

Conservation or recreation?
A critical study of the label ecotourism in the promotion of
Las Alpujarras and Sierra Nevada



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Abstract

Ecotourism has started to develop in the last 30 years all around the world as an alternative to mass tourism. However, both academia and industry have not agreed on a universal definition of ecotourism. This lack of agreement can be the cause of operational confusion in the tourism industry, as many companies, with different ideas of what ecotourism, claim to fit the mold.

In this thesis, I study the use of the label ecotourism in web promotion of the area of Las Alpujarras and Sierra Nevada in Spain. In order to see how companies and tourists reflect on ecotourism and which fundamentals of it they consider important, I have conducted web content and TripAdvisor research and surveyed people who have visited the area.

The results showed that companies have sustainable practices but prefer to highlight experiential aspects of ecotourism in their promotion, like authenticity and tranquility. Tourists on TripAdvisor reflected on these experiential aspects not directly related to ecotourism, while survey respondents' gave more importance to conservation and education and were knowledgeable of what ecotourism is. I conclude that the use of the label ecotourism in this area has been beneficial as it has stimulated the development of sustainable practices in the tourism industry.

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“And there in front of us, at the first break in the street, stretched the great plains of air with beyond them an inextricable tangle of colored mountains. The sound of water was all around us; there was a sense of greenery and freshness. No, I said to myself, the picture I formed of this place was not an illusion.”

South from Granada. Gerald Brennan.

Ecotourism is an approach to tourism that has started to develop in the last 30 years and consists, amongst other things, of sustainable travel to natural areas that minimizes the negative impacts. Three decades after the concept was first defined, both academics and tourism organizations do not seem to agree on what this type of tourism is exactly. Consequently, the word “ecotourism” is used by companies and destinations in their promotion and branding without a unified and defined set of characteristics in mind. This thesis departs from the existing confusion of who has the right to call their business or destination ecotourism and aims to present how the concept ecotourism is reflected on by companies and tourists in the area of Las Alpujarras in Southern Spain. Studying this region is especially interesting because it presents us with many businesses claiming to be ecotourism in their promotional materials as well as a particular set of historical and cultural developments that make it a unique place.

Las Alpujarras (also seen as La Alpujarra) is a rural area situated in the province of Granada in the southern Spanish region of Andalucía. It is located in the south face of the Sierra Nevada National Park. The possible origin of the name “Alpujarra” is explained in the book “La Alpujarra” by Pedro Antonio De Alarcon¹, giving three different options, all derivative from Arabic. The name could come either from “*al-bushera*”, “*abuxarra*” or “*albuxarrat*” meaning land of pastures, untamed land, or snowcapped sierra (Sierra Nevada), respectively. The area is formed by gorges, valleys and small terraces where fruit trees grow thanks to the fertility of the land and the mild climate.

¹ Pedro Antonio De Alarcon, *La Alpujarra: sesenta leguas a caballo precedidas de seis en diligencia* (Various publishers, 1874).

It is one of the most protected areas in Europe, with both nature and heritage being protected under different jurisdictions. In 2005 it was declared protected the Historical Site of La Alpujarra, which dedicates itself to the protection of a series of locations around the area like mines, irrigation canals (acequias), or churches that are deemed to conserve the traditional alpujarreño values.

The area of the Poqueira Gorge (Barranco de Poqueira) and the three villages there, which are the most touristic of Las Alpujarras, have been awarded the same degree of heritage protection. Furthermore, the natural surroundings are protected under three different jurisdictions. Since 1986 the area is a Biosphere Reserve as well as Natural Park protecting 86.208 ha of territory. This protection was incremented in 1999 to 88.965 ha with the declaration of Sierra Nevada National Park.

Las Alpujarras is formed by 47 villages belonging to the provinces of Granada and Almeria. However, the 25 villages belonging to the province of Granada are much more promoted and known than the 22 from Almeria, and therefore, this thesis will refer only to the Alpujarra Granadina (belonging to Granada). The region is divided into high, medium, and low sub-regions, depending on the altitude of the villages. The High Alpujarra is the most touristic of them all. However, the most populated villages, Orgiva, Ugijar, Cadiar, and Lanjarón, are not the most touristic ones, with the exception of the last one. In total, the region has 24.736 inhabitants, with some villages having 100 to as many as 5000 inhabitants.

The typical architectural style of the area, dating from Arabic times, is perhaps the most significant attraction point. Small whitewashed houses with flowers hanging from the balconies in small and steep streets are what one expects to find there. The rooftops of the houses called “terraos” are flat and covered in clay, and locals leave their peppers and corn to dry there. Some houses are connected with others through porticos called “tinaos”, and some “tinaos” are protected heritage. The area is also very well known for its handicrafts. Although ceramic and tile works can be bought all over the region, the most famous handicraft are the “jarapas.”. The jarapas are knitted cloths that serve as carpets, bed linen, or even fashion accessories. They were originally made of old pieces of plant fiber fabric, but now other artificial fabrics are also used. What has not changed is the use of Arabic wooden looms to produce them. Gastronomy is another significant asset of the region as it is influenced by the Arabic past of the area and the use of regional resources. The most famous dishes and main tourist dishes are spicy oatmeal (gachas picantes), trout with Serrano ham,

and alpujarreño dish (plato alpujarreño), which consists of a fried egg, chorizo sausage, blood sausage, potatoes, and pork loin. Other specialties that can be tasted or bought as souvenirs are goat cheese, honey, olive oil, fig bread and typical meringue-like sweets called “soplillos”.

Taking a closer look at the different villages allows us to see the features shared with the rest of the area as well as the local peculiarities. The most touristic area, as mentioned before, is the Gorge of Poqueira formed by the villages Capileira, Bubión, and Pampaniera, from a higher altitude to lower. The three villages are listed in the national network as “The most beautiful villages of Spain” and houses several museums. The house of agriculture, the interpretive center of gastronomy and the recreation of a typical alpujarreño house can be visited in Pampaniera while the museum-house of Pedro Antonio de Alarcon can be found in Capileira. These villages are so touristic that measures have been taken in Bubión such as rescheduling a religious festivity from January to summer to coincide with high season. The village of Bubión has developed in the last years a distinctive branding strategy after being awarded the recognition of “slow city.” The tourist office that is found in Pampaniera receives, according to last year’s report, an average of 288 visitors per month².

Furthermore, the larger village, Lanjarón, is known for different reasons than the above mentioned. Their medicinal spring waters have been the center of attention since the foundation of the health resort in the late XIX century. Lanjarón counts with the biggest tourist office of the area, a castle and the “popular route of the water” that takes tourist through the different fountains of the village which are decorated with Federico Garcia Lorca’s poems written in tiles. The last village to talk about because of its touristic interest is Trevez, the highest village in Spain. The village is located at an altitude of 1.476 meters and divided in high, medium and low neighborhoods. The most famous attractions of Trevez are the ham driers, in which the tourist can learn about the processes of producing serrano ham.

The National Park of Sierra Nevada is as well a crucial element in attracting tourism. The trails going to or surrounding the highest peaks (Veleta 3393m, and Mulhacen 3482m) received 780.702 visitors last year, marveled by the 66 endemic flora species and the 80 endemic fauna species. Inside the park, a ski station, star observatory and interpretation center can be found. The

² Instituto Nacional de Estadística INE, “Datos Turísticos Archivos. Visitantes a puntos de interes. Alpujarra y Valle de Lecrin,” Datos Turisticos Granada, accessed June 11, 2019, http://profesionales.turgranada.es/tipo_profesional/datos-turisticos/.

area was previously used for agriculture and shepherding purposes, but after its protection, it is now only exploited for tourism. However, the threats of tourism have incited several petitions to increase protection measures and extend the protected area in the last years³. These petitions have not been taken into account, and several insect species remain as endangered species.

Historically, La Alpujarras has had a constant influx of people from different parts of the world and of Spain. During the fifteenth century, the area was populated by Moorish communities who were then cast out of the country. Next, repopulation came a century later when Spanish families from the north were encouraged to settle in the abandoned villages and continue working in the Moorish orchards. Until the 20th century, these communities grew modestly. However, during and after the war, a significant number of villagers involved in agriculture moved to the bigger urban spaces in search of a better life. During the 1960s, it started to be repopulated again thanks to the influx of hippie movement followers from Western Europe that arrived in search of peace and contact with nature. In the beginning, they established themselves in communes, and later, in the 1970s, some started to purchase real estate. Then, there was a bigger increase in foreigner buying houses due to a calling effect caused by reasons like media coverage of the area, or famous British people buying houses there. It has continued until today to be home or summer residence to increasing numbers of English, German, French, and other Western European people. The most interesting case is the village of Orgiva, in which from a total of 5640 registered inhabitants in 2018, 1.330 were not Spanish but from the United Kingdom. Nowadays, orchard agriculture and traditional craftsmanship live side by side with day-trippers who hop-on and hop-off from buses, as well as ecotourists taking their time to discover the area.

The touristic infrastructure in the area is quite advanced for the standards of Spanish rural areas. The latest report on the state of tourism in the province of Granada mentions that Las Alpujarras counts with 6.740 hotel beds, mostly concentrated in seven villages.⁴ Those numbers do not count the 121 registered rural houses, the 1270 rent houses or apartments as well as illegal, or not,

³ "Cerca de Un Centenar de Plantas de Sierra Nevada Son Especies Vulnerables, Amenazadas o En Peligro Crítico," January 6, 2010,

<https://web.archive.org/web/20100106041625/http://prensa.ugr.es/prensa/campus/prensa.php?nota=1463>.

⁴ Patronato provincial de turismo, "Observatorio Turístico de La Provincia de Granada 2018" (TurGranada, 2018), http://profesionales.turgranada.es/wp-content/files_mf/1550483398OTGR_TOTAL_2018.pdf.

registered rentals. The profile of tourist that visits the area is also discussed in the said report stating that 94% of tourists are national, from which 60% are from the same region. The tourist is on average 50 years old, working or retired person that travels with a partner in their car and stays for 4,9 nights. The 63% of tourists visiting Las Alpujarras had booked accommodation online in booking websites. These tourists spend on average 60 euros per day and are visiting the area because of recommendations or previous knowledge of the region. 76% of tourists consider to be doing rural tourism, and surprisingly, 77% expressed their interest in regional handicrafts.

Because of the different migration patterns, there is now an increased population with different intertwined communities of hippies, foreign and Spanish neo-rurals, long-time rurals and non-permanent passerby's. Each one of these groups has different views and has given a different meaning to heritage and nature. For instance, lands that for some are spiritual, are the means of work or leisure for others. Due to the different influxes of people over time, it is hard to discern who can be called "locals." The existence of opposed views on the place and its meanings, and what is considered "sustainable" can have a great influence on touristic activity and how the area is presented in promotion material. The promotion of ecotourism experiences in the area raises many questions about the authenticity of this experience and the role of the population in it. Is this "ecotourism" something created, or is it old activities that have been rebranded? Who is benefiting from this label or type of tourism? What is considered to be "eco" in these activities or locations? Has the ecotourism label been beneficial or detrimental to the area?

The theme of my thesis is related to the promotion of ecotourism in this particular area of Spain. I will focus on how different perspectives about tourism activity in the area, and different views and meanings of nature and heritage are reflected on by the various stakeholders. My thesis will delve into these promotional web materials and analyze the content on the side of the offer as well as on the side of the demand. These types of analysis aim to create insights about the different notions of what ecotourism entails and provide an overview of ecotourism developments in the area and tourist expectations.

Regarding the relevance of my research, I consider it important to shift the focus on the ecotourism impacts research from developing countries to developed countries. In most of the developing world, ecotourism is developed as a problem-solving strategy to fight poverty or

deforestation,⁵ and therefore, has different outcomes than in the developed world, where ecotourism takes off with opportunity-driven motivations, in many occasions seeking the re-branding of a destination⁶. This thesis aims to understand the views of different stakeholders regarding the promotion of ecotourism in Las Alpujarras and Sierra Nevada in order to comprehend how offer and demand differ, or coincide, in their ideas of what principles are essential in the ecotourism experience. These insights can be valuable for further researching on the developed world of ecotourism and as examples of the notions of ecotourism of different stakeholders as represented online.

To put it into a research question with its sub-questions:

How is ecotourism manifested in the region of Las Alpujarras and Sierra Nevada in Spain?

-How is ecotourism present in promotional representations?

-How is ecotourism reflected upon by tourists who have visited the region?

Ecotourism appeared in the seventies when the hippie subculture that preached love for Mother Earth was integrated into mainstream American society. It was not until the nineties that it has its big boom after it was recognized, categorized, and marketed by the industry. From there on it is one of the sectors of tourism that has been rising more rapidly in the last 10 to 20 years.⁷

It is seen by the United Nations as a tool to work towards sustainable development,^{8,9} which was first defined by the Bruntland Commission Report¹⁰ as, “Sustainable development is the development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future

⁵ Donald Hawkins and Maryam Khan, “Ecotourism Opportunities for Developing Countries,” in *Global Tourism* (Routledge, 1998), 191.

⁶ Susan Place, “Ecotourism for Sustainable Development: Oxymoron or Plausible Strategy?,” *GeoJournal* 35, no. 2 (February 1, 1995): 161–73, <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF00814062>.

⁷ World Tourism Organization, “Tourism for Development – Volume I: Key Areas for Action” (UNWTO, Madrid, 2018), DOI: <https://doi.org/10.18111/9789284419722>.

⁸ M. Honey, *Ecotourism and Sustainable Development, Second Edition: Who Owns Paradise?* (Island Press, 2008), https://books.google.nl/books?id=Jw2hy_2E5nwC.

⁹ Robert Fletcher, *Romancing the Wild: Cultural Dimensions of Ecotourism*, New Ecologies for the Twenty-First Century (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014).

¹⁰ World Commission on Environment and Development, *Our Common Future* (Oxford University Press, 1987), <https://EconPapers.repec.org/RePEc:oxp:obooks:9780192820808>.

generations to meet their own needs.” The first definition of ecotourism was given by Ceballos-Lascurain when he coined the term ecotourism defining it as,

*"Tourism that involves traveling to relatively undisturbed natural areas with the specific object of studying, admiring and enjoying the scenery and its wild plants and animals, as well as any existing cultural aspects (both past and present) found in these areas."*¹¹

Since then, many different definitions have been given, sparking the debate about the need for a universally accepted definition. When searching the Internet, the most commonly accepted definition comes from The International Ecotourism Society, and it states that “Ecotourism is responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment, sustains the well-being of the local people, and involves interpretation and education”¹².

Both the touristic industry and tourism scholars are deeply invested in developing or researching ecotourism and other forms of sustainable tourism¹³. This interest corresponds to the worldwide increase of awareness in environmental matters¹⁴, and a guilt-ridden shift in travel behavior towards morally superior kinds of travel¹⁵. Another scholar also points at the tendencies developed in the globalized western world of longing for simpler places and times¹⁶ and different scenarios and cultures that differ from the ones we live in. In the touristic industry, this is translated into rising levels of demand and supply of ecotourism or sustainable tourism experiences¹⁷. In the academic world, journals such as the Journal of Sustainable tourism or the Journal of Ecotourism have appeared in the last 20 years, and there is a rising number of articles about the topic being published.¹⁸ Also, several worldwide, national or local conferences or forums are trying to understand the phenomenon with its causes and effects and determine the best ways to legislate

¹¹ H. Ceballos-Lascurain, *Tourism, Ecotourism, and Protected Areas: The State of Nature-Based Tourism around the World and Guidelines for Its Development*. (Cambridge: IUCN, 1996).

¹² “What Is Ecotourism,” *The International Ecotourism Society* (blog), accessed May 7, 2019, <https://ecotourism.org/what-is-ecotourism/>.

¹³ David B. Weaver and Laura J. Lawton, “Twenty Years on: The State of Contemporary Ecotourism Research,” *Tourism Management* 28, no. 5 (October 2007): 1168–79, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tourman.2007.03.004>.

¹⁴ Bryan Higgins and Paul Eagles, “Ecotourism Market Demand and Industry Structure,” in *Ecotourism*, 1998.

¹⁵ Jim Butcher, *The Moralization of Tourism: Sun, Sand... and Saving the World?* (London & New York Routledge, 2003).

¹⁶ Richard Sharpley and Deborah Jepson, “Rural Tourism: A Spiritual Experience?,” *Annals of Tourism Research* 38, no. 1 (January 1, 2011): 52–71, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.annals.2010.05.002>.

¹⁷ “Tourism: Investing in Energy and Resource Efficiency,” accessed May 10, 2019, https://sdt.unwto.org/sites/all/files/pdf/11.0_tourism.pdf.

¹⁸ David B. Weaver, “Comprehensive and Minimalist Dimensions of Ecotourism,” *Annals of Tourism Research* 32, no. 2 (2005): 439–55, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.annals.2004.08.003>.

and plan for its correct development¹⁹. All of these actions showcase the commitment of industry, academia, and organizations with advancing the knowledge and development of ecotourism.

However, ecotourism is not exempt from problems and dilemmas. There is no agreed view on what are the defining principles of ecotourism, and therefore, the definition is generally revisited and changed to benefit agendas and interests of experiences suppliers, governments, or academics²⁰. Due to the fact that the trend of ecotourism is growing, everybody wants to hop in on the golden wagon of ecotourism and the practice of marketing or portraying as green products that are not, known as “Greenwashing”²¹, is a problem. These are common hazards to the cause that perhaps could be better controlled with the agreement on a definition and parameters of what ecotourism entails. The scholarly debate is also emphasizing the importance of well-developed stakeholder relations as a tool to minimize undesirable impacts. Amongst the most discussed impacts in the literature is cultural and natural commodification in areas dedicated to ecotourism²²²³, altering the local meaning of these resources by commodifying them²⁴. Some questions to ask would be, if something can still be considered labeled ecotourism after it has had such a harmful impact on a community and how will we deal in the future with the massive interest in Ecotourism that threatens to strip the label of its principles.

Nowadays, researching about ecotourism is important due to the commitment of this activity with the 17 Sustainable Development Goals approved by all UN member in 2015²⁵. Ecotourism is in many places, especially in the developing world, a viable and economically profitable alternative

¹⁹ “ESTC 2017 Ecotourism and Sustainable Tourism Conference - 10YFP Sustainable Tourism Programme - TRAVEL ENJOY RESPECT,” accessed May 6, 2019, <http://www.tourism4development2017.org/es/events/estc-2017-ecotourism-and-sustainable-tourism-conference-10yfp-sustainable-tourism-programme-2/>.

²⁰ HollyM. Donohoe and RogerD. Needham, “Ecotourism: The Evolving Contemporary Definition,” *Journal of Ecotourism* 5, no. 3 (December 1, 2006): 192–210, <https://doi.org/10.2167/joe152.0>.

²¹ Thérèse Conway and Mary Cawley, “Defining Ecotourism: Evidence of Provider Perspectives from an Emerging Area,” *Journal of Ecotourism* 15, no. 2 (April 15, 2016): 122–38, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14724049.2016.1153105>.

²² E.W. George, H. Mair, and D.G. Reid, *Rural Tourism Development: Localism and Cultural Change*, Tourism and Cultural Change (Channel View Publications, 2009), <https://books.google.nl/books?id=vfEJAQAAMAAJ>.

²³ Fletcher, *Romancing the Wild*.

²⁴ L.A. Vivanco and R.J. Gordon, *Tarzan Was an Eco-Tourist—: And Other Tales in the Anthropology of Adventure*, Berghahn Series (Berghahn Books, 2006), <https://books.google.nl/books?id=wRPe12ljfOQC>.

²⁵ UNWTO “Tourism for Development – Volume I: Key Areas for Action.”

to deforestation and a tool in poverty relief and gender equity²⁶. Careful monitoring of its impacts is crucial to understand the social and cultural effect of this activity and to enable both scholars and industry professional to learn from the best and worst practices. In this thesis, the promotion of ecotourism in Las Alpujarras and Sierra Nevada will be studied, contributing then to study the views on the ecotourism experience, discussing the benefit or detriment that the label has brought to the region.

This thesis is formed by five chapters which give necessary understandings to answer the above-stated research questions in a logical manner. The first chapter summarizes the state of the research in ecotourism. Here, the scholar discussions on the definition of ecotourism are compiled. I gather interesting insights about the problems arising from the lack of a definition, like difficult measurement of ecotourism or operational confusion in tourist product providing companies. The existing research on the area is examined as well, explaining the protection figures and certifications there operating. Following this status questionis, a theoretical framework is provided, explaining the main concepts and theories necessary for the correct understanding of this thesis. Such concepts are cultural and natural heritage, sustainability, promotion, the moralization of tourism, and ecotourism in Spain. The next part of the theoretical framework locates the concept of ecotourism in Spain and elaborates on its development and promotion.

The second chapter presents the methodology. First, I present the primary sources and how these were analyzed on the basis of existing frameworks. Then, I explain more in-depth how the website analysis, TripAdvisor review analysis, and the survey were carried out, accounting for all methodological choices. In this chapter, I also present the ten tenets of ecotourism that will be mentioned throughout the thesis and explain their significance.

The third chapter delves into the first sub-question: How is ecotourism present in promotional representations? This chapter analyzes the findings from website content analysis of 21 websites belonging to tourism bureaus, accommodation providers, and activity providers. The use of the label ecotourism is analyzed together with image representations of the area and textual descriptions, providing an overview of the notions of ecotourism in the side of the offer in Las Alpujarras and Sierra Nevada.

²⁶ Mariel Aguilar-Støen, "Global Forest Conservation Initiatives as Spaces for Participation in Colombia and Costa Rica," *Geoforum* 61 (May 2015): 36–44, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2015.02.012>.

The fourth chapter focuses on the second sub-question: How is ecotourism reflected upon by tourists who have visited the region? In this segment, the results from the review analyses as well as from the survey are converted into insights. I analyzed the differences in the notions of ecotourism of tourists in the two different sources of information and argued that these differing views on ecotourism are a product of the moralization of tourism.

The fifth and last chapter serves as a conclusion and brings the analyses of the offer and the demand together in order to reflect on the different parts of the ecotourism experience in Las Alpujarras and Sierra Nevada. Here, I summarize the research process and go back to answer the research questions concretely. Afterward, I provide with broader insights on the development of ecotourism in the area and its promotion, discussing the role of certifications and assessing the impact of the ecotourism label in the area. I finish my thesis suggesting avenues for further research and reflecting on the importance of research as a tool for opening a conversation about ecotourism amongst various stakeholders.

Chapter 1: *The constant quest for a definition.* Literature review and theoretical framework.

Literature review

In 1981, Riddell²⁷ wrote about the eco-development that was starting to take place since the seventies and pointed at the reasons why people engage in eco-consumption. These included a desire to be useful, to enhance the ability of communities to be self-sufficient and to create a fair and just society. One of the activities or lifestyle changes that can be done to fulfill this ecological desires is to engage in ecotourism. On the basis of Dowling,²⁸ the authors of the book *Natural Area Tourism*²⁹ categorize the different types of tourism in nature by stating that they can be “in, about

²⁷ R Riddell, *Ecodevelopment: Economics, Ecology, and Development: An Alternative to Growth Imperative Models*. (Gower, London., 1981).

²⁸ Ross Dowling, “Environmental Education in New Zealand,” *Australian Journal of Environmental Education* 9 (1993): 21–32, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0814062600003165>.

²⁹ D. Newsome, *Natural Area Tourism*, Aspects of Tourism Series (Channel View Publications, 2017), <https://books.google.nl/books?id=AnmP1QXK1JEC>.

or for” the nature depending if they are adventure tourism (in), nature or wildlife tourism (about) or ecotourism (for).

Since the term was coined in the 1980s, the interest in ecotourism has been rising in the academic world³⁰. In 2007 Weaver³¹ referred to 400 different articles on the topic of ecotourism that had been written until the year 2006. Thirteen years have passed since that assessment, and the number of research papers on ecotourism continues to grow, as it can be seen in the numerous papers publishes yearly by the *Journal of Ecotourism*, the *Journal of Sustainable Tourism* or other tourism journals such as the *Annals of Tourism Research*. The academic literature on ecotourism is especially interested in topics like market segmentation, ecological impacts of wildlife viewing, and community-based ecotourism³², while at the same time they criticize the lack of attention to quality control, regulation of the industry and the discussion of ecotourism in public institutions. They suggested in 2007³³ that the academic field of ecotourism was “in a state of adolescence”.

Amongst the most discussed topic in the field of ecotourism is the definition of the term itself. The term was coined when Ceballos-Lascurain³⁴ defined it in the 1980s as:

“Tourism that involves traveling to relatively undisturbed natural areas with the specific object of studying, admiring and enjoying the scenery and its wild plants and animals, as well as any existing cultural aspects (both past and present) found in these areas.”

This definition was later first quoted and used by the IUCN (International Union for Conservation of Nature) in 1996. However, the idea of what are the principles of ecotourism varies in the literature. According to Ceballos-Lascurain³⁵, the concept is not well understood and therefore confused. Critique on his definition is brought on by Donahue and Needham³⁶, stating that the definition lacks the experiential side of this type of tourism. They also remark that ecotourism providers tend to label any activity done in the nature as ecotourism, and, that as the trend grows,

³⁰ Weaver, “Comprehensive and Minimalist Dimensions of Ecotourism.”

³¹ Weaver and Lawton, “Twenty Years On.”

³² Weaver and Lawton.

³³ Weaver and Lawton.

³⁴ Ceballos-Lascurain, *Tourism, Ecotourism, and Protected Areas: The State of Nature-Based Tourism around the World and Guidelines for Its Development*.

³⁵ Ceballos-Lascurain.

³⁶ Donohoe and Needham, “Ecotourism: The Evolving Contemporary Definition.”

it is more difficult to define what ecotourism is. This struggle is acknowledged in almost every scholar article as an introductory explanation. There are plenty of academic analyses of definitions³⁷. One of the most cited in the literature that has been reviewed for this chapter is the one in which Fennell³⁸ provides 85 definitions of ecotourism and analyses them. In these 85 definitions, there are plenty of conceptions about what the principles of ecotourism are.

A commonly cited overview of the characteristics of ecotourism is seen in Honey³⁹ and suggests that it is the tourism carried out in natural destinations, with an overall minimum impact, building awareness, creating financial benefit for conservation and financial benefit for locals, respecting local culture, and supporting human rights and democracy. The educational feature of this kind of tourism and its creation of awareness is what distinguishes it from other nature-based tourism^{40 41}.

The most common critic in the academic debate of the definition is about how this definition is reflected in the tourism industry. Ecotourism is, according to scholars, one thing in theory, and a different thing in practice⁴², and that the magnitude of the figures of ecotourism cannot be measured because it depends on the definition applied⁴³.

It is also a critic to ecotourism, to not consider it a kind of tourism but merely a label used for branding purposes. With the increase of eco-development and eco-consumption, many companies and destinations market themselves as “green”, “sustainable” or “eco” in what Donahue and Needham⁴⁴ call “environmental opportunism”. Harsh statements criticizing this situation have been made, affirming that ecotourism is no more than a marketing tool⁴⁵, that is just old products in a new “packaging”⁴⁶ or that it is only greenwashing by the tour operators⁴⁷. Companies that do

³⁷ Conway and Cawley, “Defining Ecotourism: Evidence of Provider Perspectives from an Emerging Area.”

³⁸ David A. Fennell, “A Content Analysis of Ecotourism Definitions,” *Current Issues in Tourism* 4, no. 5 (October 1, 2001): 403–21, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13683500108667896>.

³⁹ M. Honey, *Ecotourism and Sustainable Development: Who Owns Paradise?*, Ecotourism and Sustainable Development: Who Owns Paradise? (Island Press, 1999), https://books.google.nl/books?id=Qm_RonNzC7sC.

⁴⁰ Newsome, *Natural Area Tourism*.

⁴¹ Russell Blamey, *Principles of Ecotourism*, 2001.

⁴² Donohoe and Needham, “Ecotourism: The Evolving Contemporary Definition.”

⁴³ Fletcher, *Romancing the Wild*.

⁴⁴ Donohoe and Needham, “Ecotourism: The Evolving Contemporary Definition.”

⁴⁵ D Harrison, “World Ecotour ’97 Abstracts Volume,” in *Ecotourism in the South Pacific. The Case of Fiji* (Rio de Janeiro: Brazil: Biosfera, 1997).

⁴⁶ Place, “Ecotourism for Sustainable Development: Oxymoron or Plausible Strategy?”

⁴⁷ M. Mowforth and I. Munt, *Tourism and Sustainability: New Tourism in the Third World* (Routledge, 1998), <https://books.google.nl/books?id=ULR6fbdSxvgC>.

this are disregarding, or manipulating the fundamental principles of ecotourism, threatening the legitimacy of the industry, according to Donahue and Needham⁴⁸.

In his article about eco-labels, Buckley⁴⁹, stresses the necessity to regulate the certifications of sustainability. He suggests the importance to have in mind while researching, that some of these eco-labels are given by institutions while others are self-given, as well as having in mind that most of the regulating and certifying organisms are private firms or industry associations. However, Conway and Cowley⁵⁰ found in some cases a relation between the attainment of an ecotourism certification and increasing the awareness of features and measures related to ecotourism by the business owners. This research observed different certifications with different criterion and monitoring institutions.

The development of ecotourism raises many questions and worries both in theory and in practice. While Fennell⁵¹ argues that ecotourism is an expression of sustainable development and Fletcher⁵² emphasizes the link of this tourism with the international development communities' increasing preoccupation with environmental sustainability, other scholars like Newsome, Moore, and Dowling⁵³ point at the fact that the more popular ecotourism is, the more difficult is it to be ecologically and socially sustainable. The paradox within ecotourism is that visitors seek attractiveness in underdevelopment⁵⁴ while at the same time want to make a change in certain underdeveloped areas, which would cause development and therefore loss of interest⁵⁵. Threats to the sustainability of ecotourism can also be the visitors themselves, because, while destinations and companies might provide travel experiences that rely on the basic principles of ecotourism, it is to a great extent the travel behavior of the visitors what contributes or not to the sustainability

⁴⁸ Donahoe and Needham, "Ecotourism: The Evolving Contemporary Definition."

⁴⁹ Ralf Buckley, *Tourism Ecolabels*, vol. 29, 2002, [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0160-7383\(01\)00035-4](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0160-7383(01)00035-4).

⁵⁰ Conway and Cawley, "Defining Ecotourism: Evidence of Provider Perspectives from an Emerging Area."

⁵¹ D.A. Fennell, *Ecotourism: An Introduction* (Routledge, 2003), <https://books.google.nl/books?id=VAYYfo0gCpQC>.

⁵² Fletcher, *Romancing the Wild*.

⁵³ Newsome, *Natural Area Tourism*.

⁵⁴ Rosaleen Duffy, "The Politics of Ecotourism and the Developing World," *Journal of Ecotourism* 5, no. 1–2 (August 1, 2006): 1–6, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14724040608668443>.

⁵⁵ Richard Sharpley, "Ecotourism: A Consumption Perspective," *Journal of Ecotourism* 5, no. 1–2 (August 1, 2006): 7–22, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14724040608668444>.

of the activity⁵⁶. There is yet to wonder, as Budoski⁵⁷ did more than 40 years ago if tourism and nature will conflict, coexist or can create a symbiosis when it comes to ecotourism.

Theoretical framework

In this section, concepts that are pertinent to the research and will be mentioned during the analyses and discussion, are defined and discussed. Additionally, an overview of the state ecotourism in Spain, its development and promotion is hereby provided.

Cultural and natural heritage

Cultural heritage is, according to UNESCO, “the legacy of physical artifacts and intangible attributes of a group or society that are inherited from past generations, maintained in the present and bestowed for the benefit of future generations”⁵⁸. It is formed by tangible and intangible heritage. On the other hand, natural heritage is defined by UNESCO as “natural features, geological and physiographical formations and delineated areas that constitute the habitat of threatened species of animals and plants and natural sites of value from the point of view of science, conservation or natural beauty. It includes nature parks and reserves, zoos, aquaria, and botanical gardens”⁵⁹. UNESCO acknowledges the relation between cultural and natural heritage in the form of “cultural landscapes,” which are “certain sites reflect specific techniques of land use that guarantee and sustain biological diversity. Others, associated in the minds of the communities with powerful beliefs and artistic and traditional customs, embody an exceptional spiritual relationship of people with nature.”⁶⁰

⁵⁶ Sharpley.

⁵⁷ Gerardo Budowski, *Tourism and Environmental Conservation: Conflict, Coexistence, or Symbiosis?*, vol. 3, 1976, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0376892900017707>.

⁵⁸ “Tangible Cultural Heritage | United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization,” accessed June 17, 2019, <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/cairo/culture/tangible-cultural-heritage/>.

⁵⁹ UNESCO World Heritage Centre, “The World Heritage Convention,” UNESCO World Heritage Centre, accessed June 17, 2019, <https://whc.unesco.org/en/convention/>.

⁶⁰ UNESCO World Heritage Centre, “Cultural Landscapes,” UNESCO World Heritage Centre, accessed June 17, 2019, <https://whc.unesco.org/en/culturallandscape/>.

Scholars mentioned by Timothy⁶¹ agree that the main concept that characterizes heritage is: “what we inherit from the past and use in the present day.” He mentions that the terms cultural tourism and heritage tourism are often separated but overlapping in both academia and industry. Cultural tourism is often considered to refer to visiting living displays of culture, while heritage would be visiting dead forms of culture in the form of ancient relics⁶². Timothy mentions in his conclusion that natural heritage should be considered of importance, as often the cultural heritage of a region has been shaped by the natural surroundings. He defends an integrative approach to nature and cultural tourism, due to the fact that in some case are inseparable.

Heritage tourism is a powerful sector in the tourism industry. According to UNWTO, in 2015, 40% of international travelers considered themselves to be cultural tourists⁶³. However when looking at tourism stats from 2016 in Las Alpujarras only 3,2% considered themselves to be doing cultural tourism and the majority stated that they were doing rural tourism (76’7%), nature tourism (20’5%) or gastronomic tourism (21’5%). It is then peculiar that when asked about the activities done in the area or their interests, numbers mentioning cultural heritage assets are much higher. 22’1% of tourists were interested in attending traditional festivals as well as the 84% interested in typical gastronomy or the 34% interested in handicrafts. These numbers indicate that even though tourists did not consider cultural heritage the element that defines the kind of tourism they took part in, as cultural heritage is indeed everywhere.

In this thesis, all of these elements, like traditions, handicrafts, and gastronomy, are considered cultural heritage. I consider these elements of cultural heritage to be key inside the ecotourism experience, as reflected on by both companies and tourists. Nature and cultural heritage are discussed not as separate entities of an experience, but rather as complementary of each other as they are closely interrelated in this region. I argue that that cultural heritage is a much bigger part of ecotourism than what existing definitions portray.

⁶¹ Dallen. J Timothy, *Cultural Heritage and Tourism: An Introduction*. (Aspects of Tourism. Channel View Publications, 2011).

⁶² Timothy.

⁶³ “Cultural Heritage | World Tourism Organization UNWTO,” accessed June 17, 2019, <http://www2.unwto.org/content/cultural-heritage-1>.

Sustainability

Sustainability is defined by the Cambridge dictionary as “the quality of causing little or no damage to the environment and therefore able to continue for a long time”⁶⁴. The United Nations proposed in 2015 a set of 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) that have been adopted by the international community to ensure the wellbeing of the planet and people living in it. According to UNWTO, tourism is an important tool in achieving some of them, but there is one specific goal in which tourism has much impact. Goal number 12, responsible consumption and production, is according to UNWTO, where tourism can play a significant role⁶⁵. In order to contribute, the UN suggests to “develop and implement tools to monitor sustainable tourism”⁶⁶. The World Tourism Organization defines sustainable tourism as “tourism that takes full account of its current and future economic, social and environmental impacts, addressing the needs of visitors, the industry, the environment, and host communities”⁶⁷. Sustainable tourism, as well as sustainable development, consists of three different dimensions interconnected continuously, which are environment, economy, and society⁶⁸. Ecotourism is considered by UNWTO to be a type of niche tourism inside the broad definition of sustainable tourism.

In this thesis, the notions, beliefs, or ideas that are related to ecotourism are studied. In the area studied in this thesis, ecotourism is a sustainable alternative to an otherwise development of mass tourism. It is crucial to define the word sustainability, as it is used in many of the promotional materials studied hereby. However, the same as with ecotourism, it is difficult, not to say impossible, to determine which definition or notions of sustainability were in mind of the users of the word.

⁶⁴ “Significado de SUSTAINABILITY en el Diccionario Cambridge inglés,” accessed June 17, 2019, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/es/diccionario/ingles/sustainability>.

⁶⁵ “Tourism and the SDGs | Institutional Relations and Resource Mobilization,” accessed June 17, 2019, <https://icr.unwto.org/content/tourism-and-sdgs>.

⁶⁶ “Tourism & Sustainable Development Goals – Tourism for SDGs,” accessed June 17, 2019, <http://tourism4sdgs.org/tourism-for-sdgs/tourism-and-sdgs/>.

⁶⁷ “Definition | Sustainable Development of Tourism,” accessed June 17, 2019, <http://sdt.unwto.org/es/node/35792>.

⁶⁸ Ivana Ilic-Krstic, Aleksandar Ilic, and Danijela Avramović, *THE THREE DIMENSIONS OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT: ENVIRONMENT, ECONOMY AND SOCIETY*, 2018.

Promotion

Promotion is defined by The Economic Times as “the entire set of activities, which communicate the product, brand, or service to the user. The idea is to make people aware, attract, and induce to buy the product, in preference over others”⁶⁹. It is commonly used interchangeably with the “marketing”. However, marketing is the union and coordination of the 4P’s or four principal components. Promotion is one of those elements together with price, product, and place. Promotion at the same time is separated into two elements: “push” and “pull” promotion.

The promotion that takes part on the internet through websites forms part of the “pull” element of promotion because the actions aim to communicate to the client instead of pressure the purchase⁷⁰. This thesis focuses on this kind of promotion due to the fact that website promotion and online booking or reviewing services have changed the process of decision-making in the tourism industry in the last 25 years⁷¹.

The promotion of ecotourism is such an interesting topic because on the one hand destinations are promoted as unspoiled locations, nature, and responsibility, and at the same time, that information is available online for the whole world to see. This creates the dilemma of how to promote ecotourism without risking extreme interest and detrimental impacts. In this thesis, I focus on website promotion and how, through it, a term like “ecotourism” can be used and spread freely. I problematize this because the growing use of the word ecotourism in promotion makes it even harder to define what this type of tourism entails. This use can be even detrimental when featured as a mere branding strategy not followed by actual sustainable measures. Therefore, it is important to understand the use of the label ecotourism in website promotion.

⁶⁹ “Definition of Promotions | What Is Promotions ? Promotions Meaning,” The Economic Times, accessed June 17, 2019, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/definition/promotions>.

⁷⁰ Andrea Barragan, “¿Qué diferencia hay entre las estrategias push y pull en marketing? | Revista Merca2.0 |,” *Revista Merca2.0* (blog), September 11, 2015, <https://www.merca20.com/diferencia-estrategias-push-pull-marketing/>.

⁷¹ Guardian Staff, “How the Internet Has Changed Travelling,” *The Guardian*, August 26, 2006, sec. Travel, <https://www.theguardian.com/travel/2006/aug/26/travelwebsites>.

Moralization of tourism

Moralization is defined as “to reflect on or express opinions about something in terms of right and wrong, especially in a self-righteous or tiresome way”⁷². Those opinions and discussions are also present in the field of tourism. According to Butcher⁷³, there are two notions present in nowadays society that have contributed to the public and private discussion of the morality of tourism. The first idea characterizes mass tourism as a damaging kind of activity, hence the beneficial contraposition of other kinds of tourism, like ecotourism. The other assumption is that these “ethical” forms of tourism (ecotourism, volunteer tourism, pro-poor tourism) are not only better as a kind of tourism but also are better for tourists as individuals. Butcher considers ecotourism to be the forefront of this moralization and characterizes it as a “rejection of western development” and a source for the modern search of “enlightenment”, which he doubts is equal to education. Other scholars like Poon⁷⁴ had already criticized many years ago that the moralization of tourist was happening due to the fact that “new” forms of tourism were not being proposed as an option for leisure but more as a solution to existing problems caused by mass tourism. In the case of Las Alpujarras, it is not proposed as a solution but more as an alternative to the mass tourism happening in the surrounding seaside towns.

In this thesis, morality is discussed in relation to the reflections of travelers about their experiences in the area of Las Alpujarras. I argue that responses about the notions of ecotourism of survey participants and TripAdvisor reviewers differ due to the moralization of tourism. Respondents are perhaps more inclined to give socially desired answers in order to portray themselves as morally superior and knowledgeable of ethic forms of tourism.

Ecotourism in Spain

Ecotourism in Spain is a relatively new development. The national tourism bureau considers that the different certifications determine the offer of ecotourism product. Certifications considered for

⁷² “Definition of Moralization | Dictionary.Com,” [www.dictionary.com](https://www.dictionary.com/browse/moralization), accessed June 17, 2019, <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/moralization>.

⁷³ Butcher, *The Moralization of Tourism: Sun, Sand... and Saving the World?*

⁷⁴ A. Poon, “Competitive Strategies for a ‘New Tourism’ .,” *Progress in Tourism, Recreation and Hospitality Management* 1 (1989): 91–102.

this are ECTS, Biosphere Reserves, and Geoparks. This network of certified ecotourism sites and companies is organized and has a steadily growing size. Thirty-two different Natural Parks (ENPs) and 654 companies operating within the limits of the park are accredited with ECTS in 2018, which doubles the numbers from 2014⁷⁵. The central discourse of the national tourism bureau (Tourspain-Turespaña) is that ecotourism aims to reconnect with nature with the help of experienced companies⁷⁶. Ecotourism in Spain is marketed through the state-run, non-profit organization Ecotourism Club in Spain and their brand #soyecoturista/#ecotouristinSpain. All of the destinations and companies promoted by them are ECTS/Biosphere/Geopark accredited entities. In their website, they provide with public-friendly descriptions of what the certifications mean and why are they important, focusing on the actions done for conservation instead of focusing on how that impacts the prospective tourists.

The government of Spain has since many years ago written policy documents on nature tourism, but since 2012 it has acknowledged ecotourism in both the PSTN⁷⁷ (Nature tourism plan 2014-2020) and the PNIT⁷⁸ (National tourism plan 2012-2015). In these policy documents, they point at the need to consolidate, encourage, and promote ecotourism products and destinations. In 2016 the first national congress of ecotourism in Spain was celebrated in Daimiel (Spain). There, coinciding with the centenary of the declaration of the first Spanish National Park, a declaration of ecotourism was redacted and signed to increment the cooperation between public and private stakeholders involved in the regulating, developing and promoting of ecotourism⁷⁹. In the declaration, ecotourism is defined using the definition provided by TIES⁸⁰. This thesis considers the origins and development of ecotourism in Spain and makes use of the promotional tools available to reflect on the importance of certifications in promotion versus the use of the ecotourism label.

⁷⁵ "Empresas Adheridas a La CETS | EUROPARC - España," accessed June 17, 2019, <http://www.redeuroparc.org/actividades/carta-europea-turismo-sostenible/empresas-adheridas-a-la-cets>.

⁷⁶ Congreso Turismo Rural, "Situación Del Ecoturismo En España," (Viajes, 11:30:33 UTC), <https://es.slideshare.net/CongresoTurismoRural/ricardo-situacin-del-ecoturismo-2014>.

⁷⁷ "Plan sectorial de turismo de naturaleza y biodiversidad 2014-2020," accessed June 17, 2019, https://www.miteco.gob.es/es/biodiversidad/temas/conservacion-de-la-biodiversidad/conservacion-de-la-biodiversidad-en-espana/cb_esp_plan_sect_turismo_nza_y_biodiversidad.aspx.

⁷⁸ "Ministerio de Industria, Comercio y Turismo - Plan Nacional e Integral de Turismo (2012-2015)," accessed June 17, 2019, <https://turismo.gob.es/es-es/servicios/Paginas/Plan-Nacional-Integral-Turismo.aspx>.

⁷⁹ "DECLARACIÓN DE ECOTURISMO DE DAIMIEL (Noviembre, 2016)," *SoyEcoturista.com* (blog), December 22, 2016, <http://soyecoturista.com/declaracion-de-ecoturismo-de-daimiel-noviembre-2016/>.

⁸⁰ "What Is Ecotourism."

Ecotourism in Sierra Nevada

The natural area of Sierra Nevada was declared National Park in 1999. It covers a land area of 85.883 ha and has social and economic effects over an area of influence of 266.690 ha⁸¹. Apart from being a National Park, it is certified as a natural area of importance for biodiversity conservation by Natura 2000⁸², Unesco Biosphere Reserve⁸³, CETS⁸⁴, and UICN⁸⁵. In the year 2015, it was the 6th park in Spain in visitor number with a total of 780.702 visitors, increasing the number by 100.000 more visitors than the ones received the previous year of 2014⁸⁶.

The organization in charge of the managing of National Parks in Spain since 1995 is the OAPN (Organismo Autonomico de Parques Nacionales) public organism dependent from the Ministry of Agriculture, Fishing, Food, and Environment. Several protected natural spaces (ENPs) in Spain are part of ECST (European Charter of Sustainable Tourism, CETS in Spanish), a European initiative carried out by EUROPARC, the European network organism of protected natural areas. Sierra Nevada and some of the companies operating within the limits of the park are part of ECST, therefore, being certified at a European level as a sustainable area.

While the OAPN has directed many of its efforts in researching issues relating to the biodiversity and geological features of the area of Sierra Nevada, there is a lack of research on the impacts of the touristic activity, which they recognize to be harmful when not correctly monitored⁸⁷. The only assessments of the impacts of massive visitor influx are carried out by the private ski station located in the National Park, and it focuses mostly on the economic impact of the different seasons and special events⁸⁸.

⁸¹ MITECO, "Parque Nacional de Sierra Nevada," 2019, <https://www.miteco.gob.es/es/red-parques-nacionales/nuestros-parques/sierra-nevada/>.

⁸² "Red Natura 2000 | EUROPARC - España," accessed May 12, 2019, <http://www.redeuroparc.org/actividades/red-natura-2000>.

⁸³ "Red Española de Reservas de La Biosfera - Ficha de La Reserva," accessed May 12, 2019, <http://rerb.oapn.es/red-espanola-de-reservas-de-la-biosfera/reservas-de-la-biosfera-espanolas/mapa/sierra-nevada/ficha>.

⁸⁴ "Desarrollo Sostenible En El Parque Nacional de Sierra Nevada," CETS. 2014. n.d.

⁸⁵ "Protected Areas and the IUCN Green List in Andalusia, Spain," IUCN, July 23, 2014, <https://www.iucn.org/content/protected-areas-and-iucn-green-list-andalusia-spain>.

⁸⁶ "Red de Parques Nacionales: Visitantes," 2017, <https://www.miteco.gob.es/es/red-parques-nacionales/la-red/gestion/visitantes.aspx>.

⁸⁷ MITECO, "Parque Nacional de Sierra Nevada."

⁸⁸ "Estudio Impacto Económico Sierra Nevada 2017 | Sierra Nevada 2017," accessed May 12, 2019, <https://sierranevada2017.es/es/ultimas-noticias/estudio-impacto-econ%C3%B3mico-sn2017/>.

Obtaining the sustainable certification ECST in 2004 meant the start of branding and positioning strategy that follows up until current times. Attaining the certification entailed a series of undertakings that had to take place in order to comply with the European standards of sustainability. The objective of these activities was to educate regional organisms, business owners and population in environmental and social matters, to improve the environmental behavior of companies and to enhance the corporate social responsibility of the companies operating in the National Park area so they would contribute to sustainable rural development⁸⁹. The culmination of these initiatives was included in the editing and publishing of the first guide of ecotourism in Spain.⁹⁰

Following the creation in Spain of “El club del ecoturista”, a national network and ecotourism experiences booking site, a strategic plan of ecotourism of Sierra Nevada for the years 2010- 2013 was created by Europarc, CETS, and the Ministry of Agriculture, Fishing, Food, and Environment. First of all, the plan analyses the offer of activities, experiences, and lodging options that were susceptible to be incorporated into the general branding strategy. The planning, developing and monitoring of the strategic plan were carried out with the help of several local action groups for the development of the rural areas (ADRs) ensuring local participation on every stage of the planning⁹¹

Las Alpujarras: current state of the research

Las Alpujarras is the rural area surrounding the National park of Sierra Nevada. The research done in the area focuses primarily on the history and uses of the region. During the fifteenth century, the territory was organized in “tahas” or small circumscriptions of houses and orchards. Olive trees, wheat, grain, and vineyards were forming the landscape. After the majority of Moorish people were cast out of the area, it is estimated that 10.000 Moorish people managed to stay and host the new 6798 people that repopulated the many abandoned houses of the area in 1570⁹².

⁸⁹ “Empresas Adheridas a La CETS | EUROPARC - España.”

⁹⁰ “Turismo de España | Información Turística de España | Spain.Info España,” accessed May 20, 2019, <https://www.spain.info/es/>.

⁹¹ “Red Natura 2000 | EUROPARC - España.”

⁹² Maria del Carmen Trillo San Jose, *La Alpujarra. Historia, Arqueología y Paisaje. Analisis de Un Territorio En Epoca Medieval*. (Granada. Diputacion Provincial, 1992).

During the twentieth century, tourism started to increase with similar interest in the area than today's visitors according to Trillo San Jose⁹³ these attracting features are the mountains, agricultural landscape, architecture, and traditional way of living. Tourism was already a profitable business since the first years of the twentieth century, mostly in the village of Lanjarón, famous for its medicinal waters.⁹⁴

The area is perceived as separate from the rest of the province and the rest of Andalusian culture when speaking about culture, lifestyle, and values. The secluded geography of the regions it is said to be the reason for the distinct identity and the conservation of traditions and landscapes⁹⁵. In the studio by the Secretaria General de Ordenación de Territorio (STOGU), the new population of the villages refers to the slow way of living, tradition and life quality as the main motives to choose the area. However, there are also concerns regarding the extremely idealized images of the way of living portrayed in promotion and media. Tourists demand to see these representations in their visit, threatening the daily lives of the villages and commodifying their culture.

Las Alpujarras has been a source of inspiration to many writers since the eighteenth century. One of the oldest Travel books in the Spanish language is by Pedro Antonio de Alarcón and it is called "La Alpujarra: sixty leagues by horse and six by carriage". The Moorish history of the region also inspired Julio Caro Baroja to write *The Moorish of the Kingdom of Granada*. Other famous works of travel literature in English are *La Alpujarra, secret Andalusia* by Jean Christian Spahni, Richard Ford's *Manual for travelers in Andalucía*, or José Guglieri's *Alpujarreño Alps*. A book that has had special repercussion outside of Spain was British author Gerald Brenan's *South from Granada* in which he narrates his years in a charming and authentic area in which he ended up almost by coincidence⁹⁶. The book was turned into a movie in the year 2003.

The social composition of the villages has fluctuated over time. According to the article "Turismo rural y desarrollo local: Estudio de caso del Sur de España," the flow of new foreigner residents that plan to open a business, and their different business management ideas have created

⁹³ Trillo San Jose.

⁹⁴ Francisco Entrena Durán, "Turismo rural y desarrollo local: estudio de caso del Sur de España," *Revista Mexicana de Sociología*, 2006, 39.

⁹⁵ SGOTU Secretaria general de ordenacion del territorio, "Catalogo de Paisajes de Andalusia" (Universidad de Sevilla. Centro de estudios paisaje y territorio, 2015).

⁹⁶ Durán, "Turismo rural y desarrollo local: estudio de caso del Sur de España."

tensions with public organisms and Spanish residents⁹⁷. Since the year 1981, the houses used as second residences in the villages have increased dramatically from 488 in 1981 to 1066 in the year 2001⁹⁸, while the first residence houses have barely increased by 150 houses. The presence of the natural park, later declared National Park, was an incentive for the protection of traditional architecture and further building in a conservative way, as townships realized conservation would provide an economic future⁹⁹. However, the houses remodeled for tourist use are completely equipped with all modern life commodities that tourists demand, creating the common dichotomy between demanding authenticity but within the limits of comfort. The increase of these non-permanent citizens has brought up problems due to the fact that the majority of them do not pay taxes in the municipality but demand and consume the precarious public services that the villages offer. Apart from the non-permanent resident, one can also find in the area what Buckley¹⁰⁰ calls “amenity migrants” who found their favorite holiday spot and then overtime decided to move there permanently, having a great impact on real estate prices. This population is also called neo-rurals by Chavalier¹⁰¹.

Chapter 2: Methodology

In the previous chapter an overview of the state of research on ecotourism is provided, as well as an introduction to the development and promotion of ecotourism in Spain and the complex history of the area of Las Alpujarras. Some of the strengths and weaknesses of ecotourism and its promotion are adverted, such as the growing awareness in sustainability and ethical forms of travel or the lack of agreement of a definition and the problem that greenwashing is, all together raising the research questions that this thesis aims to answer.

⁹⁷ Durán.

⁹⁸ Durán.

⁹⁹ Durán.

¹⁰⁰ Ralf Buckley, “Social Trends and Ecotourism: Adventure Recreation and Amenity Migration,” *Journal of Ecotourism* 4, no. 1 (June 1, 2005): 56–61, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14724040508668438>.

¹⁰¹ Michel Chevalier, “Neo-Rural Phenomena,” *L’Espace Géographique*, 1993, 175–91.

How is ecotourism manifested in the region of Las Alpujarras and Sierra Nevada in Spain?

-How is ecotourism present in promotional representations?

-How is ecotourism reflected upon by tourists who have visited the region?

In this chapter, the methodology used to give an answer to the research questions is presented. First, a description of the sources consulted and methods used such as web content analysis and interviews, while reflecting on their positive and negative points is provided. Following this, it is explained how the results were analyzed, if they answered my research questions and if these findings and insights can be applied in another context.

Primary sources

I chose a selection of websites about tourism in the area of Sierra Nevada and Las Alpujarras, paying particular attention to those that mention ecotourism or sustainability in any way. These websites can be categorized depending on their aim and ownership. A total of 21 websites were analyzed from which seven belong to national, regional or local tourism bureaus or public institutions, seven belong to private experience or tour providers, and another seven belong to private accommodation providers. In addition to the analyzed websites, I collected a selection of reviews from the researched accommodations or experience provider companies selected on Tripadvisor in order to analyze the satisfaction of the tourists with the services provided by these companies. Finally, a survey was conducted with a total of 54 respondents, with the aim of generating insights about the notions of sustainability in visitors to the studied area, as well as general insights into the visitor experience in the area.

Methodology

Website analysis

I made use of Google Search as the search engine to find the analyzed websites. The decision to use the internet to find promotional material and information about the offer is justified by the increasing importance of website content on travel decision. According to data from 2012, 62% of American leisure travelers begin their travel decision process by researching locations, hotels, or experiences online¹⁰². In addition to the social relevance of website content, this methodology is more straightforward and more economical than fieldwork¹⁰³, although it has also been criticized for being a constantly changing source of information¹⁰⁴.

A total of 21 websites, divided into seven promotion websites, seven websites from experience providers and seven from accommodation providers were analyzed. The aim of the research was to examine how these companies and organizations use the label ecotourism for their promotion and possible benefit.

The promotional websites chosen belong to all the different levels of public tourism promotion being national, regional, and local. They were chosen due to the fact that they are the official mechanisms of promotion and represent the different levels of governance inside Spain, which can give insights about each level's priorities when it comes to tourism promotion online.

The websites belonging to accommodation providers were selected in a different way. At first, I looked at the sites that were listed as recommended on the official ecotourism website of Spain, "Soy Ecoturista". It was found during this first selection that the hotels were in their majority ECST certified but that almost none of them made use of the ecotourism label on their website, as words like "ecotourism", "sustainable" or "responsible" (in their Spanish translations) were nowhere to be found. As this thesis aims to study the use of the ecotourism label, these

¹⁰² "How Travelers Use Online Sources for Travel Decision-Making," Frederic Gonzalo, September 11, 2012, <https://fredericgonzalo.com/en/2012/09/11/how-travelers-use-online-sources-for-travel-decision-making/>.

¹⁰³ Inhwa Kim and Jasna Kuljis, *Applying Content Analysis to Web-Based Content*, vol. 18, 2010, <https://doi.org/10.2498/cit.1001924>.

¹⁰⁴ Kim and Kuljis.

accommodations were rejected. Therefore the criteria to select accommodation websites was based in searching on Google “ecotourism in Sierra Nevada” “ecotourism in Las Alpujarras” “eco-hotel Sierra Nevada” and “eco-hotel in Las Alpujarras” in English as well as in Spanish.

The selection made includes seven accommodation websites that use the ecotourism label on their site and that were listed higher in the search engine. This means that the sites are popular or that the owners paid money to optimize the SEO positioning, which points to an already existing benefit due to the label or an intention to position themselves as part of the ecotourism experience. Search engine organization is a tool to improve online positioning of websites, meaning language is used inside websites in a strategized way in order to appear on a priority position on search engines. Therefore, if a company wants to be ranked high on search engines when a user searches “ecotourism in...”, they can either organically optimize their language, images, HTML or design a SEM strategy (Search Engine Marketing) that will involve paying for adds on platforms like Adwords to increase website traffic. Either way, the high ranking presence of the selected websites points at an interest to generate benefit through their online promotion, and due to the fact that these companies appear listed when searching “ecotourism...” indicates that they expect to profit from using the label. The number of accommodation sites, seven, was chosen to balance with the number of selected promotional sites. Also because each one of these accommodations selected had something unique to be studied on their own being some rural houses, other rural hotels, hostels, apartments, cave houses or country states, which provides with a variety of business models to study and compare. They were chosen based on their SEO positioning

The experience provider websites were also selected in a similar way. Even though there were several certified businesses listed in “Soy Ecoturista”, the selection chosen was formed by companies who explicitly make use of the label ecotourism in their online promotional material. Again, their SEO positioning on Google was of importance in the selection as popularity or investment translates into benefit or expected benefit through the use of the label ecotourism in their website promotion. In this case, also, seven websites were selected to be analyzed due to the fact that they provided different kinds of activities involving natural and culture heritage and that all of these companies were advertised as ecotourism. Therefore, because of that variety in activities, it was interesting to research why did these very different companies consider themselves to fit the ecotourism label.

The approach to analyzing the website content is based on Pauwels' "multimodal framework to analyze websites as forms of cultural expression"¹⁰⁵, in which first impressions, salient features, verbal and written analyses are carried out in a detailed and organized way. To do so, several things were taken into consideration when looking at a website. An inventory of the activities offered was made, followed by an inventory on the elements of nature and culture included or mentioned in the experience. Then, images are analyzed and accounted in different categories, and their relation with the texts is studied.



Figure 2 Multimodal Framework for Analyzing Websites. Pauwels, 2011¹⁰⁶

The website analysis aims to answer the question: How these companies and organizations use the label ecotourism for their promotion and possible benefit? I looked at which principles, dimensions, or characteristics of ecotourism these companies mention in their website promotion.

¹⁰⁵ Luc Pauwels, *A Multimodal Framework for Analyzing Websites as Cultural Expressions*, vol. 17, 2012, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1083-6101.2012.01572.x>.

¹⁰⁶ Pauwels.

The aim is to see how are they defining what ecotourism is and how is this definition bent, modified, or even enlarged to fit convenience and profit. In order to determine which principles or tenets were most broadly accepted in both the academic world and the world of regulating organizations, the author based the selection on research previously done by Donohue and Needham in 2006¹⁰⁷. In their research, which is still cited by many after 12 years, they build upon Fennell's¹⁰⁸ research from 2001, by adding five more years of definitions of ecotourism. They analyze 30 academic definitions and 12 from the supply side of ecotourism in Canada from the years 1990 until 2006. The 30 academic definitions were chosen on the basis of most commonly cited in existing academic literature. The research accounts for how many times are certain topics mentioned in these definitions. Their graphics show the importance order of these tenets based on the number of times that these were mentioned on the definitions. However, I acknowledge that such a definition analysis should be done again in order to be updated. Taking this research as a theoretical framework, the author selected the ten most mentioned tenets as criteria to have in mind when analyzing the websites mentioned above. The principles or tenets of ecotourism selected are:

1. Nature-based
2. Benefits locals
3. Educational
4. Involves interpretation
5. Helps conservation
6. Raises awareness
7. Includes volunteering
8. Small scale
9. Enjoyable
10. Locally operated/managed (democratization in Donohue and Needham)

These principles need to be further explained to draw clarity on to what do they entail. In Donohue and Needham the tenets are defined as “fundamental beliefs that are central to ecotourism”.

¹⁰⁷ Donohue and Needham, “Ecotourism: The Evolving Contemporary Definition.”

¹⁰⁸ Fennell, “A Content Analysis of Ecotourism Definitions.”

The first one, *nature-based*, refers to the setting in which tourism activity will be developed. This tenet is perhaps the most undisputed and present in definitions, although some scholars¹⁰⁹ have pointed at urban ecotourism as an interesting topic for further study. One problem of this tenets is, that nature tourism and ecotourism are often confused, characterizing anything done in nature as ecotourism. That is clarified on Newsome et al.¹¹⁰ in which ecotourism is distinguished because of the commitment of this activity with responsible company practices and tourist behavior.

The *benefit of local communities* is discussed as an important tenet as ideally ecotourism development would be integrated into the local economy instead of replacing traditional values and ways of sustenance. It differs from the tenet “*locally operated/owned*” as it can be the case that a foreign or not regional business contributes to local development in different ways, or that a locally own business only benefits a family.

Blamey¹¹¹ mentions *education* as one of the most important pillars of ecotourism experience. Education in relation with ecotourism implies not only providing information to tourists but also instructing locals and companies about sustainable practices with the intent to develop well informed touristic services. Education is closely tied to two other tenets, awareness and interpretation. Interpretation is turning factual information into meaningful insights. It can be meant as a tool to entertain, or it can provoke thoughts. While education is providing access to information, “*interpretation*” is engaging the tourist in a conversation. Through that conversation, *awareness* about the impacts of tourism, human activity, or other social, environmental, or political problems of an area can be created. As Tilden¹¹² already pointed in 1977:

“Through interpretation, understanding; through understanding, appreciation; through appreciation, protection. The chief aim of interpretation is not instruction, but provocation.”

¹⁰⁹ James Higham and Michael Lück, “Urban Ecotourism: A Contradiction in Terms?,” *Journal of Ecotourism* 1, no. 1 (April 1, 2002): 36–51, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14724040208668111>; Vaso Jegdić and Oliver Gradinac, *Cities as Destinations of Urban Ecotourism: The Case Study of Novi Sad*, vol. 2, 2016, <https://doi.org/10.1515/aet-2016-0014>.

¹¹⁰ Newsome, *Natural Area Tourism*.

¹¹¹ Blamey, *Principles of Ecotourism*.

¹¹² Freeman Tilden 1883-, *Interpreting Our Heritage / by Freeman Tilden*, Chapel Hill Books, Accessed from <https://nla.gov.au/nla.cat-vn2341316> (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1977).

Conservation is as well one of the fundamental beliefs of ecotourism. It is defined on Donohue and Needham as collaborating with enterprises or implement measures to ensure the well-being and long term sustainability or natural and cultural heritage. It is the tenet that should ideally be in the minds of every touristic service provider, as the continuation of natural and cultural resources supposes the continuation of tourism.

Related to the benefit of locals, is the tenet “*locally operated*” which expresses the idea that companies and touristic enterprises should be managed or operated by locals or on a regional basis. Resources should be used in a circular way to train locals to manage their touristic activity, so the benefit can return to the community, which has been conceptualized as the democratization of the touristic activity¹¹³.

Other tenets associated with ecotourism through the definitions are the small size of the touristic enterprise or activity, proposed as a contrary to mass tourism activities. Volunteering as a part of ecotourism has different expectations depending on which part of the globe you are in. While in less developed countries ecotourism volunteer activities include building houses, teaching children or other promoted as meaningful undertakings, in countries like Spain volunteerism while doing tourism is translated into leisure-focused opportunities to, for example, harvest some food, take care of animals, or plant trees for a day. Lastly, the enjoyment of the experience is crucial to ecotourism as well as any other kind of tourism because the satisfaction of the user is what tourism looks for always, and being able to provide that satisfaction while minimizing negative impacts is the idoneous outcome.

Furthermore, the selection of websites was made in a logical and substantiated way. Said websites are listed in “Annex 1”. The analysis does not draw conclusions from each separate website but instead presents the insights of each group of websites, being those promotion, accommodation, and experiences.

The analysis of the 21 websites was done in a structured way. First, the analysis comments on the language used in the descriptions of either services or the area itself. Then, I analyzed the images used to illustrate the websites. To conclude, I make use of the aforementioned tenets to create insights about how these sites use the ecotourism label and how they see themselves fitting inside the label.

¹¹³ Donohoe and Needham, “Ecotourism: The Evolving Contemporary Definition.”

TripAdvisor reviews

It has been mentioned that promotional websites are for many the first point of contact with the travel decision process. Therefore it makes sense to look into one of the last points of contact with the travel experience. TripAdvisor is the leading travel review website with a total of 660 million reviews, and it is visited every day by 1 out of 16 people in the world¹¹⁴. Analyzing TripAdvisor reviews can give insights about the satisfaction of the tourist with their experience and what elements are important for them inside the ecotourism experience.

The criteria for selecting the analyzed companies are similar to the criteria for selecting the companies from the website analysis. The reviews analyzed belong to the companies whose websites were analyzed in the third chapter, as this allows us to establish a comparison between promotion and satisfaction. The total number of reviews belonging to the 14 different business is 1188, being 817 from accommodation sites and 371 from experience providers. The number of reviews is distributed unequally amongst the different companies as some have as much as 300 reviews while others have only ten. In the cases with up to 40 review entries, all of them have been read, while in the case of having more than 40 review entries a selection of reviews from different countries, in different languages and with different level of satisfaction was selected in order to provide a truthful overview of customers' views. When analyzing reviews, I observed which topics are frequently mentioned apart from looking at expressions or descriptions that would relate to the tenets as mentioned earlier. The analyzed reviews can be found in "Annex 3".

Survey

Lastly, a survey was designed and distributed in person and several social media platforms, in order to gain more insights about the ecotourists experience in Las Alpujarras and Sierra Nevada. The survey's questions (Annex 2) aim to add information on the consumption of "eco" travel products and services, the notions of sustainability of the tourists and the experiential elements that tourists give importance to.

¹¹⁴ Linda Kinstler, "How TripAdvisor Changed Travel," *The Guardian*, August 17, 2018, sec. News, <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2018/aug/17/how-tripadvisor-changed-travel>.

The questions aim to obtain insights from three different categories. First, the profile of the respondent is assessed, paying attention to age, gender, nationality, place of residence, and reached level of studies. Second, the survey provides information about the travel behavior of the respondents in the area. With these questions, I gained insight into the length of the trip, the villages visited, the services reserved or hired, and the different types of activities done. Finally, the survey assesses the notions and knowledge about ecotourism and answers the question of which of the tenets do tourists consider more important when choosing an ecotourism activity. However, there are disadvantages to this method. Respondents were faced with a header and description of the survey which stated that the research is about ecotourism, as well as with direct questions about how do they see themselves fitting in the ecotourism label, which can influence the respondents to answer what they think is moral instead of what they actually do as tourists. This behavior is called desirable social responses and is defined as “the tendency to give positive self-descriptions when asked for research purposes”¹¹⁵. This is closely tied to previous comments on the moralization of tourism, as the new reinterpretations of tourism as a damaging activity can cause respondents to give the answers that would portray them as ethic travelers¹¹⁶.

In order to obtain respondents, the survey was distributed through several online channels. Firstly the survey was distributed in several Facebook groups formed by people that had visited Spain. These groups included international travelers backpacking Spain, Spanish people who spend their holidays in Andalucía, and a group of enthusiasts of the region. Secondly, the survey was distributed through Whatsapp to friends and family who at the same time, redistributed it amongst friends, colleagues, and family. This way, I obtained through snowball sampling a variety of respondents from different places, level of studies, and ages that I would not have been able to reach otherwise.

In total, 61 persons participated, from which seven were eliminated from the statistics. This was because of their answer to the first question was that they had not been to the studied region, therefore not being useful for this research. Furthermore, the analysis was done dividing the insights into three categories: profile of the tourist, behavior, and notions of ecotourism. The data is then interpreted, and the findings commented.

¹¹⁵ Delroy L Paulhus, “Socially Desirable Responding : The Evolution of a Construct,” n.d., 11.

¹¹⁶ Butcher, *The Moralization of Tourism: Sun, Sand... and Saving the World?*

I consider the final findings of my thesis to be transferable when studying the notions of ecotourism and the tourists' reflections on ecotourism labeled products. These findings could be applied in research about Spanish or western European ecotourism markets and destinations, but in my opinion, would not relate to ecotourism activity in developing countries as visitor motivations are different.

Generally, the methodology used to research this topic answered the research questions correctly. It suited my goals, and it was well adjusted to my feasibility. With more time and resources, the methodology would have involved fieldwork with on-site interviews and participant observation.

Chapter 3: *Selling the “green” feeling. Analysis of the promotion and ecotourism companies in Las Alpujarras and Sierra Nevada as seen through their websites.*

This chapter is structured in two different parts. First, the chapter discusses the findings of the website contents research dividing them into Promotion websites, Activity provider websites and Accommodation websites, analyzing the language and images on the website and providing a table summary with the consideration of the tenets of ecotourism by the different websites. The last part of the chapter summarizes the conclusions of the research offering insights on the notions of sustainability of the different organizations analyzed as well as general insights about the area and how the ecotourism label is used in its promotion.

The chapter focuses on answering how is ecotourism present in promotional representation of the area of Las Alpujarras and Sierra Nevada. To do so, websites were analyzed having in mind the ten tenets of ecotourism taken from Donohue and Needham¹¹⁷. I focused on how the area was represented by the different companies as well as how they presented their ecological best practices in their promotion.

¹¹⁷ Donohue and Needham, “Ecotourism: The Evolving Contemporary Definition.”

In this chapter, I relate my research to the ongoing debate about the definition of ecotourism. I study how different business and organizations use and define the label ecotourism with the aid of previous academic research. I agree with statements made by Donohue and Needham, pointing at the little importance given to the experiential side of ecotourism by the first definitions. Furthermore, in this chapter's conclusion, I elaborate on the role of cultural heritage in ecotourism promotion as well as the presence of the circle of representation in the imagery used in the analyzed websites.

Promotional websites

The seven promotional websites analyzed belong to different levels of territorial administration as well as different public-private initiatives. These are the national bureau of tourism Turespaña, the region of Andalucía, the province of Granada, the area of Las Alpujarras, the area of Sierra Nevada National Park and the public-private initiatives of Ecotourism Sierra Nevada on the regional level, and Soy Ecoturista on the national level.

Ecotourism or sustainable tourism is mentioned in every website, but only two of them make it their central topic for promotion. Four of the websites list ecotourism experiences that can be booked online in collaboration with diverse companies. All of the four websites consider any nature-related activities such as walking or bird watching ecotourism in the form of explicit headlines or categorizing them with tags. However, only two of those four websites consider activities relating to handicrafts and local food produce ecotourism. The criteria that these sites use to determine which activity is filed under which tag does not seem to be clear, but in all of the cases coincides that activities in nature are immediately related to ecotourism.

On the other hand, definitions of what ecotourism is are provided by two other websites. The first one, belonging to SoyEcoturista.com, defines someone as an ecotourist if that person likes to:

“Discover landscapes, animals, culture, and gastronomy and likes to know that the trip contributes to conserving them. Enjoys bird watching, flower spotting, and discovering geological landscapes guided by professionals who work in their conservation. Visits

nature walking, biking, horseback riding, or canoeing respecting it and discovering its secrets thanks to local professionals."¹¹⁸

This definition sustains the claim that ecotourism is directly related to nature, has a component of conservation, and includes local people who serve as educational interpreters of the landscape. It stresses the respect when walking, cycling, etc. that is crucial in denominating the activity ecotourism. The second definition, belonging to Andalusia.org, encompasses ecotourism inside the broader phenomenon of sustainable tourism, defining it as:

*"Tourism that answers to the tourists' demands as well as the host regions, protects and improves future opportunities. Manages resources in a way they satisfy all economic, social, and aesthetic needs while respecting culture, ecosystems, and income sources. Any touristic activity that implies conservation, awareness of the environmental impact and benefit distribution amongst local communities can be considered sustainable."*¹¹⁹

This definition acknowledges the conservation, awareness, and benefit distribution tenets previously mentioned. Nature is an element to be conserved and taken into account, but it is not what determines the sustainability of tourism.

In addition to the definitions and views on ecotourism provided by the different websites, an overview of topics of interest, unique selling points and other features of the area, is provided by the different websites as reasons to visit the area. I analyzed the recurring topics that are common to most of the websites. The natural elements of the area are broadly highlighted. Mentions to the ecologic importance of the National Park are present in five of the analyzed websites remarking the important landscapes, species, or protection figures present in Sierra Nevada. The water, one of the distinctive elements of this region, is promoted in three of the websites as a reason to visit either to drink from the medicinal springs or to admire the Arabic irrigation systems still used. Elements of historical and cultural relevance like the villages themselves are mentioned in 5 of the websites with a similar description of what one should do when

¹¹⁸ "Asociación de Ecoturismo en España | Soy Ecoturista," SoyEcoturista.com, accessed May 20, 2019, <http://soyecoturista.com/>.

¹¹⁹ "Turismo Sostenible - Web Oficial de Turismo de Andalucía," accessed May 24, 2019, <http://www.andalucia.org/es/turismo-sostenible/>.

visiting them. That includes learning about the Arabic past of the area, which is also mentioned in five sites or admiring the typical architecture, which is highlighted three times. The value of the area is discussed three times, pointing at the different figures of tangible and non-tangible heritage protection. On recommendations of what to experience in Las Alpujarras, five sites recommend local cuisine as a highlight of a trip through the region. Other three mention handicrafts as either experiences or souvenirs, and also three recommend resting as a way to enjoy the area. In addition to the assets here mentioned, it is also to note the general tone of the descriptive texts on the websites. In six of the occasions, the texts describe the landscapes, experiences, and emotions that can be felt in the area in an evocative and eloquent way that almost seems pulled from the pages of Gerald Brenan's "South from Granada".

*"A ceiling of spongy clouds moved slowly by overhead, and on either there was nothing to be seen but a rolling treeless plain, brick-red in color but dusted with a thin sprinkle of stubble. I passed tilted wagons, drawn by teams of six or seven mules with a donkey to lead them, the men shouting and cracking their whips and the animals straining at their traces to draw the wheels through the mud. Then darkness fell and the stars unexpectedly came out. The cricket began to trill, and before long I saw the lights of Ventas de Huelma and heard the dogs barking."*¹²⁰

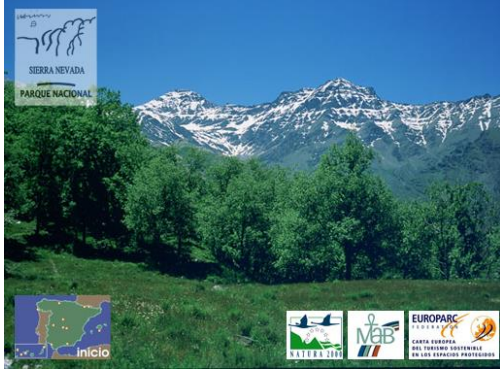
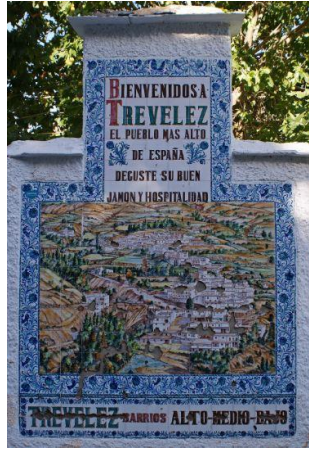
It is also notable that the expression "it is like time has stopped" is featured in five different websites, to which it can be concluded that there is a certain series of concepts, ideas, and experiences that are broadly associated with the area by the different promotion levels.

A thorough analysis of the images accompanying the texts on the promotional sites shows a clear and determined set of elements that are common in almost every website and that are proposed are the ones that capture the essence of what the area is. The images, while being all different in their own way and their authorship, show nevertheless similar landscapes, perspectives, motives, or objects. The most common image to be found is of the typical "jarapas" cloth, being present in 6 of the seven analyzed websites. Ceramic tile plaques that are so distinctive of the south of Spain were featured in five of this websites, and as well as the "jarapas" these were not presented in the

¹²⁰ Gerald Brenan, *South from Granada* (Penguin Modern Classics, 1957).

texts as separate items of cultural heritage but rather the whole concept of typical handicrafts was introduced as a unique point of attraction. The other cultural element that appears as a main feature of the area are the villages themselves. Their characteristic architecture, pictures of white houses with flowered balconies as well as aerial shots of the villages seen from above or in the distance are common to three different websites, normally appearing either one or the other picture as a representation of the architecture of the area.

In terms of nature, Sierra Nevada is represented by four elements that are present in many of the websites, mountains, water, animals, and flowers. These elements rarely appear together but in pairs complementing each other to offer a dual view on the natural park that seems to correspond with portraying both the physical environment and the biological diversity of Sierra Nevada. The snow-covered mountains appear in 4 occasions, and even though it is rare to see large quantities of snow outside of the coldest months of the year, promotional websites continue to use footage showing the snow as it matches the name of the “product” Sierra Nevada (Snow-covered Mountain Range). The element water is present in three websites, represented by wild streams of water appearing during the thaw of the mountains. However, the texts present in the promotional sites do not mention these photogenic streams of water but rather stop to explain about the human-made and less photogenic water irrigation systems dating from Al-Andalus times that are so common around the villages of Las Alpujarras. The two assets representing flora and fauna of the area are present three times each in the analyzed websites. From the animal kingdom, the mountain goat is the chosen representative element and appears in every website that mentions the fauna of Sierra Nevada. Diverse pictures of different species of flowers are also present in the different websites as photogenic representatives of the flora of the area. When diving into the names of the species featured in the pictures and the names of the most important species of the area, it can be adverted that only the most pleasing to the sight specimens appear on promotion websites, regardless of their actual biological importance.



Figures 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9. (from left to right, from above to below)
 Figure 2. Tiled Welcome sign in Trevez. Source: Ecoturismo Sierra Nevada
 Figure 3. Jarapas. Source: Turgranada

Figure 4. Air view of the Poqueira Gorge villages. Source: Turgranada

Figure 5. Tínao. Source: Turespaña

Figure 6. Sierra Nevada. Source: MITECO

Figure 7. Irrigation channels (acequias). Source: Soy Ecoturista

Figure 8. Mountain goat. Source: MITECO

Figure 9. Daffodils. Source: MITECO

Furthermore, the websites were analyzed with the previously mentioned criteria based on the definition analysis by Donohue and Needham. Out of all of the seven promotional websites, the site “SoyEcoturista” was the one that mentioned more tenets, only excluding volunteering as a principle of ecotourism. Only two tenets appear with a total agreement in all of the websites. Nature and activities in contact with nature are actively promoted as a must-do’s when in the area. Enjoying is also mentioned in every website often complemented with other related suggestions like relaxing, experimenting, or resting, showing that above everything, the experience has to provide entertainment and enjoyable time for the tourist. Still, this enjoyable experience that is traveling in Las Alpujarras has in mind in six of the websites the need to help conservation while doing so, and in four of the websites, it even mentions problems regarding the impacts of climate change or tourist activity in order to raise awareness amongst visitors or prospective visitors.

The least mentioned tenet was volunteering. A quick Google search of “ecotourism+volunteer” will show where most opportunities to spend an ecotourism holiday with a volunteer component are located. Southeast Asia, South America, and Africa offer multiple opportunities to do so with impoverished host societies or in animal sanctuaries. However, when looking at what the offer of a “volunteer” experience looks like in Las Alpujarras, we find a lower impact, highly recreational set of activities that do are not set to make a “change in society” but more to experience local ways of living in an immersive way. These experiences will be discussed more in-depth when analyzing the websites of the services providers.

On the next page, in the form of a table, the summary of the presence of the different tenets in the seven analyzed promotional websites is presented. The spaces colored in green mean that the

principle was acknowledged in the promotion of Las Alpujarras and Sierra Nevada by that organization.

	Nature-based	Benefits locals	Educational	Involves interpretation	Helps conservation	Raises awareness	Includes volunteering	Small scale	Enjoyable	Involves locals
Turespaña										
Andalucía										
Sierra Nevada Natural										
Soy Ecoturista										
La Alpujarra Municipality										
Granada										
MINECO										

Table 1. Analysis of promotional websites. Source: personal collection

In conclusion to the analysis of promotional sites of the area it is adverted that unlike other destinations like the country of Costa Rica¹²¹, who make efforts to promote themselves as an ecotourism destination actively, Las Alpujarras is not broadly promoted as an ecotourism destination but more as a natural and cultural destination where one can take part in ecotourism experiences. Las Alpujarras counts with a good combination of elements related to ecotourism, as seen in the table above, to make this type of branding possible but from the official organizations of promotion this initiative is yet to be taken. However, the big amount of mentions to conservation and awareness indicates that there is an intention to promote values of sustainability, only without making use of the label ecotourism as a marketing tool.

It is also notable in the way that the area is promoted and when looking at the images featured in the websites, that there is not a lot distinction made inside the area as it is most commonly portrayed as a whole experience than as a set of distinct villages or location with

¹²¹ “¿Cómo logró Costa Rica convertirse en un destino internacional de ecoturismo?,” *Entorno Turístico* (blog), September 17, 2016, <https://www.entornoturistico.com/como-logro-costa-rica-convertirse-en-un-destino-internacional-de-ecoturismo/>.

different assets. Las Alpujarras is then presented under a set of features and common images, not acknowledging the villages as separate destinations.

Accommodation websites

The seven websites analyzed belong to seven different accommodation providers in Las Alpujarras and Sierra Nevada. They are located in the villages of Mairena, Capileira, Origiva, Pitres, and Cadiar. The accommodations are of different types being three of them rural hotels, two rural houses, one complex of caves that function as separate houses and one complex of several small rural houses.

As mentioned before, these accommodations make use of the ecotourism label in their marketing, and with this analysis, the features that these businesses use to define themselves as ecotourism or sustainable are accounted and discussed.

All of the accommodation websites name in one way or another the reasons or measures taken to be considered eco or sustainable. Two of those accommodations even have a specific page inside their website, where they fully disclose their commitment to sustainable development. Measure taken vary from one accommodation to another but recycling, using green sources of energy, and using nonpolluting chemicals for cleaning are common to most of them. One measure specifically is common to all seven websites, which is buying or using local produce in their establishments. This is translated into offering traditional dishes cooked with local ingredients in three places, to using materials from the area in the construction of the rooms and local handicrafts such as tiles and jarapas in the decoration of their establishment.

In addition, the location of the accommodations is pointed out as a unique selling point of these facilities. All seven websites express their closeness to the nature surrounding the area, some expressing their walkable distance to trails, open spaces or forests and, others describing the wild natural surroundings of the accommodation facilities. These location appreciations are commonly the first thing to be stated in the analyzed websites, making references in some cases to the importance of the immediate surroundings of the accommodation and in other cases pointing at the bigger picture of the National Park area.

It seems relevant to include the fact that six of these websites make reference to the importance of the building itself where the rooms are located. Apart from the material and

decoration being local in most occasions, it is also mentioned the fact that the buildings are traditional houses that used to belong shepherds or field workers or have been constructed respecting the old architectural traditions and techniques that date from the Arabs times. Therefore, apart from being beneficial to locals when using local products and materials, it is another form of conservation, in this case of the heritage of traditional “alpujarreño” houses.

Furthermore, the sites describe the experience of staying at their facilities with similar words and expressions that appear to be directly related to the area as they are also featured in promotional descriptions. Invitations to “rest”, have a “resting experience” and similar are to be seen in six different websites of the seven analyzed, as well as the tranquillity” or “quietness” of the surroundings which was addressed in three sites. Furthermore, these claims are complemented, in the same way as in the promotional websites, with commentaries about the passing of time including the expressions “time stops here”, “it is like traveling through time”, “an experience of traveling to the past” and similar in four websites. These expressions as well as other descriptions of “hidden away” and “fairytale” area take possible inspiration from the first mainstream description of Las Alpujarras in the texts from Pedro Antonio de Alarcon and Gerald Brenan in which they paint a romantic picture of an area hidden away from the progress of the cities and where it felt like traveling time.

The images illustrating the sites have quite a lot in common with the ones from the promotional sites. Some themes come back like the buildings and traditional architecture of the area. In six of the websites, the accommodation building is shown as an example of traditional Arab construction, and in other five occasions, pictures of other typical Arab white houses are featured. These constructions, as well as the remarkable location of the villages, are shown again by shots from the villages taken from the air or from higher points in the distance. These type of pictures are to be found in six different sites, that together with the three promotional websites in which they were present, makes this type of representation the most common to be seen of the area.



Figures 10, 11, 12, 13. (From left to right, from above to below)

Figure 11. Decoration of room. Source Hotel Viña y Rosales

Figure 12. Decoration of room. Source: Los llanos.

Figure 13 and Figure 14. Name of the rooms indicated in tiles. Source: Alqueria de Morayma

The images of the accommodation rooms are also an interesting source of information. While at least five of the places claim to have unique and distinctive decoration in every room, a look comparing the different rooms shows the not so unique presentation of the “alpujarreño” accommodation experience. While these places are unique in the sense that are not standardized nor its decoration is planned to the millimeter, they all share a common series of elements that aim to portray the uniqueness of Las Alpujarras. Jarapas can be seen in five of the establishments either on carpet or blanket form. Tiled floors, walls, or decorative tiles are present as well in five of the accommodations. Moreover, the same number of companies include forged beds which are not specifically traditional of the area but often a representation of rural and artisanal places. The materials of the room, as stated before, are in five of the cases mentioned as an important feature of the rooms and a conscious choice that benefits local businesses.

When discussing definitions of ecotourism, the benefit of the locals comes as a principal tenet often in the literature. However, the ecotourism experience is formed by the consumption of

a destination, accommodation, and other recreational services and, the different criteria to be considered eco by these separate units makes the task of a unified definition a difficult job. To illustrate it with an example the architecture and materials are not per se considered to be of relevance in different definitions of ecotourism, but in this case, it seems to be a distinctive feature that characterizes these establishments as eco. This kind of behavior can be considered as part of the “benefits locals” tenet or the conservation one when talking about a broader definition of ecotourism, but when defining an ecotourism accommodation should be considered on its own as a tenet or part of an eco “checklist”.

Returning to the ten principles, nature, like in the case of the promotion websites, is common to all websites analyzed. The relation of the establishment with the surrounding nature is of crucial importance in the promotion seen on the websites. Furthermore, the enjoyment of the experience is as well a priority in the provision of the service. With the same priority, the benefit of the locals is addressed by all seven accommodations, from which four of them state that not only is that important but also to promote themselves as a business that involves local workforce or even place themselves as a family business. Five of these places state the small size of their enterprise as complementary to the promises of tranquillity and rest and placing themselves. Four of the sites also hold inside their accommodation an information point of the National Park of Sierra Nevada, corresponding this with the educational and informational dimension of ecotourism. Likewise, four places help the conservation of either nature or cultural heritage with the refurbishment of abandoned buildings of architectural importance, or with reforestation initiatives as social responsibility projects. Again volunteering is the least mentioned tenet with only two opportunities to help on the harvest of almonds or oranges. Nevertheless, these activities are brought up in a way that shows the educational and leisure dimension of the volunteer activities, rather than portraying the activity as helping or “making a change” the host community.

On the next page, the table summarizes the presence or mention to the ten analyzed tenets in the websites of the seven different accommodations with green colored cells.

	Nature-based	Benefits locals	Educational	Involves interpretation	Helps conservation	Raises awareness	Includes volunteering	Small scale	Enjoyable	Involves locals
Alojamiento viña y Rosales										
Hotel Rural Alfajía de Antonio										
Hotel Finca Los Llanos										
Alpujarra backpackers										
La Oveja Verde										
Alquería de Morayma										
Cuevas del Tío Tobas										

Table 2. Analysis of accommodation websites. Source: personal collection

To sum up, everything that has been stated about the accommodation websites analyses, it can be observed that accommodations which make use of the ecotourism label come in very different forms and take different measures to be considered so. Measures are generally disclosed in one way or another with the aim of supporting their eco claim. Apart from the concrete infrastructural and operative actions taken, the majority of the websites considered the architecture and decoration of their establishment as a reinforcing feature of the ecotourism experience. Furthermore, the way in which the “benefits locals” principle translates when speaking about accommodation sites is in promoting, selling and consuming local produce of different kinds, an operation that is broadly disclosed and promoted by the different businesses as a determinant for their sustainability.

It is also important to be noted that six of the analyzed places had a certification that accredited them as sustainable. Five of the establishments are accredited with ECST and one is with Ecolabel ECEAT of EcoAgrotourism. However it is surprising that none of these sites leads their promotion with the fact that their sustainability is accredited by a European certification, but rather placed this logo and other not sustainability-related seals of quality at the very bottom of their websites. It is then to be concluded, that branding yourself as an ecotourism product seems to come first on accommodation marketing, followed by disclosing some measures and, with showing your actual accreditations being placed as the last priority.

Experience provider websites

To analyze the notions of sustainability on the side of the providers of experiences and activities in Sierra Nevada and Las Alpujarras, seven company websites were selected based on the use of “ecotourism” as part of their branding and considering the optimization of their SEO as a mechanism to know the popularity or investment in promotion of these companies. The selected companies are a sample of the many different activities offered in the area. There are an oleotourism experience (olive oil tourism), a self-called center of culture and ecotourism that offers mostly cheese and bread-making workshops, a nature guide company, an organized Alpujarras weekend tour company, a center for interpretation and environmental education, a multi-activity (nature, food, handicrafts related activities) and a handicrafts workshop. Due to the different nature of these enterprises, a comparative analysis is a more complicated project. Therefore it makes special sense here to use the ten selected main tenets. However, other prominent similarities have been noticed and therefore discussed hereby.

In the case of experience providers, even though all of them make use of the term ecotourism in their promotional websites, only one of them ventures to define for themselves what is ecotourism. The site [Andaluciaecoturismo.com](https://andaluciaecoturismo.com) defines it as:

“Take part in activities outside, in contact with nature. Experiment, enjoy and discover your surrounding from a close perspective. Ecotourism is the touristic activity that is carried out without altering the balance of the environment and avoids damaging nature. It is a trend that looks to juggle touristic industry with ecology. It allows for discovering valuable places and beauty that commercial routes do not offer. It is ideal for relaxing and resting because activities are organized and safe, designed so the clients can enjoy at their own path.”¹²²

¹²² “Ecoturismo Andalucía. Haz turismo a tu ritmo y disfruta de la Naturaleza.” Ecoturismo en Andalucía, accessed May 26, 2019, <https://andaluciaecoturismo.com/>.

Their definition acknowledges some of the ten principles hereby used and adds their own considerations to what does the ecotourism experience entitles such as the experiential factor of it, the fact that activities are organized and safe, and that they show more beautiful places than commercial routes.

Furthermore, taking a look at the descriptive texts and use of language in these seven websites, it was adverted that five of them mentioned in prominent places of their websites the ecological and biological importance of the area and therefore the necessity to develop their activity in a conscious way. Second to the importance of nature is the significance of the different traditional handicrafts, jobs, processes, and activities that are common to this rural area. Some of these assets, like handicrafts and food production, are already established in the promotional materials as items of heritage. Others like traditional forms of agriculture or jobs that near their disappearance are not so publicly know but a great deal of effort is put by several of these companies to show their processes and involve tourists in them as recreational activities while helping conserve these cultural traditions. It is in five of the websites where tourists are encouraged to participate in different processes of manufacturing, harvesting, or elaborating as recreational activities to be purchased. Some of them, on two occasions, could be considered volunteering, especially the ones including harvesting processes as they involve helping actual farmers in their jobs. The rest would fall into the category of pure leisure as the involvement in the process does not help anyone as the final product of the experience, being it for example cheese, bread, or a jarapas, goes home with the tourist. Taking into account the importance of handicrafts together with the 5 mentions to “culture”, “cultural activities” or “learning about culture”, it can be pointed that interpreting, conserving and experiencing cultural heritage is a big part of ecotourism that is not always acknowledged due to the common belief of “ecotourism is done in nature”. This duo of nature and culture is reflected as well in the imagery used on the web, with natural landscapes such as the snowy peaks of Sierra Nevada and images of handicrafts like jarapas, baskets, and tiles.

When describing activities in the websites, five of them mention the person who is in charge of providing the activity as an “expert guide”. This, in contrast with not finding mentions prioritizing the “local” origins of the guides, suggests that training and expertise of the guides are more important to these companies, which is related to the importance of education and interpretation while doing this kind of tourism. However, the “local” component comes into consideration when observing that 5 of the websites list the fact that their providers are local or

that they use local produce. Furthermore, as markers to describe the experience of ecotourism rather than the activity itself, several descriptive expressions can be found on the websites. Several websites appeal to the emotions by describing the experiences as “peaceful and resting”, or like “moments to connect with nature” or “with traditions”. While this language does not give information about the actual reasons why the experience is ecotourism, it creates expectations of connection with the cultural and natural elements of your experience that are of great importance for many tourists.

Here below, the summarizing table is presented, marking in green the principles of ecotourism present in the promotion of activities in the seven analyzed websites. Marked in color yellow are the experiences that do not constitute volunteering for themselves, but include experiencing a job or productive task for leisure.

	Nature-based	Benefits locals	Educational	Involves interpretation	Helps conservation	Raises awareness	Includes volunteering	Small scale	Enjoyable	Involves locals
Quaryat Oleoturismo	Green	Green	Green	Green	Green	White	Green	Green	Green	Green
Tropolis	Green	White	Green	Green	Green	White	Yellow	White	White	White
Sierra y Sol	Green	Green	Green	Green	Green	Green	White	White	Green	White
Andalucia Ecoturismo	Green	White	White	Green	White	White	White	White	Green	White
Sierra Nevada Natural	Green	White	Green	Green	Green	White	Yellow	White	Green	White
Ecoturismo y La Vereda	Green	Green	Green	Green	Green	Green	Green	Green	Green	Green
Jarapas Hilacar	White	Green	Green	Green	Green	Green	Yellow	Green	Green	Green

Table 3. Analysis of activity provider websites. Source: personal collection

In conclusion to the analysis of the experience providers websites, it can be pointed out that cultural heritage is considered by many as a big or complementary part of the ecotourism experience. While in definitions or both academics and organizations nature is the primed component that has to be interpreted, conserved and consciously exploited to be considered ecotourism, there are few acknowledgments to cultural heritage and its involvement in making the ecotourism experience broader. Cultural heritage is promoted exhaustively in these websites as an approachable way to

feel closer to the life in the area by engaging with local artisans who are keeping alive ways of living thanks to and for tourism essentially. When coming into contact with the natural element of the ecotourism experience, hiking while being guided and educated by a guide who interprets the landscape for you is perhaps the most common and straightforward way to do so. While talking about experiencing cultural heritage in a conscious way that can be labeled ecotourism, what one comes across when analyzing the offer of ecotourism activities in Las Alpujarras, is that museums or heritage centers with information panels or even guides that walk you through cultural heritage are present in the area, but the focus of the promotion is put in the experiential activities that these places offer. Getting hands-on the heritage, in this case, translated into handicrafts and food, through workshops and tastings is the way in which cultural heritage is presented to ecotourists. This way of presenting the offer can be due to the fact that these tourists really want to get involved and in touch with culture and traditions and do not settle with being in the silent observant position.

On another subject, while being hosted by a local is primed on the promotion of accommodations, on the promotional websites of experience providers being guided by an expert is what it is highlighted. This provides insights on how people want to experience the different elements of ecotourism in their own terms. Contact with the local population is to be done in the space of the accommodation by being welcomed into the lives and spaces of the area residents and by being treated as hosted friends more than as customers. Meanwhile, the part that involves a learning experience should be done by an expert, local or not, as providing accurate information and interpretation of the surroundings or of the activity is a bigger priority than feeling part of a community in this setting.

[Main takeaways from the website analysis](#)

In the final part of the chapter, the joint conclusions of the three different analyses are presented. Firstly, insights about how the area is promoted in websites are discussed and, secondly, conclusion about the role of the ecotourism label in the promotion are provided.

After looking at how the main tourism promotion organizations in Spain market the area of Las Alpujarras and Sierra Nevada, it can be concluded that there is a well-known set of images, discourses, and experiential feelings associated with the area. The elements of nature, culture, and

history are present in almost every website and with a similar degree of importance from one website to another. Therefore, it can be stated that there are no diverging or conflicting narratives about the area. The idea of Las Alpujarras as a natural area is of permanent presence and undisputable relevance in all of the websites, followed by the importance of the various tangible and intangible elements of cultural heritage as well as the past history of Arabic influence. The narrative of the area as a peaceful site where one can rest and “disconnect while reconnecting” also seems uncontested. Descriptions in the websites of the promotion of the area, its accommodations, and experiences all express in some way these ideas of Las Alpujarras being a tranquil place where one can focus on reconnecting with nature. Furthermore, it is common to several websites to describe the natural settings, the traditions and the life in Las Alpujarras in an evocative way, which resemble past descriptions of the region that can be appreciated in the works of Pedro Antonio de Alarcon and Gerald Brenan.

“I could pick out the villages of the Axarquia far below me, the smoke rising above them in short columns and then ending. From this height they looked like splashes of white paint dropped on to a surge of pale red hills that ran off the grey rock mountain like fingers and fell in successive cones and waves and rounded protuberances to the sea.”¹²³

Additionally, the analysis of the images featured on the websites shows clearly the set of cultural and natural elements that constitute the branding of the region, and that compliments the narrative of the nature-culture-history present in the textual descriptions. Besides, the fact the images are so similar and can be so easily categorized points directly to the theory of the “Circle of Representation” proposed by Jenkins¹²⁴. The repetition of themes (white houses, nature and water, flowers, villages from above, and handicrafts) is common to every website as well as in Google Images or geolocated Instagram and Facebook public user content.

¹²³ Brenan, *South from Granada*.

¹²⁴ Olivia Jenkins, “Photography and Travel Brochures: The Circle of Representation,” *Tourism Geographies* 5, no. 3 (January 1, 2003): 305–28, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14616680309715>.



Figures 14, 15, 16 (from left to right, from above to below)

Figure 14 and 15. Collection of images found with geolocation tag “Las Alpujarras. Own collection
 Figure 16. Screen capture of Google images results when searching “Las Alpujarras” Own collection

There are other conclusions to take into consideration about the activity of ecotourism in the area. Firstly, it can be concluded that one of the most important things about doing ecotourism in La Alpujarras is experiencing. Definitions like the first one proposed by Ceballos Lascurain¹²⁵ have already been criticized¹²⁶ for the lack of acknowledgment of the experiential side of ecotourism. Educating and interpreting are part of most definitions, even the most spread one by TIES.

¹²⁵ Ceballos-Lascurain, *Tourism, Ecotourism, and Protected Areas: The State of Nature-Based Tourism around the World and Guidelines for Its Development.*

¹²⁶ Donohoe and Needham, “Ecotourism: The Evolving Contemporary Definition.”

However, while it is true that ecotourism does this, it is also to be noted that most of the activities proposed do not settle with offering a viewpoint for tourists to educate themselves about various topics, but also encourage through their activities to get hands-on nature or culture to connect with it.

It is also to be acknowledged that while nature is the base from which ecotourism is developed, cultural heritage is, in this case, a big part of the whole ecotourism experience. Natural and cultural heritage are complimentary in this area as the importance of the surrounding nature is imprinted in many aspects of their cultural heritage, and the importance of trails, water streams, and natural settings cannot be understood without explaining how did they shaped or were shaped by the local culture.

On a final note, the presence of sustainability certifications coming from different levels of governance opens for interesting insights regarding the use of their logos or names promotion through websites. While most of the accommodations and experience providers have certifications like ECEAT or ECST, their logos or mentions to them are placed at the end of their websites or in non-priority places. These certifications are not attractive to the main public as on their own they do not tell the tourist anything about the experience that the tourist can have, but rather vouch for the “hardware” of the establishment. Describing the experience in an evocative way that provokes feelings and expectations is a far more attractive promotion tool. In addition, even though the hardware and set of conservation measures are disclosed in most of the establishments, communicating feelings and creating experiences is primed thus suggesting that the emotions transmitted through the promotion and the expectations created are more important than the actual measures to conserve.

This will be discussed again in the next chapter when looking at how tourists reflect on their ecotourism experiences, looking at the importance given to the experience or to the ecological measures.

Chapter 4: *Is it really about conservation?* Analysis of tourists' experiences in Las Alpujarras and Sierra Nevada through TripAdvisor reviews and a survey.

This chapter is structured in three different parts. The first section concerns the analysis of TripAdvisor reviews and discusses the findings of said research. The second part of the chapter follows the design of the survey, accounts for the respondents' selection criteria, and discusses the findings of the survey. The third and last part of the chapter draws the conclusions from this part of the research and offers insights into visitors' notions of ecotourism. The focus of this chapter is to answer the question of how is ecotourism reflected upon by tourists who have visited the region.

TripAdvisor reviews analysis

In the previous chapter, I offered an analysis on the way several websites from promotion organizations and touristic services promote and reflect on the features that make their business sustainable or classify as ecotourism. After seeing what these companies choose to point out of their services, it is an interesting comparison to analyze what tourists who make use of these services point out as determinant features of their good or bad experience, as well as reflect on how the promotion matches tourists' experiences. Furthermore, the reviews provide the researcher with a one on one reflection about the consumed service that is not coerced or forced but written out of personal motivation to do so.

This part of the research connects with the previously discussed literature about the principles of ecotourism present in several definitions¹²⁷. I look for the representation of these tenets in TripAdvisor reviews to find out how tourists reflect about ecotourism. My findings indicate that tourists decide to comments about the aspects of ecotourism that they can experience themselves.

The reviews of the seven accommodation sites on TripAdvisor give interesting insights on what tourists find relevant to highlight and share about the services consumed. While companies promote their sustainable practices profusely online, this is not reflected in the reviews from the

¹²⁷ Donohoe and Needham.

tourists. The topics commented on by users are the ones that affect them directly or that they consume in a tangible way, rather than the best practices done by the accommodation owners in matters such as energy efficiency or involvement in nature conservation. The buildings that host guests as well as the food served there are often described as “authentic”, and the rooms, often decorated with local materials, are praised by TripAdvisor users for having “personality”.

This shows that tourists, when reviewing online, do not reflect on the conservation of cultural heritage as such, but appreciate elements like the buildings or the gastronomy for being a showcase of what is considered typical and authentic of the area. Furthermore, they also consider positive the fact that rooms are not standardized as they can be in other hotels and have a “personality” that matches their expectations of how rooms look in a typical southern Spanish area.

Tourists also reflect very often about the manners of accommodation owners valuing personalized attention very much. Owners are often mentioned by name in the reviews followed by positive reactions about the proximity of their hosts, the useful recommendations that they provided, and many comments expressing that the owners made the tourists “feel like home”. These commentaries point at the fact that this hospitality, closeness of the owners and home-like feeling, which are not transmitted through website promotion, are something that exceeds the satisfaction of the customers. It suggests that even though the clients are aware of their role as tourists, they value positively the fact that the hosts make them feel welcome with a closeness that blurs the lines, or pretends to do so, between providing a service and hosting a friend, perhaps making the client forget for a second about their role as tourist.

Furthermore, tourists describe very often the nature surrounding the accommodations, pointing at the fact that it was a determinant of satisfaction and a significant element of their visit to the area. Reviewers describe the landscapes pointing at the main landmarks and indicate the ways how they came in contact with nature, for example, walking, canyoning, or hiking. Therefore, nature seems to be not only the back scenery of a holiday but an active element that invites the tourist to connect, and that this connection is later valued positively by tourists. These surroundings are pointed by tourists as the element that makes their experience peaceful and tranquil, being the few bad reviews present on TripAdvisor about elements that distorted this tranquility, such as dogs or children.

The TripAdvisor reviews of the activity providers offer some interesting insights into what people value on their experiences. Same as with the accommodation reviews, the natural scenery is profusely described, especially emphasizing the way tourists engaged with their surroundings. These appreciations are placed inside the review as descriptions of the course the activity took. It is there, where it can be appreciated that these tourists care about actively engaging with the natural and cultural heritage and do not settle with just looking around.

In these reviews, there are more appreciations related to ecotourism to be found than in the accommodation ones. Especially in the reviews from companies that include cultural heritage in their offer, in either tours or workshops, tourists' reflect on the importance of keeping traditions alive and praise the companies for that. Some other reviews, elaborate on this raising awareness about the fact that traditional ways are being lost, and encourage readers and prospective customers to participate in these activities to help keep cultural heritage alive. Local produce is also remarked in a positive way, as some companies sell their own production (e.g., oil, jarapas) or offer tastings of local delicacies. Reviewers point to this as features that make their experience even more special. An example of this remark is tourists that praise the food that they ate and then point at the local origin of it as something that enhances the value of the experience. The use of local produce together with the reenacting of traditional ways are the two factors of the experience that make tourists define their encounter with heritage as authentic on TripAdvisor.

The role of the host or guide in activities is also reflected by tourists on TripAdvisor in a different way than the role of the host in accommodation reviews. Guides or activity providers are often referred by name in the reviews like in the case of accommodation owners. Qualities like a personal approach and kindness are also appreciated. However, reviewers expand their reflections, in comparison to accommodation owners, by pointing at the expertise of the host and how educational was the experience. The fact that tourists choose to remark how knowledgeable their guide is, suggest that education and learning while doing tourism improves how enjoyable is an experience. This matches promotion and satisfaction, as companies advertise the experiences as educational and their guides as experts, a topic that tourists mention positively on many occasions.

In conclusion, the ecotourism experience seems to be separated into two different spaces; in this case, resting space and activity space. These are two different components of the trip in which tourists look for different things. There are similarities in the things that tourists value from these

two spaces like authenticity, the personal approach of the hosts, and how enjoyable the time spend in these spaces is. However, regarding the space of the accommodation, tranquility and home-like feeling provided by the owners is pointed as important. The owners might or might not be professionals of hospitality, but that is not remarked on by tourists, as they value more the feeling that they are provided than the expertise of the owners. On the other hand, in relation the activity space, tourists prefer a learning experience through activities that present them with situations that differ from their daily lives, which is opposite to the home-like feeling preferred on accommodations. In addition, the professional expertise of the host is valued here, as education and learning are what tourists search for in this space.

It is important to mention that the concept of ecotourism was only mentioned twice in 1188 reviews. Going back to the tenets previously discussed, tourists did point at the conservation efforts of some companies and their awareness of diverse problems, but only remarks about cultural heritage were made and always in the reviews of activities. The use of local produce benefiting locals was only praised in reviews because it served as an enhancer of authenticity, and no reflections about how sustainable this is were made. The slight difference between satisfaction determinants and priorities from accommodation to activity reviews might be due to the fact that accommodations can be reserved through booking platforms that do not reflect the eco-promotion that these establishments spread in their websites, therefore attracting various types of travelers with different priorities. The activities, however, are not listed in any booking platform and would have to be contacted directly or via website, which allows the prospective customer to see the promotion as ecotourism activity that the company provides, conditioning in a way the expectations of the tourist.

On a final note about the TripAdvisor analysis, it is important to conclude that tourists do not reflect directly about many of the tenets here studied, but do consider nature, education and cultural heritage conservation highlights of their experiences explicitly. Due to the fact that reviews on TripAdvisor are written free-willingly and without a specific audience in mind, it is interesting to see how these opinions differ from the ones stated by travelers who were asked directly to reflect on their travel behavior in Las Alpujarras and notions of sustainability through a survey.

Survey analysis

In the last section of the chapter, I analyzed how tourists' reflect on TripAdvisor about their experiences with companies that brand themselves as ecotourism. However, in that analysis, no direct mention of ecotourism was found. Therefore, a survey was designed in order to know more about tourists' notions of ecotourism and how they reflect on their own travel behavior while traveling in Las Alpujarras. It was chosen as a research method due to the fact that with a survey, I can obtain qualitative insights about what people consider to be ecotourism. The survey aims to give an answer to the second sub-question about tourists' post-travel reflections on ecotourism. The survey enlarges the insights obtained from the TripAdvisor analysis as it directly asks tourists about their ecological practices, which complements and contrasts the free-willing opinions given online.

To analyze the survey and bring it together with the rest of the analysis, I used the principles from Donohue and Needham's definition research¹²⁸. When analyzing the responses from the survey is very important to recognize bias take into consideration studies about desirable social answering¹²⁹. The findings of my survey research differ from the TripAdvisor ones, as respondents acknowledge ecotourism directly and even identify themselves as one. I conclude that these results can be a consequence of the process of moralization of tourism¹³⁰ previously discussed in the theoretical framework.

The profile of the respondents is varied in ages and levels of studies and has some important similarities to the general profile of ecotourist in Spain. The majority of the respondents (35) were women, leaving only 17 men. I believe that these data about gender is not representative of the profile of the ecotourist in Spain, as male and female travelers are roughly the same number in the national survey of ecotourists in Spain¹³¹. This inequality in data is due to the distribution of the

¹²⁸ Donohoe and Needham.

¹²⁹ Paulhus, "Socially Desirable Responding : The Evolution of a Construct."

¹³⁰ Butcher, *The Moralization of Tourism: Sun, Sand... and Saving the World?*

¹³¹ "Avance Resultados Observatorio de Ecoturismo: DEMANDA. Mayo 2018" accessed June 3, 2019, http://soyecoturista.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/Avance-resultados_Obs-Ecoturismo_DEMANDA_mayo2018_red.pdf.

survey through the snowball method reaching predominantly and unintendedly groups of women. Therefore, there is a certain bias resulting from the design of the survey study.

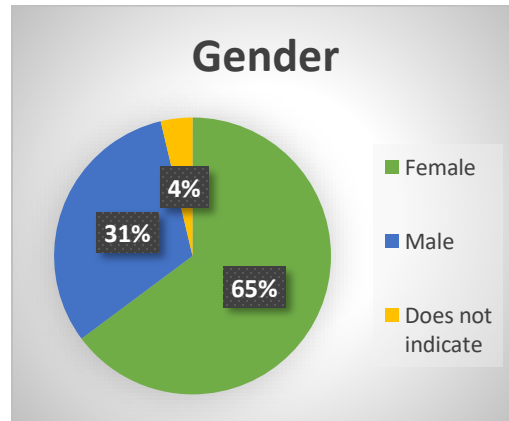


Chart 1: Gender of respondents. Source: Self elaboration

However, better results can be observed in the variety of ages. An amount of 23 travelers belong to the age group of 46 to 55, making for 43% of the respondents. This number is followed by the groups of 18 to 25, and 56 to 65, both with ten respondents each. According to the profile of the ecotourist in Spain done in 2018, the biggest age group is from 35 to 65 years old, corresponding these ages to a tourist with a steady income and an active profile. Because of the price of touristic services, younger tourists are not big consumers of eco-travel products, and because of the active nature of most of the activities, older travelers are less¹³².

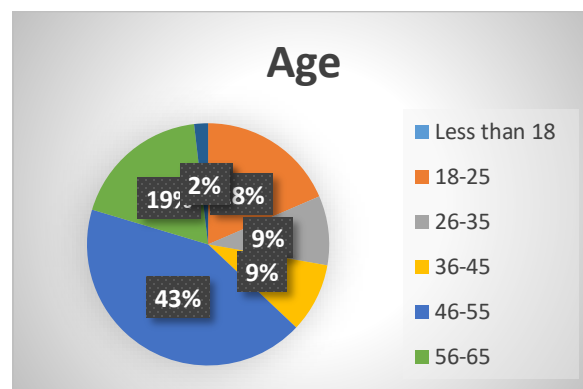


Chart 2: Age of respondents. Source: Self elaboration

¹³² "Avance-Resultados_Obs-Ecoturismo_DEMANDA_mayo2018_red.Pdf."

The results on the level of studies of the respondents are similar to the findings of the Spanish ecotourist profile report, meaning that, to an extent, this report can be applied to the area of Las Alpujarras. The majority of respondents have reached a level of a university degree (26), a master's degree (13) or a Ph.D. (2). These findings match with profiles done by UNWTO in different countries¹³³ in which the tourist interested in consuming products or services label eco has achieved a superior level of studies, and has an above-average income.

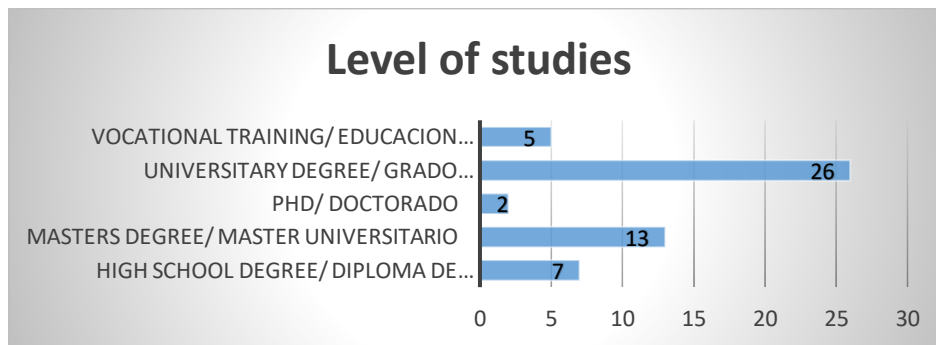


Chart 3: Level of studies of respondents. Source: Self elaboration

In addition, the respondents' nationality is mostly Spanish with 51 respondents, even though according to the 2018 report of tourism in Granada 38'4% of the tourists of the area are foreign, most of them being French, German and British¹³⁴. It would be interesting for further research to give a similar survey to foreign tourists in the area in order to verify if there are differences in their notions of ecotourism.

The consumer behavior of tourists was studied by asking questions regarding the duration of the trip, how long ago it was, what services were hired, and what activities tourists took part in. A big part of the respondents (46'3%) had visited Las Alpujarras more than five years ago, followed by 16 people (29'6%) who visited the area two to five years ago. Only six people had traveled there in the last six months.

The length of the trip was for the majority (59'3%) of two to four days which according to the 2018 report of tourism in Granada is the most common length to visit the area. Twenty-two

¹³³ UNWTO, "The Spanish Ecotourism Market," 2019, 152; UNWTO, "The Italian Ecotourism Market," 2019, 100; UNWTO, "The French Ecotourism Market," 2019, 174.

¹³⁴ Patronato provincial de turismo, "Observatorio Turistico de La Provincia de Granada 2018."

per cent of the respondents stayed for a week, and 13% visited on a day excursion. Only three respondents (5.6%) had stayed for more than a week. These numbers also match the ones from the profile of the ecotourist in Spain¹³⁵ in which the average ecotourism visit to a National Park or protected natural space adds to 3.22 days.

The surveyed tourists were asked to point out at the villages that they had visited during their stay in the area. A total of 33 respondents had visited Lanjarón, most probably due to the fact that this village is where the main tourism office of the area is situated. The tourism office had in 2018 an average of 2463 visitants per month, while the other tourism office of the area situated in the Pampaneira received on average 288 visitants per month last year¹³⁶. The next most visited area is Sierra Nevada ski village with 29 respondents having visited it. The area surrounding the ski station is the least affected by the seasonality of tourism thanks to the winter sports offer during the coldest months as well as the trekking and adventure sports offer during the months without snow. Trevelez, Capileira, Pampaneira, and Bubión have a similar number of visitors amongst the respondents as these are geographically close, and are often promoted together in the form of a route with stops in every village. Other villages included by the respondents under the category “Other” were Soportujar and Cadiar, which are not so broadly promoted as the other villages mentioned but nevertheless have developed their tourism in the past years with a branding strategy based on witches and magical stories and the presence of the Buddhist center “O’sel Ling”.

¹³⁵ “Avance Resultados Observatorio de Ecoturismo: DEMANDA. Mayo 2018” accessed June 3, 2019, http://soyecoturista.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/Avance-resultados_Obs-Ecoturismo_DEMANDA_mayo2018_red.pdf.

¹³⁶ INE, “Datos Turísticos Archivos. Visitantes a puntos de interes. Alpujarra y Valle de Lecrin.”

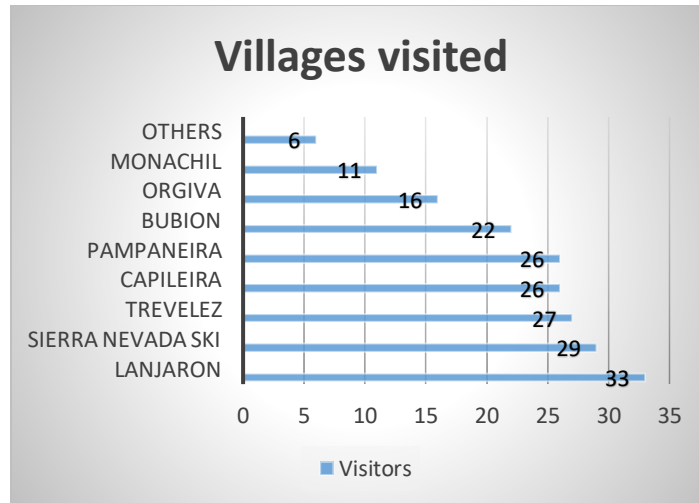


Chart 4: Villages visited by the respondents. Source: Self elaboration

Respondents were questioned about the services hired before their visit to Las Alpujarras and Sierra Nevada. The majority of the 54 respondents had booked accommodation before their visit. Only five people had reserved transport to, from, or around the area. This matches visitor behavior described in regional reports in which 90% of visitors to the area use their own car in contrast to the rest who rent a car in Granada, use public transportation or form part of an organized day trip that provides transport. Out of the 54 respondents, ten had booked an activity in advance. These activities that were booked in advance are mostly not related to nature like a cooking workshop, agrotourism experiences, or handicraft workshops. The only nature activities booked in advanced are activities of alpinism that require preparation and material. This indicates that less spontaneous activities are booked in advance while others like walking tours or museum visits are easier to plan on site. Under the category “Other,” the three respondents indicated that what they had booked in advance was material for skiing or snowboarding.

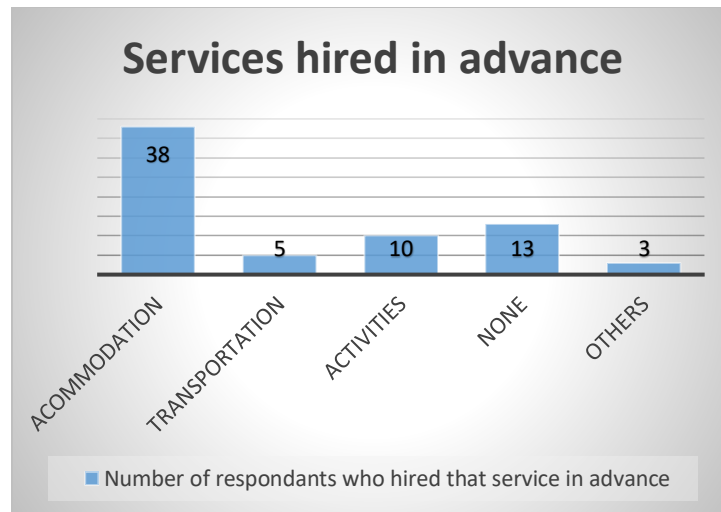


Chart 5: Services hired in advance by the respondents. Source: Self elaboration

Respondents were also asked to indicate in which kinds of activities they participated. Activities booked in advance were extracted combining the answers to the previous question, and therefore, the rest of the answers are understood to have been booked on-site or activities that did not require booking. Fifty-one respondents answered the question, which means only three respondents did not engage in any organized activity. The variances between activities were explained to the respondents, specifying the differences between handicrafts demonstrations and workshop, what is understood by food or history-related activity, and making a distinction between adventure sports and mountain biking. The list of activities presented to the survey respondents reflects the main activities promoted in the area, as seen during the analysis of experience provider websites.

The most common activity to take part in is walking in the nature or hiking, which was done by 40 people. When looking at the offer of activities in the area, it is adverted that most companies include different sorts of nature walks of different lengths and difficulties, which makes walking the most popular activity to do in the natural area as well as the most available one. Activities relating to history are the second most popular amongst surveyed tourists. This category of activities includes visiting monuments or heritage museums or taking a guided tour. These two categories, nature and culture, appearing as the most popular choices, reflect the promotion efforts done by the different authorities portraying the area as the combination of nature and cultural heritage. Furthermore, adventure sports and mountain biking are also popular with 20 and 11 respondents taking part in them. Adventure sports was separated from mountain biking, as the first includes winter sports like skiing or alpinism, and the second is the alternative sport available

during months without snow. Cultural heritage in the form of handicrafts and food heritage is also represented in the activities. Eleven respondents attended handicrafts-related shows such as the many pottery or knitting open demonstrations available, and five respondents even participated in workshops themselves. Food is a very important part of Las Alpujarras heritage, 11 respondents visited food-related museums, cooking workshops, or visits to production sites, from which the most popular ones are the serrano ham drying facilities. It is interesting to point at the five respondents that engaged in agrotourism experiences. Agrotourism is a relatively new offer of tourism, often related to ecotourism, based on the contact with natural forms of production through experiencing agriculture and farming in real settings. In the context of Las Alpujarras, this kind of activity is often offered for families with kids.

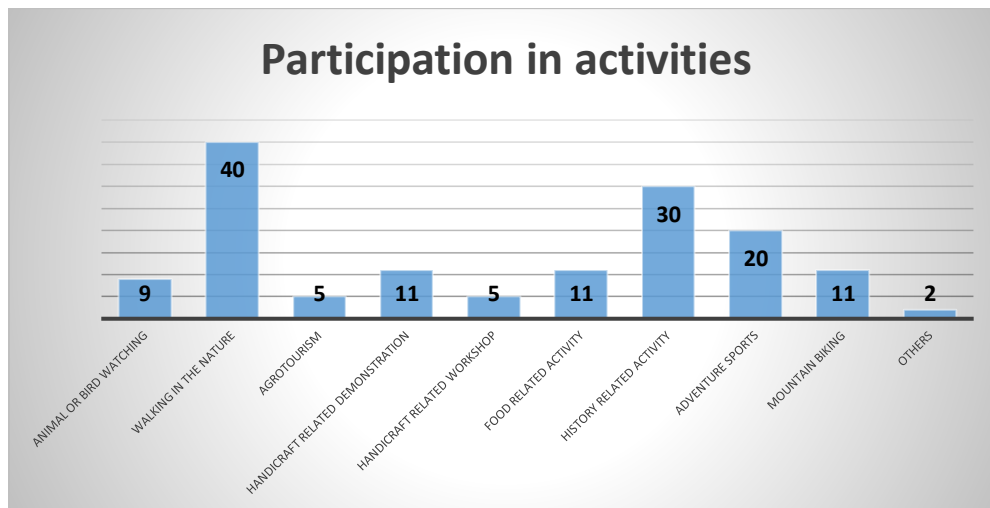


Chart 6: Participation in activities by the respondents. Source: Self elaboration

For the last part of the survey, respondents were asked about their views on ecotourism and how do they see themselves and their experiences fitting the label of ecotourism. First, surveyed tourists were asked if they were familiar with the term ecotourism, to which the majority (77'8%) answer yes, followed by 18'5% that maybe knew and only two respondents who did not. Immediately afterward, they were presented with the definition of ecotourism as seen in TIES¹³⁷ and asked if after reading the definition, they considered themselves to be an ecotourist. A total of 36 respondents considered themselves to be ecotourist making this number the majority. Most of the

¹³⁷ "What Is Ecotourism."

tourist that considered themselves to fit the definition has already stated that they knew what ecotourism meant, as well as six from the ten respondents who stated that perhaps knew what ecotourism was. Sixteen of the respondents considered that in some aspects, they thought they are ecotourists. Only two of the surveyed tourists did not consider themselves ecotourists at all according to the provided definition.

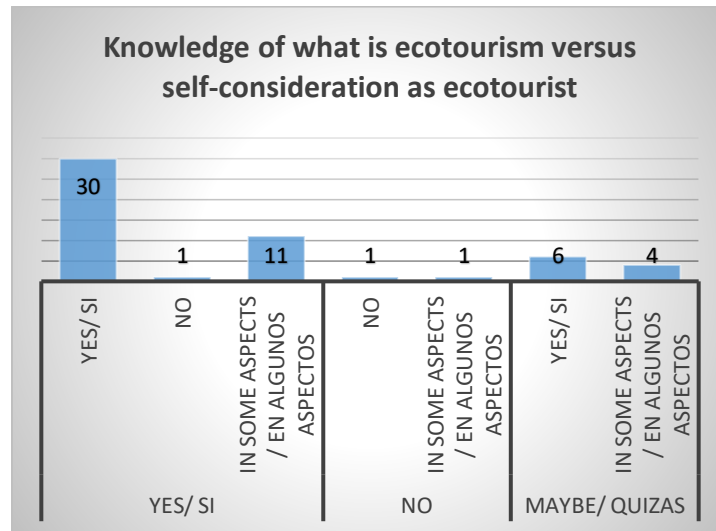


Chart 7: Knowledge of what ecotourism is versus self-consideration as an ecotourist. Source: Self elaboration

For the second part of this topic, respondents were asked about the activities that they took part in. They were requested to indicate if any activity had been promoted as ecotourism and afterward asked to consider for themselves if they would label it ecotourism and based on what. To the first question about the promotion of the activities as eco, only 44 of the 54 respondents answered. The vast majority (27 respondents) indicated that their activities were not promoted as eco versus the 15 people whose activities were promoted as eco. All of the respondents whose activities were promoted as ecotourism considered that label to be accurate, as well as some respondents whose activities were not promoted as ecotourism, making it a 59% of the respondents who believe their activities to be ecotourism. Meanwhile, the rest of the tourists whose activity was not promoted as ecotourism are divided in the 23% doubting that it could be ecotourism and the resting 18% denying that their activity was ecotourism.

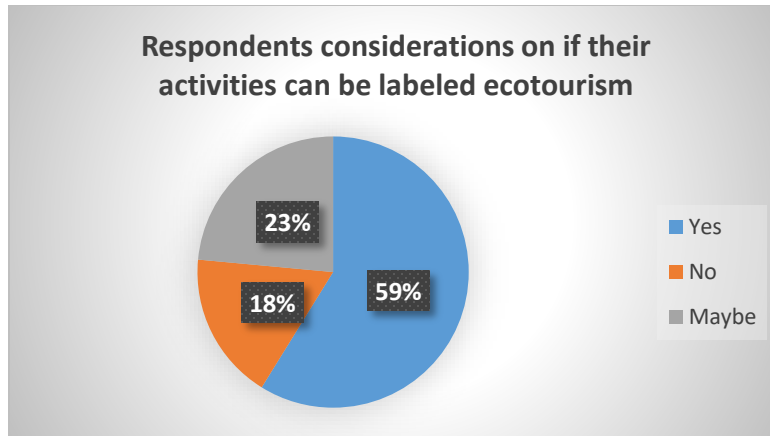


Chart 8: Respondents' considerations on if their activities can be labeled ecotourism. Source: Self elaboration

Subsequently, tourists who considered their activity to be eco were asked which features of the experience did they considered to be what made it ecotourism. The features given to the surveyed people were the ten tenets of ecotourism considered in this thesis. The feature that most people considered to be what made their experience ecotourism was the fact that the activity was in the nature followed with the fact that the activity helped the conservation of natural or cultural heritage. The benefit of local people, creating awareness, the enjoyability of the experience or the educational side of it were also chosen by many respondents. Others like the small scale of the activity or the opportunity to volunteer were chosen by fewer respondents. It is interesting to compare it to what tourists express on TripAdvisor because there they give much more importance to the education and local owners or guides than they choose to give in this survey, while tenets like conservation and awareness that went almost unrecognized on TripAdvisor reviews are here chosen by many people. An explanation for this behavior is perhaps that survey respondents chose more socially desirable answers.

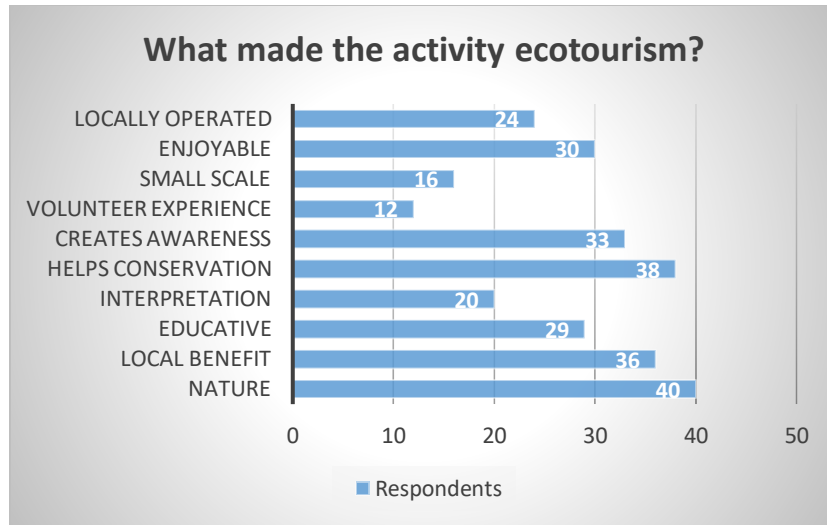


Chart 9: What made the activity ecotourism? Source: Self elaboration

For the last part of the survey, respondents were presented with the ten tenets and were asked to give a grade of 1 to 5 to each one of them considering how important were this features to them when choosing an ecotourism experience, being one the least important and five very important. The 54 responses to each one of the tenets were analyzed, and the tenets ranked from most important to least. Respondents ranked enjoying the experience higher, shortly followed by contact with nature and helping conservation. Education comes in the fourth position, followed by ensuring that the experience is locally operated, benefits locals, and raises awareness. A small size experience and being able to volunteer is what surveyed tourists find least important to look at when booking an ecotourism experience.

Conclusion

In conclusion to this research on visitor preferences and reflections on their experiences in Las Alpujarras and Sierra Nevada, tourists reflect differently on their trips if confronted or not with the topic ecotourism. The reviews on TripAdvisor, which are considered to be reliable by scholars¹³⁸, seem to portray better how tourists that visit the area reflect on their experiences and which features do they select to comment about. The free-willingness of these reviews, together with the lack of context in which they are placed provides more interesting insights than the survey.

¹³⁸ Alton Y K Chua and Snehasish Banerjee, "Reliability of Reviews on the Internet: The Case of TripAdvisor," 2013, 5.

The survey presents a profile of the tourist and its travel behavior that matches both the regional profiles of the general tourist and the Spanish profiles of ecotourist. It shows that tourists, when put into context about ecotourism and ask directly about it, tend to value more topics related to conservation and less experiential ones like it was seen in the TripAdvisor reviews. Causes to these differing results might root on the moralization of tourism previously discussed, due to which tourists endorse lower impacts forms of tourism that are deemed to be morally superior and an alternative to mass tourism. Therefore, it is a risk to take when researching using surveys as methods that respondents will not answer with their real views but with the views that they believe to be expected or they consider more moral¹³⁹.

Furthermore, when tourists are faced with ecotourism and asked to reflect about it, the reflection coming from it might not be as reliable as one done free-willingly, but it certainly opens up for the tourist to think about the impact of tourism activity and consider the different dimensions and features that construct their tourism experiences, perhaps influencing future travel decision.

Chapter 5: Conclusion. Recommendations and insights.

Ecotourism is a relatively new concept, it appeared in the late 1970s due to the development of a global environmental movement and the growing dissatisfaction with mass tourism. Its definition differs from nature tourism because of the compromise of ecotourism with responsibility, conservation, and lower impacts. According to UNWTO, nearly every country with a tourism promotion board dedicates efforts to promote ecotourism. However, there is a lack of agreement in both scholarly literature and from the side of tourism organizations onto what the exact definition of ecotourism is, and what this form of tourism entails. This is problematic in the tourism industry, as definitions are stretched or bent for different businesses to fit in the golden wagon of ecotourism. It is because of that that some see ecotourism as a type of tourism and by others as a label or marketing strategy. In this thesis, I have studied the appearance of ecotourism in the area of Las Alpujarras and Sierra Nevada in Spain and researched how tourism services providers there use the ecotourism label in their website promotion.

¹³⁹ Susan E. DeFranzo, "Advantages and Disadvantages of Surveys," Snap Surveys Blog, November 16, 2012, <https://www.snapsurveys.com/blog/advantages-disadvantages-surveys/>.

In order to answer my question, I first selected and analyzed literature regarding the academic discussion of ecotourism. This literature contributed to a better understanding of the issues and discussions that surround the topic of ecotourism. Overall the literature follows the creation and development of the term ecotourism and the debate held by scholars. An interesting insight provided by the literature is the fact that the lack of agreement on a definition of ecotourism makes measuring the impacts of it difficult as they vary depending on which definition is applied. Also, the literature discusses the paradox in itself that is the demand of ecotourism due to the fact that tourists demand unspoiled and underdeveloped locations while their demand is actively changing those locations.

A second part of the literature review focuses on research done about the studied region. In this part I researched the state of the area, providing an overview of what are considered the natural and cultural assets of the region as well as historical background and a summarized outline of the development and current state of tourism activity in Las Alpujarras. Las Alpujarras is characterized in the literature as an area rich in cultural and natural heritage whose landscapes have inspired numerous literary works. The social composition of the area, inhabited by Spanish people and expats alike, is highlighted as an interesting topic in the literature as one of the many things that makes the area different from other rural regions of Spain. Besides, in the theoretical framework, important concepts and trends that are essential for the understating of this thesis are defined and discusses. Those concepts are cultural and natural heritage, sustainability, promotion, the moralization of tourism, and ecotourism in Spain.

The research questions and sub-questions laid out at the beginning of this thesis were satisfactorily answered with the research done.

I analyzed the promotion of the area through websites as well as the promotion of touristic services providers that use the label ecotourism in their marketing. The aim of this chapter was to give an answer to the sub-question how is ecotourism present in promotional representation. The research shows a clear narrative composed by the interrelation of natural and cultural heritage elements and the clear influence of the circle of representation in the images used to promote the area and its touristic services.

Ecotourism in Sierra Nevada and Las Alpujarras is promoted via website by several actors in different levels of hierarchy. It was observed that the area is not promoted as an ecotourism

destination but more as a destination where ecotourism activities can be done. When looking at promotion websites from the area, some actors provided with a self-made definition of what is ecotourism, while others took nature as the most important factor and labeled every activity done in the nature as ecotourism. However, when looking at companies' promotion, nature alone is not the only reason to label a product ecotourism and disclaimers of concrete eco-actions are often featured as justification for using the ecotourism label. The activities that are promoted as ecotourism are of very different kinds. They incorporate nature and culture elements as one cannot be understood without the other in this area. Because of the several different types of activities offered it can be concluded that there is not a standardized kind of ecotourism activity but more a variety of experiences that share a set of principles or beliefs about the conservation and correct exploitation of both nature and cultural heritage for tourism.

The website promotion of ecotourism activities proved that there are no conflicting narratives about the area, and many similarities can be found in the descriptions of experiences, the region, or accommodations. These descriptions appeal to the emotions of the tourists, narrating abstract sensations, and feeling that the area will provoke. These ideas of resting, peace, traveling back in time, connecting with nature and disconnecting from the world are what tourists ultimately reflect online about their experiences, showing that the ecotourism experience is more about providing a feeling than about actual measures for conservation. It is the same case with the images used to illustrate the studied websites, which almost do not differ from one website to the other. These images, that summarize the main elements of the area, are inside the circle of representation and are reflected as well on social media content uploaded by tourists. It is to be concluded that nature, education, conservation, enjoyment, and local benefit are the principles of ecotourism that companies choose to point out in their promotion.

Lastly, I analyzed the experiences of tourists in the area and their notions of ecotourism through a survey and the selection of TripAdvisor reviews. The focus of this research was to answer the second sub-question about how is ecotourism reflected upon by tourists who have visited the area. This analysis provided interesting insights about how the reflections of tourists differ from online reviews to surveys, meaning that they give importance to different elements of their touristic experience depending on the context in which they are asked. The research done for this thesis had limitations of time and scope which did not allow for a more in-depth study of several matters

relating this topic that were adverted during the writing and noted as interesting avenues for further research.

The research showed that tourists point out different principles of ecotourism in their TripAdvisor reviews and when surveyed. Tourists writing TripAdvisor reviews did not reflect about ecotourism directly but did value experiential features that are also associated with ecotourism but do not constitute principal beliefs. The enjoyment, authenticity of the experience, and above everything, the personal approach received were highlighted in this platform. Topics like the last two are perhaps highlighted as they are experiences not commonly related to mass tourism. Mentions to other principles of ecotourism like locally operated business or conservation were not direct, but conclusions can be drawn from how tourists allude these topics. Presence of local produce and displays of culture, for example, are treated as a feature of authenticity and valued but can be related to the principles of conservation and benefit of the locals. So when tourists point out these appreciated features, they do not reflect directly about ecotourism but offer insights about the topics belonging to the ecotourism experience that connect with them. Nevertheless, when tourists were asked to reflect on ecotourism principles through a survey, nature, conservation, and education were considered the most important differing from the online reflections of tourists. It was concluded that when asked directly tourists point out at principles similar to the ones promoted and highlighted by companies in their website disclaimers such as conservation, the benefit of the locals and awareness, while when freely reviewing online tourists tend to imitate the point at experiential features, that match the descriptions offered in websites.

Other interesting insights have been noticed during the research process. When the topic and focus of this thesis was decided, I thought that I would encounter companies that would make use of the ecotourism label without the right to do so. Greenwashing, which is defined as, “*the practice of falsely promoting an organization’s environmental efforts or spending more resources to promote the organization as green than are spent to actually engage in environmentally sound practices*”¹⁴⁰, was what I expected to find. The term was coined in 1986 by Jay Westerveld in an

¹⁴⁰ Karen Becker-Olsen and Sean Potucek, “Greenwashing,” in *Encyclopedia of Corporate Social Responsibility*, ed. Samuel O. Idowu et al. (Berlin, Heidelberg: Springer Berlin Heidelberg, 2013), 1318–23, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-642-28036-8_104.

essay about environmental practices in the hotel industry¹⁴¹. Instead, I came across the complete opposite. When selecting companies to do website research, I came across many companies who were ECTS certified, meaning they have fulfilled a particular set of measures to be considered sustainable. However, most of these companies did not make use of the term ecotourism in their promotion, or feature disclaimers, but only include the certification logo in a corner on their websites. This is related to a practice called “Greenhushing”, which scholars define as “the deliberate withholding, from customers and stakeholders, of information about the sustainability practices that they employ”¹⁴². It was found that many businesses in the area of Las Alpujarras and Sierra Nevada have their sustainable practices, but there is no following communication. This can be due to the lack of training in communication and promotion¹⁴³ or due to the deliberate withholding of the information because customers tend to respond more positively to practices that they can experience, and many owners prefer not to moralize a leisure activity like tourism.¹⁴³

In general, I believe that the label ecotourism has been beneficial for the area. With the concession in 2004 of the European Charter of Sustainable Tourism, the area has developed four different policy plans about ecotourism, whose development involved stakeholder communication at many levels. It has been the certification what has abled companies to label themselves ecotourism, as that label is more attractive than mentioning ECTS in the promotion. Coming back to the assessment done by Place¹⁴⁴ stating that ecotourism was “old wine in new bottles” I can conclude that in most cases this is the case, but that does not have to mean a bad thing. The area presents a network of businesses that have been awarded the ECTS certification and have begun to promote themselves as ecotourism after refining their practices to fit the certification mold. There are other companies without ECTS that considered themselves ecotourism and disclose their responsible actions, perhaps aiming for the certification. Anyhow, the sustainability and responsibility of many businesses is proved via certification but using “ecotourism” in your promotion is the most

¹⁴¹ “A History of Greenwashing: How Dirty Towels Impacted the Green Movement - DailyFinance,” September 23, 2015, <https://web.archive.org/web/20150923212726/http://www.dailyfinance.com/2011/02/12/the-history-of-greenwashing-how-dirty-towels-impacted-the-green/>.

¹⁴² Xavier Font, Islam Elgammal, and Ian Lamond, “Greenhushing: The Deliberate under Communicating of Sustainability Practices by Tourism Businesses,” *Journal of Sustainable Tourism* 25, no. 7 (March 29, 2016): 1007–23, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09669582.2016.1158829>.

¹⁴³ Font, Elgammal, and Lamond.

¹⁴⁴ Place, “Ecotourism for Sustainable Development: Oxymoron or Plausible Strategy?”

effective tool, as this appeals to the experiential features that a company provides a tourist. Therefore I believe that ECTS and the use of the ecotourism label have been beneficial for the area as it has triggered many companies to be more sustainable in order to form part of a network or in order to use the ecotourism label.

In consider my thesis to be of interest for the touristic industry because it offers interesting insights into what do tourists value when traveling through Las Alpujarras and Sierra Nevada. Using this research about the narratives of the area can serve tourism boards to reflect about the uniformity of the narrative, which does not promote villages separately but the area as a whole experience. A recommendation in this aspect would be to enrich the offer of cultural heritage by promoting the singularities of the different villages, but always keeping the same regional branding identity that attracts thousands every year. In addition, ecotourism companies could find interesting the hereby presented overview of what tourists refer about, to either try to excel the quality of the most popular features or increase their efforts to divulgate their sustainable practices in a way tourist can experience them and later reflect about them.

Furthermore, my thesis adds to the scholar debate by presenting a case study of ecotourism and applying existing literature about the discussions over the need of a definition to determine how is ecotourism being defined by the companies providing it. This work makes use of several analyses of definitions and extracts the most important principles from them to later check those principles with both tourists and providers in order to elucidate what ecotourism actually focus on when talking about offer and demand. In addition, it adds to the debate of whether ecotourism should be considered as a type of tourism or it is just a branding and rebranding tool for companies.

Nevertheless, there are still questions left unanswered and many avenues for further research of the ecotourism label. It would be very interesting to study more in-depth if the certification of CETS has had an impact on the type of tourism and tourist in the area, or if it has had any impact on companies. The research could delve into how existing companies see themselves fitting this relatively new ecotourism narrative and if they have changed their branding and practices to fit in. With more time and resources, tourists could be interviewed in situ to obtain more information about what do they consider ecotourism to be and what are the principles or

features that they determine to be essential in their experience, in order to enlarge the research that can be done online.

On a final note, I would like to make a reflection about the future of ecotourism both in academic research and in practical terms. Buckley¹⁴⁵ stated this very year (2019) that trends in ecotourism will depend on how is this being defined. Therefore, a definition is needed, in order to ensure quality experiences, correct measuring of impacts, and operational clarity on the side of the offer, as well as closing the unending scholar debate. A definition would have to be based in both scholar definitions and organization ones to encompass the differences among both. I consider certifications at national and supranational levels the most important tools nowadays to define and regulate ecotourism. With supranational certifications, like ECTS, implementing the same definition and set of principles, together with their existing evaluation criteria, the regulation of the use of the label ecotourism would be made easier. Furthermore, better promotion of the certifications appealing to experiential factors is needed as these are functioning and working to regulate ecological practices but do not get recognition from tourists as these are more moved by the promise of feelings and relating experiences than by the lost lists of ecological measures taken by companies. Lastly, I would like to point at the importance of researching ecotourism and its principles, as it opens a conversation with tourists and companies alike, to reflect about their own behavior in consuming or providing tourism products and the impact of their actions and choices.

Word count: 24.005

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¹⁴⁵ Ralf Buckley, *The Future of Ecotourism*, 2019.

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Annex 1 Websites analyzed

Accommodation	Accessed last time on:
https://www.alpujarras.alojamiento.raya.org/index_esp.htm	August 10, 2019
https://www.hotelruralalpujarra.com/	August 10, 2019
https://www.hotelfincalosllanos.com/	August 10, 2019
http://www.alpujarrabackpackers.com/	August 10, 2019
https://www.laovejaverde.es/	August 10, 2019
http://www.alqueriamorayma.com/que-pretendemos/	August 10, 2019
http://www.cuevastiotobas.com/actividades-y-experiencias/	August 10, 2019
Experiences	
http://www.quaryatdillar.com/oleoturismo.php	August 10, 2019
https://www.ecoturismosierranevada.com/	August 10, 2019
https://sierraysol.com/es/	August 10, 2019
https://andaluciaecoturismo.com/	August 10, 2019
https://sierranevadanatural.com/	August 10, 2019
https://www.ecoturismoylavereda.com/	August 10, 2019

https://www.jarapahilacar.com/visitas-y-talleres/	August 10, 2019
Promotion	
www.spain.info	August 10, 2019
https://www.ecoturismosierranevada.com	August 10, 2019
http://soyecoturista.com/	August 10, 2019
http://www.andalucia.org/es/destinos/zonaturisticas/la-alpujarra/	August 10, 2019
http://www.alpujarraturistica.com/turismo/	August 10, 2019
http://www.turgranada.es/region/alpujarra-y-valle-de-lecrin/	August 10, 2019
http://www.laalpujarra.info/	August 10, 2019

Annex 2 Survey questions

1. Have you visited the area of Las Alpujarras and Sierra Nevada?
2. When did you visit the area?
3. Which of the following places did you visit? (Options: Sierra Nevada Ski Village, Monachil, Capileira, Pampaneira, Bubi3n, Trevelez, Orgiva, Lanjar3n, Others)
4. What was the duration of your trip?
5. Which services were hired during your stay? (Options: Accommodation, Transport, Guided activities or experiences, None, Other)
6. Do you know what Ecotourism is? (Options; Yes, No, Maybe)
7. After reading this definition (TIES definition of ecotourism), do you consider you do Ecotourism? In the case you hired or participated in an experience what kind of activity it was? (Options: Animal or bird watching, hiking, agrotourism, handicraft related activity demonstration or workshop, food-related activity, history-related activity, adventure sports)
8. Were any of those activities promoted as ecotourism or sustainable?
9. Having in mind what Ecotourism is, would you consider that your activity was ecotourism?
10. How important these following points are in your opinion when choosing a responsible tourism experience? Rank them from one to five. Being one not important and five very important.
 - a. Its nature-based
 - b. Benefits local people
 - c. It is educational
 - d. Includes interpretation

- e. Helps conservation of nature, culture or history
 - f. Raises awareness about environmental or local problems
 - g. Involves volunteer experience
 - h. It's done in small scale
 - i. It's enjoyable
 - j. Personnel or guides are local
11. In the case the activities that you did were "eco", what made them so?
- a. Its nature based
 - b. Benefits local people
 - c. It is educational
 - d. Includes interpretation
 - e. Helps conservation of nature, culture or history
 - f. Raises awareness about environmental or local problems
 - g. Involves volunteer experience
 - h. It is done in small scale
 - i. It is enjoyable
 - j. Personnel or guides are local
12. Were your ecotourist expectations met?
13. In case it did not meet your expectations, could you indicate why?
14. Demographic questions
- a. Gender
 - b. Age
 - c. Level of studies
 - d. Country of Origin
 - e. Country of residence

Annex 3 Tripadvisor reviews

Accommodation providers	Accessed last time on:
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https://www.tripadvisor.com/Hotel_Review-g1069210-d1156164-Reviews-Alojamiento_Vina_y_Rosales-Mairena_Province_of_Granada_Andalucia.html#	June 7, 2019
https://www.tripadvisor.es/Hotel_Review-g608984-d10352376-Reviews-Hotel_Rural_Alfajia_de_Antonio-Capileira_Province_of_Granada_Andalucia.html	June 7, 2019
https://www.tripadvisor.es/Hotel_Review-g608984-d573864-Reviews-Finca_los_Llanos-Capileira_Province_of_Granada_Andalucia.html	June 7, 2019
http://www.alpujarrabackpackers.com/reviews.php	June 7, 2019
https://www.tripadvisor.nl/Hotel_Review-g1591158-d1419885-Reviews-Hotel_La_Oveja_Verde_de_La_Alpujarra-Pitres_La_Taha_Province_of_Granada_Andalucia.html	June 7, 2019
https://www.tripadvisor.es/Hotel_Review-g1078897-d316163-Reviews-Alqueria_de_Morayma-Cadiar_Province_of_Granada_Andalucia.html	June 7, 2019
https://www.tripadvisor.es/Hotel_Review-g1940603-d1115379-Reviews-Cuevas_del_Tio_Tobas-Alcudia_de_Gaudix_Province_of_Granada_Andalucia.html	June 7, 2019
Experience providers	
https://www.tripadvisor.es/Attraction_Review-g1591157-d5075429-Reviews-Quaryat_Dillar-Dilar_Province_of_Granada_Andalucia.html	June 7, 2019
https://www.tripadvisor.es/Attraction_Review-g1940603-d11994390-Reviews-Tropolis-Alcudia_de_Gaudix_Province_of_Granada_Andalucia.html	June 7, 2019
https://www.tripadvisor.es/Attraction_Review-g187441-d7331648-Reviews-Sierra_Sol-Granada_Province_of_Granada_Andalucia.html	June 7, 2019
https://www.tripadvisor.es/Attraction_Review-g187441-d3655261-Reviews-Rafting_SaltaRios-Granada_Province_of_Granada_Andalucia.html	June 7, 2019
https://www.tripadvisor.es/Attraction_Review-g1174585-d8387776-Reviews-Centro_de_Visitantes_El_Dornajo-Pinos_Genil_Province_of_Granada_Andalucia.html	June 7, 2019
https://www.tripadvisor.es/Attraction_Review-g1028186-d6131825-Reviews-La_Vereda-Guejar_Sierra_Province_of_Granada_Andalucia.html	June 7, 2019
https://www.tripadvisor.es/Attraction_Review-g1047553-d7813035-Reviews-Hilacar_ArtesAna-Bubion_Province_of_Granada_Andalucia.html	June 7, 2019