

## **CULTURAL LANDSCAPE AND TOURISM ON HISTORIC RANCHES OF THE PANTANAL WETLANDS OF BRAZIL**

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UDK: 911.53(81):338.48

COBISS: 1.02 - Review article

### **Abstract**

#### **Cultural Landscape and Tourism on Historic Ranches of the Pantanal Wetlands of Brazil**

The rise of eco-tourism and rural tourism as new complementary activities which add value to traditional stock-raising functions on historic ranches located in the Pantanal Wetlands of Central-West Brazil is analyzed. Differently from other rural enterprises of the booming Central-West, which produce the majority of Brazilian export commodities, the specific environmental conditions of seasonal wetlands and perennial swamp of the Pantanal restrict the viable options for gaining access to global markets. Consequently, after 1990 ranchers of the Pantanal have developed tourist activities based on the spectacular natural beauty of the wetlands as well as the distinct ranching culture. The ranches have modernized with amenities to attract domestic and foreign tourists and tourism has assumed an importance source of their income.

### **Key words**

eco-tourism, rural tourism, cultural landscape, Pantanal wetlands, Central-West Brazil

*The editor received the article on 19.3.2010.*

## 1. Introduction

The Pantanal is a broad sedimentary basin dating from the Quaternary which is seasonally flooded. The region is spectacularly beautiful and possesses a complex ecosystem with exuberant flora and fauna attuned to the seasonal pluvial and fluvial floods, which advance over vast open wetlands during the rainy season.

The floodplain is located in the far west of Brazil between 17° to 22° latitudes South and 55° to 59 ° longitudes West. The Pantanal occupies a total area of 192,600 km<sup>2</sup>, of which about 150 thousand square kilometres are located in Brazil, divided between the states of Mato Grosso (40%) and Mato Grosso do Sul (60%).

Defined by internal variation in flooding, of relief and of soil types, the Pantanal is divided into eleven sub-regions: Barão do Megalaço, Cáceres and Poconé in Mato Grosso state and Abobral, Miranda, Aquidauana, Porto Murinho, Nabileque, Paraguai, Paiaguás and Nhecolândia in Mato Grosso do Sul state. The part in the latter state is known as the southern Pantanal and is the object of this study.

The principal economic activity of the Pantanal is beef ranching. The wetlands have low population density and historically were divided up between huge ranches so that few urban areas exist in the region. Population is concentrated in the small cities of the Pantanal and around the ranch stead. The ranches are so large that they are located at great distances from one another as well as from the cities and vast empty areas exist in between. Relative distance is further aggravated by the difficulty of establishing transport facilities in wetlands and the seasonal isolation which occurs during the annual floods, all of which have historically limited economic integration and development so that the region has never been very dynamic.

However, today within contemporary processes of restructuring global capitalism, the Pantanal has assumed new functions of organic beef production often times associated with tourism so that productive ranches have set up eco-lodges to cater to Brazilian and foreign tourists. This multi-functionality of Pantanal rural space has assumed considerable importance for economic and social regional development. The opportunity for additional income to be earned in rural and eco-tourism is such that both traditional and modern ranches have taken on this activity.

The incorporation of the Pantanal in global tourism is based on its comparative advantages of great natural beauty, a slow way of life conducive to "ecological leisure" and de-stressing, rich fishing resources and a traditional way of life based on wetland ranching. These advantages have created an environment for innovative business to use the rich natural and cultural landscape to market holidays on the historic ranches of the Pantanal.

The object of this study is to evaluate the spatial transformations provoked by the introduction of rural and eco-tourism into the southern Pantanal, the part of the wetlands which has lead this process. The results presented here are based on bibliographic research, secondary statistics and field work in which questionnaires were applied to 91 ranches in the southern part of the Pantanal in 2002 to 2005 as well interviews with fifteen representatives of tourist agencies. In addition, follow up visits were undertaken in 2006 and 2008.

## **2. Tourism in the Southern Pantanal: Natural Beauty and Historic Ranches**

Tourism is a global growth industry which can be of great importance for social and economic regional development but involves two apparently contradictory movements: spatial differentiation and homogenization. Tourism attributes value to spatial differentiation at the same time that space is standardized in terms of price, comfort, basic infrastructure and service and product quality so that spatial difference is reduced but still remains different (Araujo 2006). Consequently, the natural beauty and cultural heritage of the Pantanal are emphasized but tourist activities follow the fundamental logic of global capitalism. As Santos (1997) points out, spatial uniformity is re-dimensioned by the perception of distance at the same time that technical unity occurs and productive relations are internalized so creating value for regional differences. Within this dynamic process in the southern Pantanal, trans-cultural interaction and the conservation and preservation of social and natural attributes are tied into global spatial production, which articulates the region into world tourist markets but also can provoke internal change to the point of threatening local distinctiveness and ultimately the product being sold (Araujo 2006, Araujo and Bicalho 2009).

In the southern Pantanal the only tourist activity of any importance in the past was sport fishing, which was based solely on the natural attribute of large stocks and variety of fish present in the region. This overly specialized tourist base caused tourism to decline during the 1990s due to the poor quality of the services offered and the lack of infrastructure and planning. Fishermen would trailer boats and beer in from their home states and stay in gaudy camp grounds and motels surrounded by brothels. These male tourists would get drunk while fishing by day and then whoring by night. This generated little local income of questionable social sustainability. As a result, after 2000 many of the camp grounds and small motels were transformed from eye sores to more presentable establishments catering to rural and eco-tourism. Today public and private officials are trying to revitalize sport fishing in the region but as part of more diversified tourist products which includes fishing within rural and eco-tourism.

Eco-tourism is promoted in the media by marketing the Pantanal as a 'paradise', an 'El Dorado' and an 'ecological sanctuary'. Officials are keen on developing eco-tourism in a more planned way which would be coherent with maintaining local natural and cultural resources rather than encourage mass tourism which could provoke the opposite. The development of local rural and eco-tourism was first promoted by government tourist agencies and then taken up by the ranchers. A crisis in beef production during the 1990s sent home the need to diversify economic activities and tourism based on local natural resources and a distinctive way of life proved to be a promising line of work.

The historic ranches maintained traditional extensive cattle raising at the same time that eco-lodges were set up near the ranch house on the property. This new activity aggregates value changing the ranch but maintaining it as something akin to what it was before. In the words of a woman who transformed her ranch in this way, "With the division of my grandfather's ranch among heirs into a number of separate properties, with each heir needing to invest money into new infrastructure, we passed a period of great difficulty. Then, in 1996, the prospect appeared of investing in tourism as an alternative source of income. At first my father was against it but we insisted and he finally agreed to let us set up an eco-lodge. In 1997 we opened

for business and tourism was the salvation of the ranch. Today we earn up to 50% from rural tourism, my father still turns his nose up at the activity but is pleased with the financial return" (interview, 2003).

As there are in-numerous natural and cultural attractions in the Pantanal, rural and eco-tourism has quickly become a promising activity, which could result in sustainable development by incorporating environmental and cultural dimensions into regional development. Local business people have become acutely aware of the natural value of flora and fauna for international tourism and of the necessary trade-offs involved with combining activities, as the following remark shows,

"We have a number of scientific projects on the ranch, which are undertaken in partnerships with universities with the objective of preserving species threatened with extinction, such as the blue macaw and the spotted jaguar. We may lose calves to jaguars but we are more than compensated by the tourism" (interview, 2004).

The incorporation of an environmental dimension to regional development policy was fundamental for permitting access to the financial resources necessary for funding new rural activities, which in turn, reinforce wildlife conservation. This synergy was identified on all of the 91 ranches researched, with cattle ranching combined to different tourist activities in such a way as to result in the preservation of the environment. One interesting combination is organic cattle raising and tourism present on 11% of the ranches researched in which alternative forms of ranching seek harmony and balance with the Pantanal ecosystem.

### **3. The Role of the State in Promoting Tourism in the Pantanal**

Different levels of government have stimulated the development of tourism in the region of study. With the objective of preserving biodiversity, traditional genetic resources and local culture, federal and state environmental reserves and parks have been created as well as private-sector reserves which can be quite large given the size of the ranches in the Pantanal. At the regional level, all levels of government have been involved in improving roads and other transport infrastructure as well as expanding electric and telecommunication services. Many of these investments have been made with the express intent of stimulating the growth of tourism and specific governmental agencies have been created to regulate and advertise tourism in the southern Pantanal (Araujo and Bicalho 2009).

With the aim of integrating the region into national and international tourist destinations, the International Airport of Corumbá was amplified, a new airport was built in Bonito municipality and another new airport is planned for Porto Murtinho municipality. A paved highway was built across the Pantanal linking Corumbá and the state capital Campo Grande. Existing roads within the wetlands have been transformed into "park routes" and are being better maintained and a number of bridges were built permitting all-season access to the tourist destinations. In 2009 the historic railway between Campo Grande, Miranda and Aquiduaana was reactivated as a tourist attraction.

Municipal governments of the Pantanal have followed federal directives for tourism by setting up Municipal Secretariats for Tourism as well as private-public Municipal Tourist Councils which permit feedback to government. At the state level, in 1999 Mato Grosso do Sul implemented its part of the National Plan for Sustainable Tourist

Development (PDTUR) in partnership with a number of public and private institutions. This plan includes training qualified tourist workers, planning tourist development in specific parts of the Pantanal, advertising tourism at the national and international level and establishing a tourist calendar of traditional festivities and events regularly held so as to assure a constant flow of tourists.

#### **4. Tourist Development**

The ranchers and business people engaged in tourism have assimilated the different suggestions for the sustainable development of the activity made by different levels of government. They are becoming better organized in associations, such as the Brazilian Association of the Hotel Industry of Mato Grosso do Sul (ABIH/MS) and the Association of Eco-lodges of the Pantanal (APPAN). They have invested heavily in expanding hotel capacity, in sophisticated leisure infrastructure and in advertising and marketing.

Among the measures taken by the private sector, the most important has been to build a network of tourist services in urban and rural areas, including hotels, eco-lodges, restaurants, night clubs and other attractions, organized in enterprises which are passing through a period of acquisitions. Urban amenities are demanded by tourists so that after 1995, when electricity was made available for the first time in these remote rural areas, most ranch eco-lodges installed electric lighting, running water, air conditioning, cable television, internet and mini-refrigerators in the guest rooms and saunas and swimming pools for collective use. Tourist attractions have been set up on and off the ranch in order to fulfil what the rural and eco-tourist of urban origin expects to see in the Pantanal. Tourist facilities include parking lots, public bathrooms, access roads to lakes for recreation fishing, ecological trails and viewpoints, so permitting easy and safe access to natural attractions. On the ranch, attractions emphasize cattle raising cultural heritage and a relaxed life style.

Tourist operators market regional difference and the distinctiveness of place in English and Portuguese language brochures, "In photographic boat cruises, jeep tours, horse back riding and trekking the visitor will have the opportunity to experience the spectacularly beautiful region of the southern Pantanal, the meandering creeks and rivers, the exuberant forest at water's edge, the floodplains and the birds and wildlife all in plain view".

Municipal governments also produce similar brochures highlighting the attractions in their counties, an example being: "Located in the southern Pantanal, Miranda county is an excellent tourist destination offering ecological tourism in which the visitor can contemplate the beauty of the local flora and fauna. Rural tourism is also available in which the visitor can participate in the daily activities of a typical Pantanal ranch. Sport fishing is another option with a long tradition of good service and an abundance of fish".

At the national level, rural and eco-tourism in the Pantanal is aggressively marketed in advertising in newspapers and on television in the principal metropolitan areas of Brazil. These areas have serious problems with air and noise pollution as well as with urban violence so that tourists come for a peaceful stay. A tourist from industrialized São Paulo summed up his experience as, "This place is Paradise. I breathe fresh air and here it is so calm. I never felt so close to God. The sky is

blue, there is so much water and so many creatures, all surrounded by Nature” (interview, 2004).

Foreign tourists make up the majority of tourists (65%), many of whom are Europeans (Fig. 1). Brazilians comprise 35% of the total and the great majority of them come from the neighbouring state of São Paulo (Fig. 2). The tourists from Europe and São Paulo seek a respite from their highly urbanized, domesticated landscapes and come to the southern Pantanal in the hope of encountering a natural world untouched by modern capitalism in which they can experience a rural lifestyle. Contact with cattle and horses in the rural zone and sighting wild animals on swamp tours are thought as medicine for the daily tensions of the big city in which they live. Differently from sport fishing of the past, rural and eco-tourism give great value to personal introspection and contact with the natural landscape and local culture rather than coming to engage in binge drinking and whoring.

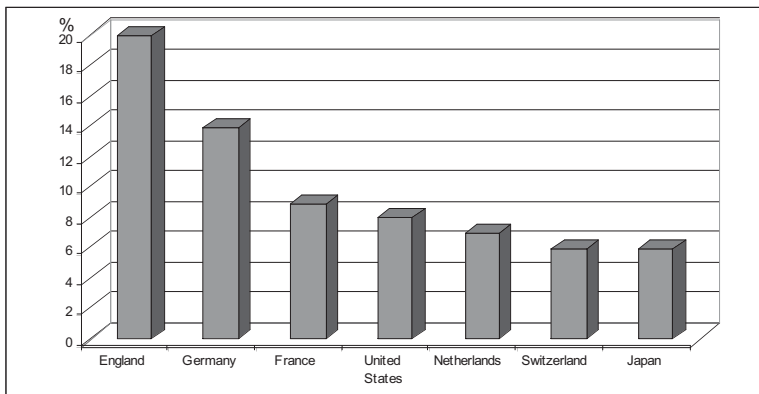


Fig. 1: Country origin of foreign tourists to the southern Pantanal, 2004. Source: Field research (2004).

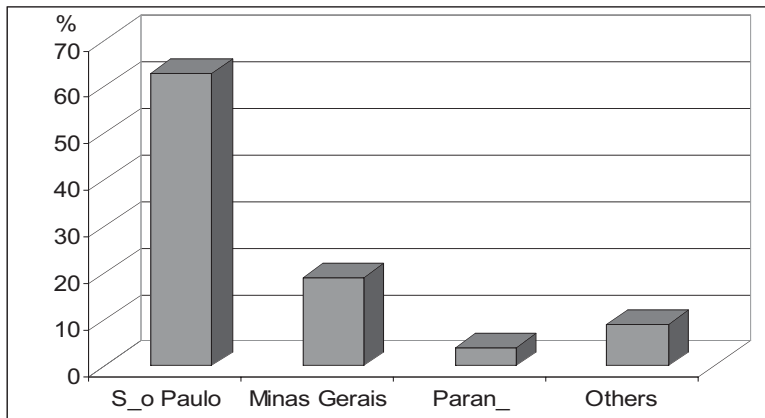


Fig. 2: State origin of Brazilian tourists to the southern Pantanal, 2004. Source: Field research (2004).

The new kind of tourism is expanding rapidly in the southern Pantanal. According to the Brazilian Association of Hotels of Mato Grosso do Sul in 2005 the area received 260,568 domestic and foreign tourists who spent R\$100 million (the equivalent of US\$40 million). The number of tourist in 2005 was 10% higher than that of 2004 when 234,512 visited the area and spent about R\$90 million (Fig. 3). It should be emphasized that the number of annual visitors has reached the point of being almost the same as the total inhabitants of the southern Pantanal: 296,788 in 2000.

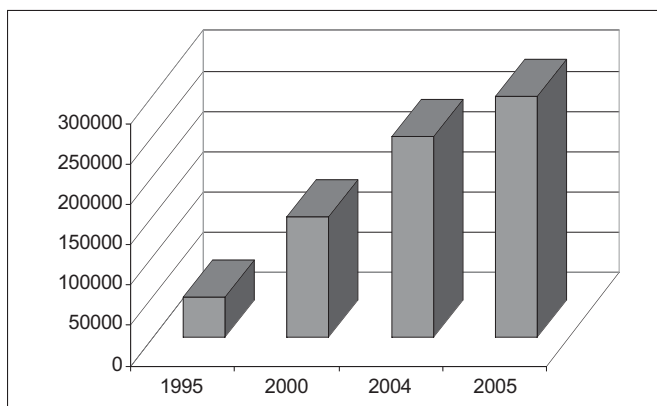


Fig. 3: Number of tourists per year visiting the southern Pantanal. Source of data: ABIH/MS (2005).

The importance of the new form of tourism vis-à-vis sport fishing of the past can be seen in the number of tourists who visited in 1995 and afterward. In 1995 about 50,000 tourists visited the area, of which 80% came for sport fishing and only 20% for rural and eco-tourism. After 2000 this relationship became inverted as sport fishing entered into decline and rural and eco-tourism expanded.

Capacity was expanded to accompany increased demand and the number of hotel beds increased by 30% from 4,859 beds in 2000 to 6,938 beds in 2005. In Miranda municipality alone, 71% of the ranches located within the wetlands invested in tourist development alongside their cattle raising activities.

On the other hand, considerable spatial concentration occurs with most of the establishments being clustered in Aquidauana, Miranda and particularly Corumbá municipalities, which cover only 28% of the total area of the southern Pantanal. The concentration occurs because of the comparative and competitive advantage of these municipalities. They are characterized by great beauty, offer a diversity of services, have easy access and local business people invest heavily in publicity.

Direct and indirect employment has accompanied this expansion, increasing qualification in hotel and tourist management and services such as guides, boat drivers, chefs and waitresses. Eco-tourism in particular requires training and on 60% of the ranches researched a professional manager runs the operation, 85% of which have university degrees and have done English or Spanish courses.

## 5. Conclusion

The development of tourism in the southern Pantanal of Mato Grosso do Sul state has induced the construction of a new territory with new functions, forms, structures and spatial processes. These in turn has made the area competitive, with the inclusion of the area in international tourist routes as a non-subordinated space. To become "attractive" in such a way as to compete with other tourist destinations Pantanal tourism has had to standardize its style, services and taste, so that despite being a differentiated space in the world, the Pantanal has had to conform to universal technical requirements and to homogenize its productive space.

The modernization of ranches into eco-lodges and dude ranches is such an example of this process. In the beginning tourist services were rustic but today they have become increasingly sophisticated going beyond former local characteristics. Even if elements of regional identity and preservation of natural and cultural attributes of the southern Pantanal are valued by tourists, new landscapes are created in a process involving ever greater rationalization and homogenization of tourist space.

## Acknowledgements

Research funded by the Coordenação de Aperfeiçoamento de Pessoal de Nível Superior (CAPES - Brazil).

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## **CULTURAL LANDSCAPE AND TOURISM ON HISTORIC RANCHES OF THE PANTANAL WETLANDS OF BRAZIL**

### ***Summary***

The rise of eco-tourism and rural tourism as new complementary activities which add value to traditional stock-raising functions is analyzed on the historic ranches located in the southern part of the Pantanal Wetlands of Mato Grosso do Sul state in the Central-West region of Brazil. The Central-West is undergoing profound transformations of its spatial organisation with the advance of large agro-industrial enterprises, however, these changes did not occur into the Pantanal wetlands. The Pantanal consists of a maze of lakes, meandering rivers and swamp in which historically sparsely populated ranches were established in extensive areas in which annual farm activities were regulated by seasonal flooding of the wetlands. Differently from other rural enterprises of the Central-West, the specific environmental conditions of the Pantanal and limited capital resources make farming in the Pantanal less competitive so that ranchers encounter difficulty in intensifying stock-raising methods or in adopting other new agricultural activities. As a result, the Pantanal has not accompanied wider regional trends.

In the search for alternative economic strategies, historic Pantanal ranches have turned to tourism based on their rich natural and cultural heritage in an attempt to add value to their traditional cattle-raising function. This became a possibility after 1990 when new roads were built and rural electrification took place so permitting the construction of a Pantanal tourist territory which attracts visitors from Brazil and from abroad. Ranches have been modified in order to attain international tourist standards of quality and comfort of the installations, even if they are selling nature and a rustic way of life. The tourist activities are associated to nature conservation and preservation of the Pantanal and a distinctive cultural identity of typical customs associated to the seasonal cycles. Tourists have contact with a slower way of life, wide open spaces and close contact with rich tropical fauna.

The apparent leisurely way of life sold to tourists contrasts with a methodically planned tourist sector which pursues clearly determined economic objectives and articulates the ranches to a local tourist network consisting of private-sector firms and government tourism offices and from there to regional and international networks specialised in eco-tourism and rural tourism. The tourist sector represents an important new economic activity and aggregates value and dynamism to a previously backwater region.

