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Study about the environmental and socio-economic impact of sports events in “El Valle y Carrascoy” regional park (Murcia, Spain)

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ARTICLE SECTION

Study about the environmental and socio-economic impact of sports events in “El Valle y Carrascoy” regional park (Murcia, Spain)

Abstract: Sport events held in rural settings can help to enhance the natural heritage of the places where they are held. Particularly, they can contribute to the diversification of economic activity, social dynamization and territorial balance in rural areas. However, they can be unsustainable for the ecosystems of the species that live in the environments where they develop, in addition to generating other types of conflicts (symbolic and material), since in the rural environment there is a whole heterogeneity of social and economic actors with different visions and different interests around the use of the territory. This work is proposed as a main objective to know the socioeconomic and environmental impact of this type of events within a specific study area, such as “El Valle y Carrascoy” Regional Park, in the Region of Murcia (Spain). To achieve this objective, a total of 15 interviews have been conducted with qualified informants, such as participants in sporting events, environmental managers, members of associations and environmental groups, members of federations, among others, obtaining conclusions of great interest that allow the adequate governance of the resources in which they are developed and providing tools for the proper management of those.

Key words: El Valle y Carrascoy, environmental impact, sporting events in the natural environment, participatory study, sport and rural development.

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IDEAS CLAVE / HIGHLIGHTS / IDEES CLAU

1. La práctica totalidad de los espacios naturales protegidos está experimentando la organización y desarrollo de eventos deportivos.
2. Son necesarios estudios multidisciplinares como herramienta para el adecuado uso de los recursos.
3. Diversas publicaciones evidencian la aparición de ciertos tipos de problemáticas asociadas a la celebración de eventos deportivos en el medio natural.
4. Gran evolución de este tipo de eventos en la Región de Murcia en general, y en “El Valle y Carrascoy” en particular.
5. Un evento de estas características representa un factor de atracción para dar a conocer territorios rurales.

1. Almost all protected natural areas are experiencing the organization and development of sporting events.
2. Multidisciplinary studies are necessary as a tool for the proper use of resources.
3. Several publications show the appearance of certain types of problems associated with the celebration of sporting events in the natural environment.
4. Great evolution of this type of events in the Region of Murcia in general, and in “El Valle y Carrascoy” in particular.
5. An event of these characteristics represents a factor of attraction to publicize rural territories.

1. La pràctica totalitat dels espais naturals protegits està experimentant l'organització i desenvolupament d'esdeveniments esportius.
2. Són necessaris estudis multidisciplinaris com a eina per a l'adequat ús dels recursos.
3. Diverses publicacions evidencien l'aparició d'uns certs tipus de problemàtiques associades a la celebració d'esdeveniments esportius en el medi natural.
4. Gran evolució d'aquesta mena d'esdeveniments a la Regió de Múrcia en general, i a “La Vall i Carrascoy” en particular.
5. Un esdeveniment d'aquestes característiques representa un factor d'atracció per a donar a conèixer territoris rurals.

EXTENDED ABSTRACT¹

Sport events held in rural settings can help to enhance the natural heritage of the places where they are held. Particularly, they can contribute to the diversification of economic activity, social dynamization and territorial balance in rural areas. However, they can be unsustainable for the ecosystems of the species that live in the environments where they develop, in addition to generating other types of conflicts (symbolic and material), since in the rural environment there is a whole heterogeneity of social and economic actors with different visions and different interests regarding the use of the territory

For this reason, it is believed necessary to carry out detailed studies – such as the one presented here – to identify the possible impacts caused by this type of sporting events, especially if take place on natural environments cataloged with some figure of environmental protection.

The present work has been carried out with the initial idea of approaching the reality of the sporting events that take place in ENP, as well as knowing their socioeconomic and environmental impact in the surroundings of the Regional Park "El Valle y Carrascoy", in the Region of Murcia (Spain). In this way, through greater knowledge about the impact of this type of events, what is sought is that this study serves as a basis to contribute to establishing a more objective and constructive dialogue between the different social, economic and institutional agents involved, thus collaborating in the conservation of the natural environment and favoring a more sustainable approach to this type of events and a greater development of the areas where they are held.

To achieve this objective, a total of 15 interviews were carried out with qualified informants, such as runners, environmental managers, members of associations and environmental groups, members of federations, among others. These were structured in four blocks, which pursued different objectives in terms of obtaining information:

- Block 1: economic impact generated by the sporting events that take place in the Park.
- Block 2: social impact associated with sporting events that take place in the Park.
- Block 3: environmental impact caused by sporting events held in the Park.
- Block 4: conclusions and recommendations for the future that improve the development of this type of event.

Thanks to these interviews, numerous statements of great interest have been obtained which have allowed us to identify the different impacts associated with this type of sporting events in a specific area of study, in addition to being able to know first-hand what is the impact they have at an environmental, economic and social level on the environment and the surrounding localities. Some of the most representative conclusions have been the following:

- The fact of bringing together a large number of people and holding events of a certain importance, has led to a greater awareness of both the localities in the area and the natural environment of the Park.
- It shows the tremendous evolution that has taken place in relation to the celebration of sporting events in the natural environment in the Region of Murcia in general, and in "El Valle and Carrascoy" in particular. This has been particularly noticeable over the

¹ Traducción exclusiva de los autores / Authors' exclusive translation.

last 15 years, where it has gone from being a sporadic leisure activity to an economic sub-sector in itself.

- In addition to participants and organisers, this type of event mobilises a significant number of people (family, friends, onlooker, etc.) who travel to the place of the event. The main economic impact in the area is focused on local bars and restaurants, although the incidence depends largely on the category and quality of the event. This impact is not considered very significant.
- These events play an important role in the enhancement of sports practice at the local level.
- The organization and development of these tests generates diverse opinions depending on the groups that have been interviewed, with participants and organisers being more in favour and creating a greater rejection among environmental groups and associations with some kind of relationship with nature conservation.
- It is known that the influence of the event goes beyond the day of the competition creating routes from the itinerary of the races, adapting the participants their training throughout the year. This has a major impact on the routes, beyond any kind of control by organisers or managers.
- On the one hand, the demands of federations and organizations for the modification of the routes from one edition to another, prioritizing a greater attraction for the participants over the conservation of the environment. And, on the other hand, the lack of means, both technical and human, that prevent environmental managers from carrying out a total and detailed inspection of the route of the events, which would guarantee greater control over the environmental impacts that may occur.
- As a result of the fact that the PORN of "El Valle y Carrascoy" has been approved initially and not definitively, the regulations it includes in terms of sports activities organized in the natural environment can only have a recommendatory character, and not mandatory.
- What most of the interviewees agree on is the importance of environmental education and the need to involve all groups in the correct use of the Park, prioritizing the conservation and preservation of the environment above any other aims.

The conclusions drawn in this study argue the need to carry out comprehensive analyses of the positive and negative impacts (both socioeconomic and environmental) of sporting events that take place in natural environments. Research should be promoted around the planning of this type of test and its possible impact through the increase of scientific knowledge, thus achieving better management of both the test and the space where it is held.

In addition, the administrations should allocate more resources to guarantee a correct review of the route of the events and greater control of the required environmental measures, as well as, in the specific case of the "El Valle y Carrascoy" Regional Park, definitively approve the PORN, which would allow greater regulation of sporting events that are disputed in this ENP.

Furthermore, the impact that certain human activities generate on the environment is often ignored by users, so it is necessary a correct disclosure that leads to an awareness on the part of users of the causes and effects that degrade it.

Finally, it seems essential that the competitions are impregnated with an educational character and awareness towards the conservation of the environment, thus contributing to the dissemination of the values of protected areas explicitly and to a greater knowledge of the territory where they are held. It is necessary that these events are carried out in collaboration with the administrations and local populations, achieving a greater communion between the event and the territory where it is held.