bit for there to be an investment in recovering these cultural spaces or this church or this heritage that all these inland towns and cities basically have".

Once again, the viability of projects requires comprehensive and common approaches. Approaches that include all stakeholders, including the local population. To this end, it is essential, as we have already seen in other sections, to transmit the opportunity of making the most of the hiking drive. In the case of products or livestock farmers, to encourage them to sell their products to visitors.

The conclusions of informant E18 are very similar, insofar as the relationship between heritage and hiking is very important. As he argues:

"I think that's where we start from, that's where we have to arrive at hiking... I think that the future lies in sustainable hiking and local products, for example, that is, when the user arrives in a village, they consume local products, they see, they get to know the heritage,

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they get to know the culture, they get to know the history. That, I think, is the meaning of hiking, to soak up the sensations of that place".

The network of footpaths in rural areas is undoubtedly an element that represents a competitive advantage for the leisure and activity offer of the establishments. But this generates certain problems in terms of competences of action: who oversees recovering and maintaining the footpaths? In this sense, collaboration between administrations and companies is required, looking for a common objective. In relation to this, informant E1 highlights another stakeholder grouping, the local action groups, which act on a voluntary basis in these cases.

"Local action groups are taking centre stage because at the end of the day they are people from the population who want to maintain their environment. Administrations are often slow to act, so this type of initiative is very interesting. On the other hand, it depends a lot on the voluntariness of the people, and not everyone in every town is willing to make that sacrifice".

These local action groups can represent a complementary dynamization factor to make rural areas more attractive to visitors and to recover and maintain their heritage.

3.5.- Heritage Management: a Key Element

As has been observed, the studied environment presents a great variety in the number of heritage elements that can be exploited in the tourism industry. In relation to the above, the key element is the management of these elements. Generating quality products and services requires coordination between the different stakeholders. And it seems that in some cases this coordination is very scarce or non-existent, which generates the opposite effect on the tourist. As informant E15 indicates:

"The issue of heritage is a very sensitive one. In our case, it has generated some problems. In our village we have a church with paintings from the 14th century that has been restored in the last few months. When tourists come I recommend that they go to see it and at weekends it is closed. Resources are dedicated to the restoration of the heritage, but in many occasions the administration forgets that when tourists come it is on weekends. This situation creates a bad experience for tourists".

Other problems that can be encountered are that products are not conceived as an overall experience. This also generates a certain feeling of dissatisfaction among tourists. In relation to this, informant E2 comments that:

"I think we are failing to create experiences. Tourist offices, hotels, shops, neighbours, etc. are recommending that tourists go to see the dry stone, but once they go there is very little on offer to complement the experience. The Museum is doing its job, but with so many dry stone items in the region, we are wasting it".

In relation to dry stone there is a big problem. As informant E15 indicates:

"We send people to Vilafranca, which is where most of the strongest dry stone constructions are to be found. However, here in Vallibona there are a few dry stone walls and very few shepherds' huts. The few that exist have either fallen down or are in poor condition because they have not been restored. That's why we send them to Vilafranca. They also have a Dry Stone Museum there, where they do a lot of activities".

The point is that the area in general has a wide variety of Dry Stone architectural elements that can be attractive. However, all interest groups mention Vilafranca as the most interesting area. This well-intentioned recommendation creates several problems. First, a process of overcrowding of visitors in the town of Vilafranca. At the same time, there is not enough infrastructure to cope with it. Secondly, the inefficient creation of a

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tourist destination where La Piedra en Seco is consolidated. As the informant E13 indicates:

"Perhaps it would be much more interesting to create Piedra en Seco routes that cover the whole territory and different towns. In this way, we could all benefit and the clients would have much more complete tourist experiences, lasting more days, and, therefore, would generate much more spending and less overcrowding in certain elements".

Third, this lack of consistency in the La Piedra en Seco product can have a negative impact on visitor experiences. This makes it very difficult to build loyalty and encourage repeat visits. In the long term, heritage tourism can become more of a threat than an opportunity.

In the case of the Most Beautiful Villages of Spain award, this is also a paradigmatic situation. Undoubtedly, this has allowed some villages to put themselves on the map and the number of visitors has increased exponentially. However, this is not always positive in the long run. This is what informant GD2(7) indicates regarding the population of Culla.

"Morella has been receiving many visitors for years and has very competitive infrastructures. In the case of Culla, they are receiving many visitors every weekend and they don't have competitive infrastructures. They have no hotel and very few restaurants. This situation can generate bad experiences for visitors".

Informant E7 also gives similar conclusions about the problem that tourist overcrowding can sometimes cause.

"In the case of Ares del Maestrat, there was a very important increase due to hosting an important sporting event, but the town does not have many facilities. Now Culla, as one of the most beautiful villages in Spain, is having a large influx of people. We should all

be happy, but I am aware that this overcrowding sometimes generates some problems. On the one hand, the dissatisfaction of some customers who sometimes find it difficult to access the services. On the other hand, there is dissatisfaction among the local population because of the problems inherent in overcrowded tourism".

In relation to the above, it seems that heritage and tourism management requires medium and long-term planning. This planning can focus on quality rather than quantity.

In terms of quality, one of the most important values is the experience provided to visitors. In this sense, it seems that the competitive advantage is generated by linking specialised people to the products. Experts who tell stories and help the tourist to understand each of the elements. In this sense, informant E13 tells us that he:

"Our team accompanies each of our clients on the guided tours they take, because this is the value of our tourism product. This is what really generates the most complete satisfaction. We are in charge of interpreting and explaining all the elements of the environment. It is a very complex job because it prevents us from dedicating resources to other sites, although, as I say, it is the value of our product".

Some similar reflections are provided by informant E9 who tells us that:

"With the creation of the active tourism company we have been able to professionalise the offer of sports and cultural activities linked to heritage. Before, it was very complicated to dedicate hotel resources to carrying out these excursions".

In this sense, guided routes in heritage environments are a competitive advantage for destinations. However, these experiences can also have some risks. In the case of informant E14, she tells us that:

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"In my case, I have spent my whole life managing this type of accommodation. I don't have a solid background in history or anything like that, nor can I speak languages other than Valencian and Spanish. Maybe I am not the right person to make these guides".

In relation to this, one of the most interesting aspects could be for public administrations to encourage the creation of companies specialised in the management of tourism experiences in relation to heritage. Or, alternatively, that they provide municipalities or companies with these figures.

In relation to the above, informant GD1(8) tells us that in practice management is quite complicated:

"Somehow we know what we have to do, but it is not always so easy. In our case, as an administration, we can help companies and try to dynamize some aspects of heritage, but companies must also do their part to be able to create products and services associated with the heritage we have".

Undoubtedly, the key factor is the professionalisation of this aspect of the business, as indicated in the scientific literature (Murti, 2020; Pegg & Patterson, 2010; Vidal-Matzanke et al., 2023). However, the limited resources of some stakeholders are a negative factor for the development of a quality product.

4.- New Technologies

The results indicate that many of the establishments have had to adapt their businesses to a changing social reality, where sports tourists are increasingly using technological tools for aspects such as reservations, consulting technical information. These results are in line with the proposals made by different researchers (Chekalina et al., 2021; Rech et al., 2019; Trunfio & Della Lucia, 2019).

As informant E10 shares with us, there is a wide variety of applications to carry out the various procedures. "Applications such as Instagram or Facebook are more focused on promotion, while WhatsApp is being used more for formalising bookings, where the website and telephone (phone call) are losing a lot of weight".

Similar conclusions are shared by informant E8, in relation to the benefits of new technologies in the tourist establishment where he works:

"Yes, look, I think it is positive completely, because as it is seen as positive... Booking, Airbnb... all platforms are extremely positive for hotels to compete. A small hotel can compete perfectly well with the biggest, without having to invest in the brutality of money that the biggest ones invest in advertising, with the little one that can't, they are on a par. But that has made it positive for big and small".

According to informant GD1(3) new technologies and booking portals have allowed him to reach everyone. In his case:

"I am a member and collaborate with various booking portals. Do you think I would have been able to reach customers from other parts of the world with traditional promotion? Obviously not. I don't know how this will evolve in the future, but so far it has been profitable".

For informant E11, there is also no debate on the use or non-use of new technologies. For him:

"They are giving it a lot of importance... because, for example, new rural accommodations that have... they are new and they are having a lot of work because they are working very well with social networks. That's why we all try to have an active presence".

New technologies and social networks have made it possible to give greater visibility to those geographical areas with more difficulties. For this reason, they have

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been a very powerful tool for reaching the entire national and international scene. As informant E9 comments:

"Well, it is clear that new technologies, well, for the interior it has been brutal, because before we depended a lot on word of mouth and agencies, and nowadays a wide range of possibilities to promote ourselves are open to us. In a way, social networks represent a way to promote word of mouth".

For informant GD1(5), the use of new technologies has also been key to the promotion of tourism in the city he represents. As he indicates: "we have been able to contrast an increase in the number of visitors as a result of the promotion strategies through different digital tools".

Another advantage of the new technologies is that they have allowed establishments to segment customers according to their characteristics and to launch specific promotional campaigns. As informant E13 points out: "Depending on how you move on social networks and what you want to show, you will also attract one type of customer or another".

For informant GD1(6) the new technologies also represent a major advance. In his opinion, "they have helped us to boost tourism in the town of Culla and therefore in the area where we are". New technologies have allowed them to launch specific promotional campaigns.

In relation to the above, we note that some local corporations are also developing very powerful promotional campaigns, despite limited resources, to attract the attention of new visitors. This is corroborated by informant GD2(7) who claims that: "the town council advertises a lot in tourism".

Informant GD1(2) also highlights the importance of new technologies and social networks. In his opinion:

"The way we communicate from the Tourism Association has helped us to reach a lot more people. Without a doubt, new technologies have had a very positive impact on businesses. Think that we are very small companies with very limited resources".

That said, new technologies have an aspect that can be negative. As informant E8 states:

"Social networks can be detrimental because they allow personal criticism. You can find comments on applications such as Tripadvisor, where they criticise aspects that do not depend on the service provided by our establishments".

Another problem they are seeing is the large number of options, which sometimes makes it "a real challenge to choose the channel and the information, in addition to limited resources" GD2(4).

Federations also play a very important role, albeit with more limited resources, as their main function is not to promote venues. However, as informant E16:

"Conventional advertising doesn't work and what works is social media. For example: in the case of mountain races, which is what I'm working on, if suddenly, well, if a new mountain race is established in a place, it's clear that the way to publicise that race is on social networks and on blogs. Look for the prescribers, talk to them, maybe you can do a famtrip, but it is much more productive to work on blogs that already talk about mountain races, that there are already publications, than to say to a Federation: "hey, there is a new area to do a mountain race, etc.".

This approach is very interesting because the users of mountain races are often the same users of hiking, i.e. a person who runs a particular race may return to the same

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geographical area to go hiking with his or her family. In this way, mountain races and their promotion through social networks can represent another element in the promotion of tourist destinations.

Informant E17 also highlights the importance of the use of new technologies and social networks. In his field of action, he does not work in hiking and tourism, but he also highlights the manoeuvrability of the networks for promotion.

"I think that, in the FEDME, the fundamental communication channel now, in this digital world, is the website, where all the publications that are made through the FEDME channel are rigorous and official. Then we have the different social media channels so that we know that this information arrives directly in the natural world, now. Because maybe you don't go to the website many times, but if you go to Facebook, for example, or Twitter, to ask a question and you get these news and messages. I think it's an interesting idea to reach a larger number of people and, well, it's a rational use in relation to the news that you want to publish and the importance that it has".

It is clear that the versatility and usability of new technologies makes it possible to reach many more users in the federative sphere as well. The great consolidation of the use of new technologies in federations can be seen as an opportunity to generate synergies in other areas such as tourism, health promotion or environmental training.

However, the use of new technologies also entails certain risks. Informant E18, manager of a sports federation, argues that reliable sources of information should be followed. Hiking, insofar as it takes place in a natural environment, can lead to accidents, which is why the recommendations of experts in the field should be followed. Reflecting on the FEDME trail application and a widely used application in the hiking world, he postulates the following:

"I know that people, the other day in the conversation we had here with the FEDME hiking director told us that they are looking at MisendaFEDME, which is where everyone is, they are looking at the influx of people coming in, the visits there are and such. It's a bit like leading people who search on Wikiloc to also look for the approved, the definitive one. In other words, that's the function I have here for the whole year, that is, to update all the files, scan them all and where the route is on Wikiloc, upload one made by a technician. And maybe it coincides with the Wikiloc one, or maybe not. Most likely it won't".

Undoubtedly, the different bodies must also ensure that the new technologies are used in accordance with their criteria. Foresight and preparation are two fundamental aspects of preparing for mountain activities.

Part 4. Conclusions

**Chapter 5. The Mountains in the
Inland Areas of Castellón, a Space with
Great Growth Potential**

All academic and research work must follow a systematic pattern with the aim of achieving a rigor that cements the basic pillars of the work carried out. In this sense, the conclusions section represents one of the most important areas of this doctoral thesis. In the conclusions, we reflect in a very surgical way on the intersection between the previous body of scientific knowledge and the results obtained based on the laborious field work carried out in the region of the mountains of the interior of Castellón.

In this section, three well differentiated parts will be observed. First, a summary table on the degree of fulfillment of each of the hypotheses or work objectives. Second, a relationship between the main ideas that have been contrasted during the field work and their importance within the possible theoretical contributions to the field of hiking as a tourist and sports activity in the mountains of the interior of Castellón. Third, we consider it essential to make a theoretical proposal in the form of a SWOT analysis to establish a series of guidelines whose applicability may be of interest to the tourism industry in rural areas.

The researcher tries to analyze in detail the relationship between sports activities, more specifically hiking, as an element of the tourism and sports industry in the inland mountain area of Castellón. Based on this field of study and all the adjacent sub-fields, a series of hypotheses are proposed that are analyzed throughout the work. The following table describes each of them, while sharing the degree of compliance with them.

Table 19

Summary table of hypotheses and their degree of compliance

Hypothesis	Degree of compliance
H1	The hypothesis is partially fulfilled.
H2	the hypothesis is fulfilled.
H3	The hypothesis is partially fulfilled.

Note. Source: Own elaboration

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As can be seen in the table above, there is a difference between the degree of compliance with the different hypotheses or work objectives. There are some of them that are fully met, others are partially met.

That said, we will try to describe and analyze the most important findings obtained during this research work. The most relevant conclusions are established below as sections or fields of knowledge.

1.- The Tourism Sector as an Element of Socioeconomic Revitalization

Tourism is an economic sector with great weight and importance in the global economy. Tourism per se represents an economic engine capable of generating economic and social development, in different geographical areas, including rural, mountain and more depopulated areas.

There is no doubt that tourism represents one of the productive and economic sectors with a very powerful weight in the GDP of many countries. We have already commented in this work that tourism in Spain represents approximately 13% of the national GDP. In addition, the different national, regional, and local administrations try to boost and strengthen the tourism sector as an element capable of generating employment and improving the lives of families. More than 50% of the informants affirm that the relations that exist between the town councils and the hiker accommodation are good.

In addition, the satisfaction of businessmen in the accommodation sector belonging to more than 65% of the populations are satisfied with the investments in existing infrastructures. Although, there is also a part of them that considers that these investments are insufficient. We believe that the evolution and improvement of the

infrastructures in the mountains of the interior of Castellón is being very positive from a strategic point of view.

Parallel to this, throughout the work many facts and figures have been used that show the good health enjoyed by the tourism sector in our nation. However, there are certain shortcomings or pending issues that must be addressed. For example, we know that coastal tourism associated with sun and sand handles very powerful volumes and economic figures. This work has shown that tourism is capable of revitalizing territories and regions from a social and economic point of view. You only need to see the number of people who emigrate to the coastal areas to satisfy the demand for employment that exists in the season.

We have also witnessed a paradigm shift in the tourism model. Although the last half of the 20th century has meant a predominance in the tourism that we described before, the beginning of the 21st century has brought us a diversification in the sector. In these last two decades, we have been able to witness the proliferation of terminology such as adventure tourism, rural tourism, nature tourism and an endless number of words, whose common denominator is the social change that is occurring every day. A change where society is attracted by the practice of sports, by the consumption of natural spaces, by the care of the body and mind.

These factors, together with the COVID-19 crisis, have generated an unprecedented increase in the demand for nature spaces, where you can disconnect and practice all kinds of activities. This upward trend has been endorsed by 100% of the informants who place the summer of 2021 as one of the seasons that has worked the most in terms of total numbers of visitors. The previous summer is removed from the equation due to the health crisis.

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In this sense, although the figures shared by the sector are very positive, one of the most repeated claims among those interviewed is excessive seasonalization. In our opinion, diversification is one of the key elements to combat this excessive seasonalization. As it has been observed, 3 out of 4 accommodations try to carry out activities of various kinds: sports, cultural, traditional, mycological, etc. to space out the visitors in time. However, we consider that there is a deficit in the offer of sports activities, since only 15% of the accommodations have a specialized portfolio.

This reality calls our attention since during our work we have been able to identify some elements that show that tourism represents a very robust economic sector capable of generating a very positive socioeconomic impact. On the one hand, we have been able to point out different Spanish regions where tourism, in general, has been a boost for the local economy. Some of these regions, such as the Pyrenees, have a greater tradition and, therefore, much more experience in the sector. However, the information obtained also shows that there are regions with much less experience that are managing to reverse this process of depopulation and generate a productive system, as is the case of Matarraña (Aragon) and some areas of the mountains in the interior of Alicante.

To sum up, in the case of the region of the mountains in the interior of Castellón, we believe that, in general terms, the tourism sector does not have a specific weight sufficient to stop the process of depopulation. Proof of this is that in the analysis of the depopulation figures in the different regions involved, there are very few localities that experience an increase in the number of inhabitants, specifically the towns of Palanques, Argelita, Montanejos or Puebla de Arenoso, among others. The localities that have experienced an increase in the number of inhabitants are very few, this is specifically due to the proliferation and increase in registrations as a second residence that has been experienced because of the health crisis.

In this case, in the scientific literature there is a concept that is very important: the concept of destiny. The different interest groups of the tourism industry in the mountains of the interior of Castellón must work in a coordinated and strategic manner in order to strengthen and consolidate the destination, as has been achieved in the neighboring region of Matarraña.

2.- Sports Tourism, a Subsector With Great Growth

The sports tourism subsector has experienced very powerful growth in total numbers in recent years. This growth has also been observed in very specific geographical areas such as rural and mountain areas, growth that has been boosted by the COVID-19 health crisis.

It is obvious that sports tourism has experienced tremendous growth in recent decades and today represents one of the most important subsectors of the tourism industry. As we have been able to observe in the scientific literature, the socioeconomic impact of sports events and events is very large.

But not only the big events have a positive impact, since as Delpy (1998) shows in his analysis of the socioeconomic impact of various competitions in the United States, sports with less media coverage and even amateur and junior sports have a great impact and move some very interesting figures from an economic point of view. Something similar occurs with mountain racing competitions, which, in most cases, take place in rural and mountain environments. In the literature it has also been possible to see the cases of the Festival des Templiers or the Collontrek, among others. These competitions have made economic revitalization possible directly and indirectly.

In our work we have been able to observe various international and national case studies where sports tourism per se is being an element that energizes the socioeconomic

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environment. However, in the case of the region studied, sports tourism by itself does not represent an effective tool in the task of combating depopulation. As stated by 90% of the informants, although sports tourism is experiencing gradual growth, there are other activities such as mycology or hunting that have a greater weight in the local economy.

In fact, hunting is positioned as a subsector whose impact per capita/day can double and even triple the daily expenses of a visitor. Regarding mycology, similar figures are also considered. We think that in the medium and long term, sports tourism may be more interesting from the socioeconomic and environmental point of view, since the activities mentioned are highly seasonal.

In relation to the above, we have been able to verify that different sporting events are organized throughout the year, which shows an increasingly growing demand for consumption of tourism products and services. Events such as the Penyagolosa Trails or the cycling competitions are very interesting due to their social and economic impact. In this sense, it is interesting to monitor this growth over the next few years, as it will surely generate a constant increase in the flow of visitors. And what is more important, a deseasonalization of the sector, insofar as the events are organized in a strategic way to cover different moments of the calendar.

As for some negative factors found, the low specialization of the tourism sector stands out, where there are very few companies whose scope of work is the provision of activities, specifically 2 companies have been identified, one of which has its headquarters outside the populations studied, although its scope of action does have scope in these populations.

In addition to this, there are also very few accommodation establishments that are diversifying their offer and adding the possibility of practicing sports activities to their

business portfolio. In this sense, it is interesting that the tourism sector moves towards a specialization of its portfolio of services in order to attract this new customer segment. This is due in more than 50% of cases to the lack of experience of the managers of sports accommodation. And to the scarcity of resources when implementing an offer of activities. In this case, we found the proposal made by the company "7 Pobles" very interesting, because it makes available to several accommodations the know-how of how to expand the range of activities through a hiking proposal.

3.- Hiking as an Activity That Can Generate a Socioeconomic Impact

Within the variety of activities that exist in the field of sports tourism, hiking is one of the most interesting for various reasons. First, it is an activity that can be practiced by many audiences. And second, it can be linked to other cultural and social activities, which further enriches the activity. Hiking, as a tourist activity represents a differentiating element in the tourist experience.

Hiking is one of the sports activities with the most practitioners. The characteristics of the activity itself make it optimal for many audiences, which is why it has a strong presence both at a non-competitive sports and tourism level. According to the Spanish Sports Habits Yearbook, hiking is one of the most practiced activities by Spanish society, with almost constant growth. Parallel to this, from the sports federations we receive very positive feedback on this activity, because according to the data that is handled there is many practitioners, both federated and non-federated.

Hiking has a very strong link with the tourism and leisure industry. Currently there is a wide variety of hiking tourist products and services that complement each other perfectly with other products of a cultural, gastronomic, heritage, etc. nature. The economic data supports these theses, and it is that during the year 2018 national trips

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related to hiking reported around 7,000 million euros in turnover, while international visits exceeded the barrier of 3,000 million euros. This last piece of information is very positive because the international tourist spends a greater amount on average, which is directly linked to quality tourism.

From an applied point of view, it has also been possible to verify the existence of tourist destinations, such as the Pyrenees, where hiking has a very high social and economic impact, which helps combat the depopulation process. However, these hiking products are associated, in many cases, with a very varied offer, where there is also cycling, skiing or horse riding.

According to the analysis of the information obtained from the informants, we have been able to contrast the low specialization of the tourism-sports sector and even more of the products related to hiking. These figures indicate that, of the total number of visitors, less than 35% travel for the sole purpose of hiking. This factor has several readings: on the one hand, accommodations can use other resources or attraction factors to reach a greater number of visitors. And, on the other hand, there is the risk of losing this flow to the detriment of other more specialized destinations.

In this section, we would like to highlight perhaps electric bike excursions as an alternative or subsector that is growing with greater momentum compared to hiking, since 1 in 2 accommodations have introduced or are in the process of introducing electric bicycles as leisure activities. These data reveal two aspects: on the one hand, the need to bet on investment in the tourism-sports sector by private companies and public administrations and, on the other hand, the opportunity presented for the region as a novel space, which represents one of the most important factors in the theoretical model of tourist attraction factors.

4.- The Region of the Mountains of the Interior of Castellón, a Destination With a Great Margin of Growth

The characteristics, strategies and development of the tourism industry are key factors in the tourism framework. External factors, such as location and environment; and internal factors, such as the quality of the environment and the service, the variety of products and services offered, among others, are factors that determine the quality of the visitor experience.

The tourist experience is characterized by a series of factors, of diverse nature, that make up a complex framework. For this reason, we defend that a good tourist experience must consider factors such as customer expectations, the quality of the service provided, the novelty of the space or current trends, among others.

From a strictly scientific point of view, one of the most complete theoretical models is the one that proposes push factors (from visitors) and pull factors (from the destination). Or what is the same, what the destination can give visitors and what the latter are looking for.

The good health enjoyed by the sports tourism subsector has already been contrasted in the scientific literature. At the same time, it has also been possible to discover a greater number of national and international destinations whose main purpose is the provision of services and products related to sports tourism and hiking.

In relation to the above and once the data obtained in the field work has been crossed, we have been able to verify that the area under study has geographical, natural, gastronomic conditions, etc. very interesting. However, the degree of development of sports tourism and hiking products is very low.

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Of many of the establishments and interest groups interviewed, it has been observed that very few have incorporated this type of offer into their portfolio of products and services. In addition, there are not many active tourism companies that can establish collaborations with the different hiking accommodations.

Finally, it will be interesting to observe the development of the destination in the medium and long term, since in the information obtained it has not been possible to appreciate a great interest in the development of hiking. Existing a positive awareness of its importance, the lack of resources or the excessive seasonality of visitors are factors that make day-to-day life in the area a real struggle for survival.

5.- The Customer Segmentation, a Competitive Advantage

Knowing the sociodemographic profile of the visitor is one of the most important tasks of the tourism industry. This information helps to better understand customers and to be able to adapt the different products and services to their needs.

In recent decades, the practice of physical activity has experienced an exponential increase worldwide. A large proportion of the population in developed countries practices physical activity daily, while in developing countries it is also increasing gradually. Access to information technologies, public health and welfare plans linked to the activity itself are factors that allow this development. Hiking is becoming one of the most practiced activities due to its characteristics since it is an activity suitable for the vast majority of the public. In this sense, hiking has found a very good fit within the framework of sports tourism, being a sports product that adapts very well to many audiences.

In relation to the above, according to the results obtained in this study on the sociodemographic profile of hikers and visitors to the inland mountain area of Castellón, we can establish four very specific profiles of hikers:

The non-hiker, who practices hiking. This profile fits a tourist who looks at the mountains as a space to disconnect and finds himself with the possibility of hiking and other sports activities. Not having a strong attachment to sports activity and feeling attracted to other types of cultural, gastronomic activities, etc. This type of visitor does not visit the destination looking for hiking, however, they practice the activity due to the conditions offered by the environment. The representation of this hiker in percentage terms would be approximately 50%.

The hiking mountain club. This profile applies to members of sports associations and clubs that organize weekend hiking excursions. These hikers do not usually generate a great economic impact in the area, since many times they do not spend the night, although they must be considered for the application of specific products for one day. In this case, it would be a more specialized hiker looking for the surroundings because they know the attractiveness of the mountains inland from Castellón and their possibilities. From a percentage point of view, this group would represent 25%.

The basic hiker. This profile describes a hiker who feels a certain attachment to sports and for him hiking is a kind of initiation activity. These trekkers often involve their families and organize overnight trips, which undoubtedly has an economic impact on the area they are going to. From the point of view of the establishments, it is advisable to provide these visitors with other types of complementary activities. This hiker can represent around 20% of the total.

The advanced hiker. This profile applies to people who have long experience hiking and make little use of the channels that a tourist establishment can provide for organizing trips. You can go alone or with your family. In any case, from a socioeconomic point of view, profiles that travel as a family are of interest, because they also have an

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economic impact on the local territory. This profile can represent around 5%. Despite this, it represents a very interesting profile since they are subscribers to the activity, that is, they practice advanced hiking individually or in groups of other specialized hikers, but later they return with their families.

This study also provides a very detailed description of the specific profiles of walkers. This information can be very useful both for private sports tourism companies to be able to segment their clients and launch very specific promotion strategies, and for public administrations to propose and improve current legislation on the use of natural parks, strategies health promotion, local conservation of the area through training, etc.

The distribution that we have observed in the various profiles of walkers allows us to contrast one of the most important concepts in the sociology of current sport. The deinstitutionalization of sport represents a social change at present that broadly defined as the individual's passage where they practice sports under the protection of a club or federation towards sports practice in open-air spaces and on their own.

This process of social change has inherent some issues that have been the triggers for this change. First, the diminishing identification with the clubs and federations that understand sport as a more closed element. This does not allow the flexibility that sports practice has on its own, which represents an advantage for the practitioner himself who has the option of deciding, for example, the geographical space where he will go hiking on the weekend. Second, the rise of sports practice in the open air and in natural spaces has experienced constant growth at the beginning of the 21st century, while the COVID-19 crisis has boosted this growth. This, together with the social and psychological need that urban human beings must return to natural spaces, have been key factors for this social change. Third, there has also been a proliferation of life cycle sports, where walking

and running have been postulated as sports practices that are associated with social health (since it can be practiced in groups), physical health (because of the benefits it has for health) and psychological.

In relation to the above, there is another very important concept from the point of view of social and sports psychology. This change in trend is strongly associated with the existence of a social change of values towards postmaterialism. Society has the need to seek new values such as the need to have its own autonomy and freedom in a liquid society. In this reality, the individual prefers loose commitments and less formal groupings, where they can be easily disaggregated or aggregated. This idea is what some of the informants have shared with us about the fact that many of the hikers are not faithful to the activity itself, which means that there is a wide variability in the sport practice of the same individual.

Parallel to this, there is also a social aspect, insofar as the practice of certain sports carries inherent social recognition. Take the example of how someone who has been trekking in the Himalayas, or who participates in long-distance trail running competitions, is observed. All this, together with the environment that social networks have generated, makes many of the sports practitioners seek a kind of social approval through the like.

6.- Digital Tools as a Contributing Element to Growth

Digital tools have developed enormously in recent years. Its link to the various fields and productive sectors has been very powerful. In the field of tourism, digitization is very present and represents one of the great challenges of the future, to achieve more sustainable and higher quality tourism. In the most practical tourism field, digital tools allow better promotion and marketing, since more potential customers can be reached;

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and in the field of internal management, making some of the management tasks more agile.

Without a doubt, digital tools are helping the tourism industry to develop new strategies and initiatives. There are more and more applications for the management of internal business processes, such as for sales and marketing. In this sense, we have been able to verify that 100% of the hiking accommodations are fully immersed in the technology of their companies.

However, we should divide this implementation into two phases that are related to the state of technological development of their companies. First, there is a common and majority awareness of the benefits that exist when implementing these tools. Second, the development is uneven in the different accommodations, since each one has limited economic resources and knowledge.

That said, it is very interesting to follow up on the different financing programs that are promoted by the different local, regional, national, and international public administrations because one of the main objectives is the digitization of various economic sectors. In this case, the various accommodations can benefit from both direct financing for the acquisition of tangible equipment, as well as training and advice for the implementation of new strategies.

7.- Heritage, an Element That Generates Value for Hiking Accommodation

The experience lived (or provided) to the tourist is one of the key elements of tourist satisfaction. Many professionals, academics and researchers focus on improving the tourist experience. This factor is related to the theoretical model of pull factors (what the destination can offer) and push factors (what the tourist is interested in). In this sense,

the natural, cultural, and architectural heritage can play an important role by providing services and products with a plus in quality and content.

The tourist experience must be understood as a complete product or service, where the content of the experience is highly valued. The tangible and intangible heritage can be interesting from the point of view of the experience of the tourist-hiker.

However, it has been observed that there is a deficit in the creation of joint strategies for the promotion of heritage. This means that the use and promotion of heritage in tourism is limited to individual strategies or small groups of different stakeholders. In practice, we have confirmed that 85% of hiking accommodation and 100% of public bodies are aware of and are able to share with visitors those elements of heritage interest. However, there is no integrated or structured offer that represents an interesting attraction factor for visitors. All interest groups agree that Vilafranca del Cid is the cathedral of dry stone, however, this limited vision means that visitors do not see other spaces where these elements can be found.

Something similar occurs with the population of Morella, whose architectural elements are very numerous. However, from a visitor's point of view, Morella represents a 24-hour visit, making it very difficult to stay in the destination for a longer period. In this case, we think it would be interesting to generate a story and connect the heritage elements of all the populations.

We have also been able to observe a deficit in heritage management, to the extent that there is no planning between the different interest groups and no support from experts when tourists interact with heritage elements. According to 1 in 2 informants, heritage has been a double-edged sword, if the customer experiences have not been what they wanted.

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Having said all this, we think that the destination is in a growth phase, so the implementation of various management and promotion strategies can be a key factor for the development of the tourism sector in the area. In general, there are many very interesting ingredients to make a consolidated destination and you just need to put them in order.

One of the main motivations of tourists is the attractiveness of the cultural and natural landscape in the surroundings of the accommodation. In this sense, the owners of hotel establishments must promote this heritage, to improve the satisfaction perceived by the client. We have detected a low level of promotion of the natural and cultural heritage associated with the territory of the establishments. We recommend those responsible for tourist establishments to value and promote this cultural heritage. The positive aspects of this tourist activity in rural areas outweigh the possible threats to heritage, which in any case should not be underestimated. This strategy will increase the number of visitors as well as improve their satisfaction.

Finally, we would like to share an idea that may be of great interest to deepen scientific knowledge about the intersection between hiking, mountain sports, the rural world and depopulation. This idea responds, in part, to the critical capacity acquired during the process of developing the doctoral thesis.

We think that we have made the mistake of approaching socioeconomic development from a more traditional vision of the tourism sector, that is, that the main (and only) objectives were short-term growth, increased profits, etc. In this sense, we are very struck by the idea that has been repeated on many occasions when they tell us that "they don't want to work anymore". This declaration of intent does not mean that they do not want to work, but rather that the development model that must be followed is not that

anything goes. Delving into these reflections, this idea is closely linked to stable development over time, considering other variables such as environmental and ecological ones. In our opinion, we must take these ideas into account to ensure that sports activities in nature respect the good that nature itself represents.

At this point, we believe that the application of the SWOT analysis tool can help us synthesize all the issues that have been collected and reflected in the results. This analysis tool makes it possible to show which are the internal and external, positive and negative factors that may be key to the success of the project. In this case, the analysis of the weaknesses, threats, strengths, and opportunities of the region of the mountains of the interior of Castellón can help the different interest groups to propose strategies and plans in the short, medium and long term that help to fight against depopulation. The following tables share the factors that have been identified.

Table 20

Analysis of internal factors: strengths and weaknesses of the destination under study

Strengths	Weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The geographical area presents many interesting elements from a historical and patrimonial point of view. Dry stone elements can represent an important attraction for visitors. - In relation to the above, there is a network of paths, trails and spaces that can be used to carry out physical-sports activities, where hiking is positioned as one of the most attractive. - The average altitude of many towns (1,000 meters) makes the destination a reference space for the segment of visitors interested in mountain sports and other activities such as mycology. - Although there are some towns whose access is more difficult, there is an extensive road network and investments continue to be made to improve the transport network. - Existence of good connectivity with the Castellón Airport. - There is an offer of accommodation in the region, in variety and quantity. However, some populations with a high demand for visitors should create more accommodation (for example: Culla). - The existing accommodation offer is very attractive for families and tourists in the context of the COVID-19 health situation. There is great interest in private tourist spaces. - From a vision of tourist attraction, you can find vestiges of different cultures, a factor that supposes the existence of a great attraction. - There are several natural resources of great landscape and environmental value: The Peñagosa Natural Park and the Tinença de Benifassà Natural Park. - There is a wide variety of tangible and intangible assets declared Assets of Cultural Interest. This generates a great tourist attraction. - Price competitiveness (between 25 and 50 euros person/night) - Network of trails for practicing physical-sporting activities: hiking, trail running, mountain biking, etc. - Great variety of Assets of Intangible Cultural Interest in the different towns. The variety and its celebration on different dates is an attraction for the deseasonalization of tourism. - Existence of some products linked to hiking and other sports activities: Ruta dels 7 Pobles, Ruta Templaria, etc. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The lack of accommodation in some towns prevents the destination from being positioned as a reference space. - Although there is some investment in facilities, current infrastructures create bottlenecks in some towns at times of strong visitor demands. - Some populations do not have adequate infrastructure. - Insufficient signage, in some populations it generates confusion. - There are no infrastructures for public transportation. - Lack of adaptation of many spaces for people with disabilities. - Non-existent public transport to reach the destination. - Deficit in the adequacy of some of the hiking routes. - There is no international vision in promoting the destination. Many towns do not have their promotional resources adapted to the common languages of visitors: English, French, German. - Training in tourism is very low. - There is no deseasonalization of the demand. There is no average flow of visitors. - Management of languages other than local very low. - Some reluctance from the private sector when it comes to diversifying the current supply. Little initiative in the creation of hiking and cycling-oriented products and/or services. - Lack of tourist value enhancement of some cultural resources. - Existence of very few products and/or services oriented to hiking. - Many hiking establishments only offer accommodation and, on some occasions, diets. Non-existence of the offer in terms of cultural activities, guided tours, sports activities, etc. - There is not a great demand from international public. The current demand resides in very specific issues in very few accommodations because of working with specific tour operators.

Strengths	Weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Wide gastronomic offer and a wide variety of local/autochthonous products: truffles, honey, cherries, almonds, etc. - Inclusion of some towns in the group "The Most Beautiful Towns in Spain". This has a direct and indirect impact on many populations. - The Flavor Route as an element of revitalization and promotion of the local product. This proposal represents a complement to the existing hiking offer. - The health crisis has energized and strengthened interest in natural spaces. There is a growing demand that seeks rural and mountain spaces, as is the example of the region studied. - Linking other market segments as complements to existing hiking products and services: mycology, pilgrimages, other sports activities. - Strong criteria and unanimity of the interest groups in being present in the different existing social networks. - There is a relatively good investment in human and economic resources to position the destination in general on social networks (Example of an informant when he mentions that "they have been able to be on the same channels as other big brands with large economic budgets". - Large investment in advertising (physical and digital) by local corporations. - Investment of the different local corporations in facilities. - Dynamism of the different tourism associations in promoting the destination and its products and services - Awareness and investment on the importance of tourism training for the various interest groups. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - High seasonality. - The digital signage and brochures are not adapted to different languages. The French public is interesting, and the information is not adapted. - Lack of adaptation of many web spaces to current market requirements. - Little personnel specialized in tourism. - In general terms, in many towns bureaucratic procedures are very slow: building permits, activity licenses, etc. - Many populations do not have coherent and solid tourist strategic planning. - Lack of coordination between the different municipalities in the area. The Maestrat is not a tourist destination. - Difficulty in generating an attractive offer in contracting.

Note. Source: Own elaboration based on the analysis of the information obtained by the informants. Part of the information collected in this table may be published in the coming months in the

Culla Tourist Plan. This responds to the fact that the author and the director of the doctoral thesis are the authors of said plan, responding to a collaboration agreement.

Table 21

Analysis of external factors: opportunities and threats of the destination under study

Opportunities	Threats
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Development of strategies to attract tourist segments with greater purchasing power: international, retirees, hikers. There are examples of other destinations that are having success (Mallorca, inland Alicante mountains, etc.). - Development and improvement of the Castellón airport - Maintenance of the tourist flow/seasonalization of the demand on weekends and holidays. - Use of local tourism. - Increased demand for bicycles: mountain and electric. - Creation of incentives by the administration for entrepreneurship in the rural world, with the aim of fixing population in the locality. - Use natural elements as an element of great value and link it with tourist/sports (hiking) and ecological trends (valuation of the environment). - Creation of synergies with coastal towns with a large flow of tourists. Rural spaces can represent elements for the reorganization of visitor flows and the sustainability of spaces. -Strengthening the involvement of the local population in tourism. Local action groups represent a very interesting element for this work. - Creation of synergies with various market segments to boost periods with less tourist flow: schools, retirees, international, etc. - Use of European funds (Next Generation EU Funds) for investment and revitalization of tourism. - Taking advantage of the trend in the market for second homes in mountain towns. - Promotion of gastronomy as an element of interest for national and international visitors. - The New Technologies as an element of improvement of the internal management processes of the companies. This allows redirecting human and financial resources to other spaces. - Use of new ways of promoting the destination, services, and products through New Technologies. - Taking advantage of the investment programs of public bodies in terms of digital tools. - Use of the territory and customs as elements for the formation and promotion of healthy and sustainable lifestyles. - Taking advantage of the guidelines of the 2030 Agenda in terms of sustainability, quality of life, energy management, etc. in rural towns. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The non-involvement of the local population. - Discontent of some sectors of the local population with tourism. - Existence of well-established destinations (the case of La Matarraña). - The global socioeconomic and geopolitical situation. The population decreases its resources dedicated to leisure and tourism. - Turbulent job market: there is very little labor for the jobs that have to be done in the locality.

Note. Source: Own elaboration based on the analysis of the information obtained by the informants. Part of the information collected in this table may be published in the coming months in the

Culla Tourist Plan. This responds to the fact that the author and the director of the doctoral thesis are the authors of said plan, responding to a collaboration agreement.

Chapter 6. Contribution, Limitations and Future Lines of Research

1.- Contributions of the Doctoral Thesis

The purpose of this doctoral thesis is to expand knowledge in a field of work with an important specific weight in our geographical region. In addition, we also consider it necessary to delve into some topics that are closely related to the Mountain Sports Research Group.

In this way, our work has contributed to a better understanding of many of the causal relationships that exist at the intersection between mountain sports, hiking, sports tourism, and depopulation. Various sections to which our doctoral thesis has contributed positively are detailed below.

1.- With our work we have contributed to carrying out an analysis of the socioeconomic reality linked to mountain activities, hiking, and tourism in the region of the mountains of the interior of Castellón, specifically in the regions of Els Ports, El Maestrazgo and some inland towns in the Alcatén and Alto Millares regions. In relation to the above, we have also been able to analyze the role played by the Tinença de Benifassà and Penyagolosa Natural Parks as attractive elements for visitors and sports tourists.

2.- Thanks to this work we have also been able to contribute to improving the body of scientific knowledge in the field of sports tourism and activities in the natural environment in the region of the mountains of the interior of Castellón. Specifically, two specific articles have been published in specialized international magazines: on the one hand, the article "Hiking accommodation provision in the mountain areas of Valencia Region, Spain: a tool for combating the Depopulation of rural areas" in the Journal of Sport & Tourism. On the other hand, the article "Can cultural Heritage be a successful

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strategy as a tourist experience? The case of tourist establishments in the mountains of Valencia, Spain” in the Journal of Heritage Tourism.

3.- Our work has also contributed to increasing our knowledge about the different realities existing in the mountainous areas of the interior of Castellón. This factor has allowed us to forge stronger alliances with that destination, which has led us to be able to sign two collaboration agreements with the Culla town hall, where we advise them on sports activities from a tourist perspective.

4.- This work has also allowed the Mountain Sports Research Group. Health, Inclusion and Society and the Faculty of Physical Activity and Sports Sciences of the San Vicente Mártir Catholic University of Valencia to take another step towards consolidating specialization at a national and international level in the field of sports research. mountain. This, in turn, translates into the improvement of institutional relations with the various interest groups, especially the mountain sports federations.

5.- This work has also allowed us to highlight an increasingly growing trend in visitors to rural areas, where they seek quality over quantity. This factor may represent an opportunity for sustainable and prolonged growth over time, where quality and sustainability will be the most important elements. In relation to the above, in the case of businessmen in the sector we have also been able to corroborate that there is a trend as long as in their discourse it has been possible to analyze that the variables sustainability and quality are very present.

2.- Limitations

Like all academic and research work, this doctoral thesis also has some limitations. A posteriori, the biggest limitation that we have found is that the proposal has a regional character, therefore, the conclusions and contributions are difficult to

extrapolate to other realities. Regarding the aspect of scientific communication of our work, we have also found, at times, certain limitations when it comes to publishing, because the proposal is excessively regionalist.

In relation to the above, this last limitation has been a virtue, insofar as we have had to seek the richness of the data to make the content attractive to the scientific community.

Another of the limitations that we have been able to find has been that the doctoral thesis has been carried out during the COVID-19 health crisis, which has made field work difficult on some occasions. Restrictions on mobility and fear of contracting the disease have delayed field work.

In relation to the above, we believe that the COVID-19 pandemic may have represented a risk factor for data collection, as many informants, when questioned, have qualified the differences in sport tourism trends. From the outset, the criterion has been to carry out an analysis of the information up to the pandemic. At that time, many of the interviewees shared that there has been a steady increase in sport and rural tourism. However, the pandemic has also represented a kind of opportunity for the sector, which has experienced very significant flows of visitors to these areas. It would be useful to analyse visits in the coming years in order to see if there has been a stabilisation.

3.- Future Lines of Research

The research line of this doctoral thesis represents one of the various lines of work of the Mountain Sports Research Group: Health, Inclusion and Society. That said, the work lays the foundations for future research in various fields of knowledge. First, it is essential to work on one of the limitations of this work. For this reason, studies will be carried out compared with other regions of the Spanish geography. Considering the

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information obtained in the field work, the region of La Matarraña is positioned as a very interesting space in order to know in greater depth the factors that are allowing it to be positioned as an inland tourist and sports destination.

Second, there is a growing trend on the use of new technologies in the field of hiking and mountain sports. For the research group, it is vitally important to analyze the role that new technologies play in this field. The practical application of this knowledge can help improve management both in the private sector and in public organizations.

Third, the analysis of sustainable tourism as an element directly linked to sports activities in the natural environment. The Research Group, which, in turn, is associated with a university faculty, considers it very important to increase knowledge in this field to train future businessmen, political leaders, citizens, etc. that will have an impact on the mountain.

And fourthly, although this doctoral thesis represents a very specific case study in Spain, we believe that the way in which all the conditioning factors and variables of the space are analysed may represent an opportunity for other specific geographical spaces in other countries, since the factors that attract and push tourists are common at an international level. In this sense, the SWOT analysis is a very useful tool to identify the elements that can generate competitive advantages to improve the experience in these destinations.

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Annexes

Annex I. Summary of the Results of the Various Socio-Economic Variables Analysed

Table 22

Summary of results for the variable "gender of hikers".

Reference	Distribution (in percentage) of gender	Reference	Distribution (in percentage) of gender
E1	50% W 50% M	E10	50% W 50% M
E2	50% W 50% M	E11	40% W 60% M
E3	50% W 50% M	E12	45% W 55% M
E4	-	E13	30% W 70% M
E5	55% W 45% M	E14	50% W 50% M
E6	50% W 50% M	E15	50% W 50% M
E7	50% W 50% M	E16	-
E8	50% W 50% M	E17	-
E9	45% W 55% M	E18	-

Note: Source: Own elaboration based on the organisation of the information analysed in the interviews.

Table 23

Summary of results for the variable "age of walkers".

Reference	Age(s) (in years)	Reference	Age(s) (in years)
E1	From 30 to 70 Prevalence 35/50	E10	From 35 to 60
E2	From 25 to 75 Excursionists 40/60	E11	Between 35 and 50 Groups from 50 to 60
E3	From 25 to 50	E12	From 45 to 55
E4	Between 35 and 65	E13	From 25 to 60
E5	From 30 to 60	E14	From 40 to 55
E6	From 35 to 60 Prevalence 50/60	E15	From 25 to 45 prevalence From 45 to 65 minority
E7	From 40 to 50	E16	-
E8	From 40 to 50 Between 20/30 (minority)	E17	-
E9	From 55 to 65 From 20 to 35 (minority)	E18	-

Note: Source: Own elaboration based on the organisation of the information analysed in the interviews.

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Table 24

Summary of results for the variable 'types of groupings'.

Reference	Types of grouping	Reference	Types of grouping
E1	45% COU 45% FAM 5% IND 5% SG	E10	90% COU 10% FAM
E2	50% FAM 50% BG	E11	20% COU 70% FAM 10% BG
E3	90% COU 10% SG	E12	80% COU 10% FAM 10% BG
E4	-	E13	15% COU 15% FAM 65% SG 5% IND
E5	95% BG 4% COU 1% IND	E14	30% COU 35% FAM 15% SG 15% BG
E6	65% COU 30% FAM 5% IND	E15	40% COU 40% FAM 10% SG 5% BG 5% IND
E7	90% COU 10% BG	E16	-
E8	10% COU 80% FAM 10% BG (10 groups per year)	E17	-
E9	60% COU 20% FAM 10% BG 10% IND	E18	-

Note: Source: Own elaboration based on the organisation of the information analysed in the interviews.

Table 25

Summary of results for the variable "origin of hikers".

Reference	Place of origin	Reference	Place of origin
E1	1% international 99% national -70% Valencia -10% Castellón -15% Cataluña -5%: rest	E10	100% national -90% Com.Val. -10% Cataluña (Tarragona)
E2	5% international 95% national -80% Valencia -20% Castellón	E11	100% national (local tourism)
E3	3% international 97% national -80% Com. Val. -20% rest	E12	5%international 95% national: Valencia, Cataluña, Aragón, Madrid
E4	-	E13	1%international 99% national: Terres de l'Ebre, Castelló, Valencia, etc.
E5	100% national -90% Com.Val. -10% Cataluña	E14	100% national -79% Com.Val. -19% Cataluña -2% rest of Spain
E6	50% national (general) 50% international (european)	E15	20%international (Netherlands) 80%national: Com. Val. Cataluña, País Vasco, Aragón
E7	20%international 80% national -90% Com. Val. -10% Cataluña	E16	-
E8	5%international (Belgium, France, Switzerland, etc.) 95% national (general)	E17	-
E9	5%international (Oxford agency) 95% national (local tourism)	E18	-

Note: Source: Own elaboration based on the organisation of the information analysed in the interviews.

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Table 26

Summary of results for the variable "membership of federations".

Reference	Membership of federations	Reference	Membership of federations
E1	No	E10	No
E2	No	E11	No
	FAM		
	Yes BG		
E3	No	E12	No
E4	-	E13	Some
E5	Yes	E14	No
E6	No	E15	30% Yes 70% No
E7	No	E16	-
E8	No	E17	-
E9	No	E18	-

Note: Source: Own elaboration based on the organisation of the information analysed in the interviews.

Table 27

Summary of results for the variable 'type of clothing'.

Reference	Type of clothing	Reference	Type of clothing
E1	90% basic 10% technical	E10	25% basic 75% technical
E2	40% basic 60% technical	E11	50% basic 50% technical
E3	95% basic 5% technical	E12	30% basic 70% technical
E4	-	E13	50% basic 50% technical
E5	50% basic 50% technical	E14	50% basic 50% technical
E6	75% basic 25% technical	E15	50% basic 50% technical
E7	50% basic 50% technical	E16	-
E8	50% basic 50% technical	E17	-
E9	80% basic 20% technical	E18	-

Note: Source: Own elaboration based on the organisation of the information analysed in the interviews.

Table 28

Summary of results for the variable "predominant seasons".

Reference	Predominant seasons	Reference	Predominant seasons
E1	Weekends and holidays (spring and fall)	E10	Summer: June, July and August
E2	Weekends and holidays (spring and fall) June/July: schools	E11	Spring and autumn May: flowering species
E3	Holidays: Easter and Christmas April, August, October, November	E12	Spring and autumn Summer: very early
E4	-	E13	Spring and fall. Post-COVID: July, August and September
E5	Spring: April, May, June	E14	Spring and autumn Winter: to a lesser extent
E6	Holidays: Easter, October 9, November 1, etc.	E15	Spring and autumn Summer: to a lesser extent
E7	pring and autumn Extreme temperatures = low inflow	E16	-
E8	Weekends and holidays. August For school groups: June and July	E17	-
E9	Spring and autumn September Winter: significant influx	E18	-

Note: Source: Own elaboration based on the organisation of the information analysed in the interviews.

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Table 29

Summary of results for the variable 'ways of booking'.

Reference	Ways of booking	Reference	Ways of booking
E1	80% internet 20% telephone	E10	90% booking 5% web 5% telephone
E2	70% internet 30% telephone	E11	50% internet 50% telephone
E3	95% internet -80% booking -20% web 5% telephone	E12	70% internet (Predominantly booking) 30% telephone
E4	-	E13	33% web 34% WhatsApp 33% telephone
E5	80% internet 20% telephone (groups)	E14	5% web 95% telephone
E6	75% telephone 25% web	E15	25% web 75% telephone
E7	90-95% internet (booking) 5-10% telephone	E16	-
E8	50% web 50% telephone Increase WhatsApp	E17	-
E9	60% web 20% booking 20% telephone	E18	-

Note: Source: Own elaboration based on the organisation of the information analysed in the interviews.

Table 30

Summary of results for the variable 'complementary activities'.

Reference	Complementary activities	Reference	Complementary activities
E1	Pensions and excursions	E10	Pensions and picnic
E2	Pensions, excursions and workshops	E11	<i>Note: the interviewee belongs to a Tourist Office, so she does not have specific data on accommodations.</i>
E3	No. Overnight only	E12	<i>Note: the interviewee belongs to a Tourist Office. She does know the average prices of hotels in Morella. Average expenditure = 80/85€ (FB). Generalized adaptation to needs.</i>
E4	-	E13	Pensions, picnic, excursions Route of the 7 villages
E5	Pensions and picnic	E14	Pensions and picnic
E6	Pensions, excursions and workshops	E15	Pensions and picnic
E7	Pensions and picnic	E16	-
E8	Pensions and picnics Family trekking	E17	-
E9	Pensions and picnics Excursions Esp. cycling	E18	-

Note: Source: Own elaboration based on the organisation of the information analysed in the interviews.

Table 31

Summary of results for the variable 'Socio-economic impact'.

Reference	Socioeconomic impact	Reference	Socioeconomic impact
E1	Impact on local businesses Average spend FB: 50€ person/day	E10	Average spending during the week = 80€. Weekend = 100€ (FB)
E2	Impact on local businesses Average expenditure: 30/40€ person/day (HB)	E11	<i>Note: the interviewee belongs to a Tourist Office, so she does not have specific data on accommodations.</i>
E3	Impact on local businesses Overnight spending: 700€/4 days	E12	<i>Note: the interviewee belongs to a Tourist Office. She does know the average prices of hotels in Morella. Average expenditure = 80/85€ (FB). Generalized adaptation to needs.</i>
E4	-	E13	Average non-seasonal expenditure = 42€ (HB) Average seasonal expenditure = 45€ (HB)
E5	Impact on local businesses Average expenditure: 46€ person/day (HB)	E14	Average expenditure = 37€ (HB) Average expenditure = 47€ (FB)
E6	Business collaboration Average expenditure: 30/50€ person/day (HB)	E15	Average expenditure = 64€ (FB)
E7	Impact on local businesses Average spend: 50€ FB + on family audiences	E16	-
E8	Local business impact Average FB spending: in season 70/80€; out of season 50/60€. Includes leisure offer	E17	-
E9	Local business impact Average spending during the week = 32€. Weekend = 65€ (HB)	E18	-

Note: Source: Own elaboration based on the organisation of the information analysed in the interviews.

