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Tourism Development and Environmental Land-Use Planning: The Mallorca Experience

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This paper tries to make a compilation of problems relating island tourism development in the Balearic Islands and easy cheap mass airborne accessibility with increased wealth bringing to the abandonment of traditional uses of the land. The fate of land is to be built and sold to newcomers looking for sun and good weather. As a case study it describes the continued degradation of wetlands in the name of greed of a minority. A very different case of what happens in poor areas in the third world, where mismanagement of these areas come from ignorance of the values at stake or lack of resources to conserve them, a process powered by humans in the search of fulfilling basic needs.

Different tools have been used to conserve the natural heritage along the last 30 years. The association of one of these wetlands to Living Lakes has been the ultimate action, and will surely not be the last.

The Rich Also Cry

"A sustainable society is one that satisfies its needs without diminishing the prospects of future generations" If we accept as valid the definition of Sustainability enshrined in this phrase by Lester Brown, from the Worldwatch Institute, we must recognize that little sustainability is around the economic model developed in the Balearic Islands.

These lines are a resume of the document filed in the web <http://www.gobmallorca.com/livinglakes/salobrar.doc>, which contains a more reasoned background and comprehensive notes and links to related information. I hope to be able to create enough curiosity in all of you along these lines to see you rushing to the page and look for more.

Even if a participation process was done in the Balearics with the aims of setting the basis of a sustainable society and a process to define and evaluate a set of sustainability indicators has been done, including programs oriented to achieve the goal of sustainability, everywhere you look in the Balearic scenario you see clues that the direction the islands are moving is the opposite to sustainable future.

The Balearics, seen from the perspective of global investment, are a 'land of opportunities', with insufficient mechanisms in place to resolve the big unbalance between a limited territory and the demand of use of resources, mainly land use for new urban developments.

Recent developments in the regional scenario (Spain incorporation to the EU, the adoption of the Euro, the low interest rates for mortgages) added to old and well known problems (such as delictive money laundering) have increased greatly the demand for real estate, with a preference by the international speculative investment to target small and preferably limited markets. No correction mechanisms have been set up to deal with the problems created by this trend.

The topic of the Balearics being a 'Touristic Economy' is still grabbed in the minds of the majority of local and overseas citizens, business people and politicians, who have not yet realized that in the last years the biggest driver, by its single contribution to the growing of the gross internal product has been the construction of new houses instead of the tourism.

Allowing the free development of this big sector creates enormous wealth, but also troubles. Insufficiently regulated real state development in this specific conjunctural economic situation poses a series of cultural, social and environmental problems and challenges to the local society in terms of:

- direct destruction of landscape, way of life and natural heritage
- indirect destruction, due to accessory infrastructures for increased population (bigger roads, airport, power plants, sewage plants, hospitals,...)
- Increased production of Municipal Solid Waste and consumption of electricity. Need for new facilities and processing plants.
- water shortage to be solved increasing the dependence on fossil fuels (new desalination plants needed)
- as a result of these pressures on the environment, grave endangering of the touristic industry
- rise of housing prices feeds fears of a bubble and makes young people unable to afford the buying of a house
- immigrants needed to cover low-qualification jobs have huge problems to afford housing, and use to pile-up in infra-houses.
- construction cannot grow forever in a limited land.

The reorientation of the construction activity, with a reconversion plan for the involved human and capital resources is a need already flagged by the sector but not addressed by the political power.

A process to implement an economic tool -an ecotax- to provide a fund to fine-tune and compensate the impacts of the Touristic activity was setup by the local government in 1999-2003. The touristic sector was severely fighting against it and the ecotax was in the centre of the political battle that ended in the change of government in the 2003 elections, with a new right wing government withdrawing the ecotax.

GOB as a Social Actor Raising Awareness

GOB (Balearic Group of Ornithology and Defence of Nature) is a non governmental organisation and registered charity, legally founded in 1973. Details about objectives, structure, membership, funding, independence and others can be found in the website www.gobmallorca.com. Among natural areas, wetlands all around the Balearics have been widely destroyed or seriously damaged; only a few of them have a real protection and appropriately dimensioned management, and their declaration as protected areas has been the result of long term campaigns, demonstrations and legal initiatives driven mainly by GOB and widely supported by the local population.

Es Salobrar Joining Living Lakes

GOB campaign work for the conservation of the Salobrar-Es trenc area started 30 years ago. It constitutes a good example of the process that happened in other places in our Islands, that can be described as follows: For-profit groups pressing to create or take advantage from legal loopholes is followed by citizen's groups opposition and demonstration until new legal framework is established, often laying new loopholes forcing the environmentalists to be forever alert.

In this context of growing environmental problems and the recent political changes with the withdrawal of the eco-tax, the partnership of GOB and GNF (Global Nature Fund) wants to motivate especially German tourists and residents to support nature conservation work in Majorca as well as at international level, and also wants to build pressure into the local government and the Campos municipality to preserve the area.

Majorca is one of the most important destinations for German tourists and is getting more and more important for summer and third age German residents. German tour operators play an important economic role on the island and also influence politics.

Es Salobrar de Campos was officially declared an Associated Member of the Living Lakes network on the occasion of a press conference on Majorca on the UN water day 22nd March 2004. It is one more, and very useful, of the actions done by GOB to overcome threats to that natural area.

The Way Forward

From GOB perspective, the analysis of the position of the different actors shows that a long way is to be run, and that Touristic businesspeople, Construction and investment managers, Politicians, environmentalists, Labour Unions and other Social Movements need to go through a formal process to agree a model of contention of the development that allows the survival of the natural values of our archipelago.