

Mediterranean experience of ecotourism Challenges and opportunities

by Natalie LOBARTOLO and Marcos VALDERRÁBANO

During the session « Tourism and Forests » of the 4th Mediterranean Forest Week of Barcelona, the theme of the promotion and the sustainable development of both tourism and forest areas was discussed. It was illustrated by several examples, including a Mediterranean experience of ecotourism MEET. This project, involving eight countries, provides tourism offers that benefit local communities and are aligned with conservation objectives in the concerned region.

The natural-cultural landscape of the Mediterranean has been traditionally depicted as the typical 3S (sun, sea and sand) mass tourism destination. The unsustainable visits, heavily concentrated in the summer months, have dramatically transformed the historical human and natural landscapes to the point where very few, if any, pristine landscapes still remain. As the demand for eco and nature-based tourism increases worldwide, a sustainable model needs to be developed for the Mediterranean region which allows tourists to visit natural areas and parks in a way that respects, preserves and supports the protected areas and their associated communities.

Sustainable tourism in the Mediterranean context

Traditionally, sustainability has been described as being founded on three major pillars: environmental, social and financial. These principles largely apply to sustainable tourism, which aims to keep a balance between biodiversity, nature conservation and provision of benefits to local communities, all while generating economic support. While traditional mass tourism focuses almost solely on creating financial gains, the Mediterranean Experience of Eco-Tourism (MEET) fosters positive experiences between people and nature, increasing both visitors and locals' awareness of conservation efforts and strategies to protect natu-

ral resources, as well as simultaneously supporting and maintaining the cultural and economic values of the protected areas involved.

The MEET project offers an alternative to the typical 3S tourism to include forests and less well-known Mediterranean landscapes, striving to do so in a way which will not hinder, but help their conservation status and potential. According to the World Tourism Organisation, a growing number of tourists are becoming more sophisticated in their tourism demands, seeking out a meaningful travel experience, including aspects such as cultural authenticity, contact with local communities, and learning about flora, fauna, unique ecosystems and nature conservation in general. MEET aims to achieve exactly that.

The MEET Project

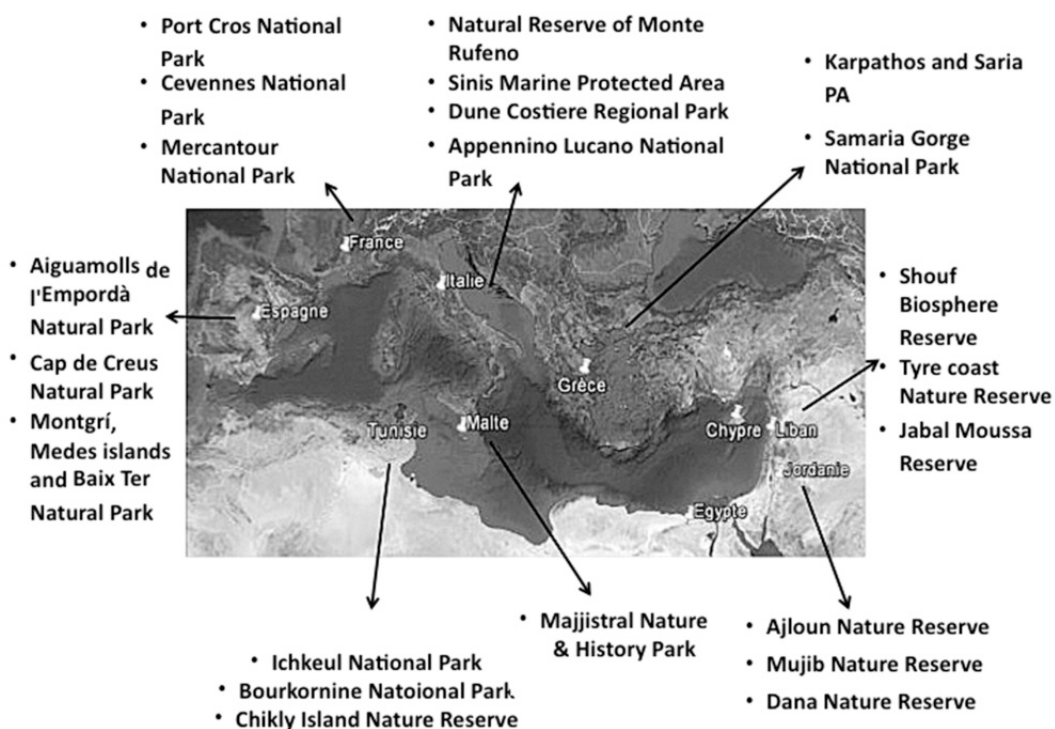
In recent decades, the concentrated distribution of tourists in typical Mediterranean hotspots has put immense pressure on natural systems, especially during the peak summer tourist season. The MEET project has developed an alternative to the typical temporal and spatial patterns of mass-tourism in the region, offering off-season packages

for small, environmentally conscious groups (4-12 people) who seek to engage in responsible tourism. This type of tourism allows them to learn about and contribute to the conservation of the natural and cultural environments they visit and enjoy.

Each protected area has designed and developed its own ecotourism package following a participative approach, heavily involving the local community. The conservation of the natural features of each site remains their primary objective, whether this is through the responsible management of visitors, increased motivation of staff and stakeholders or heightened awareness of locals about sustainability issues.

As species and their habitats worldwide are exposed to unsustainable development pressures, it would seem logical to be sceptical about developing tourism packages within protected areas. However, along with these pressures comes an increased demand for nature based tourism in protected areas and national parks, and for this reason it is important to focus on how this demand can be met and controlled to ensure that tourism activities are not detrimental, but rather have the potential to increase the effectiveness of the management of protected areas while sustainably maintaining conservation values and benefiting local communities.

Figure 1: Funded by the European Union in the framework of the ENPI-CBC Mediterranean Programme 2007-2013 and gathering institutions from eight Mediterranean countries (Jordan, Lebanon, Italy, France, Malta, Spain, Tunisia, and Greece), the ultimate aim of this cross-border cooperation project is to create a catalogue of ecotourism packages (MEET catalogue) within 22 Mediterranean Protected Areas.



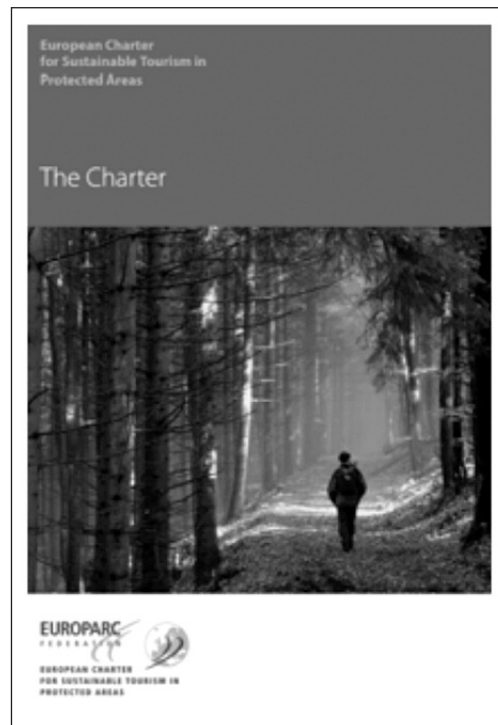
The value of the MEET project to Mediterranean protected areas

In order to create appealing tourism packages worthy of being deemed « eco », the MEET Secretariat and project partners have organised a number of capacity building and training workshops on topics such as Tourism Guiding and Interpretation, Product Development and Sustainability, with the assistance of world-class leaders in the fields, including Kuoni, Drumm Consulting and Sustainable Travel International. The experts stress that tourism in the Mediterranean needs a new, more sustainable model, in particular one focused on a respectful, low-impact type on protected areas.

Sustainable tourism in the Mediterranean: Fostering a participative approach, with the protected area as the central focus point

Practices, activities and packages considered sustainable today might not be so in 10-20 years, so tourism in such fragile natural spaces must be carefully planned, managed and monitored. MEET packages have followed a strong local participatory approach, whereby the managers of protected areas have taken on a leadership role in the creation of a local cluster of tourism resources such as tour operators, accommodation, restaurants and transport and activity providers.

As well as contributing financially to the management activities and conservation of protected areas, tourism can help local people to recognise their natural resources as valuable assets, realising the importance of appreciating and preserving them. MEET visitors not only have the opportunity to increase their knowledge and understanding of the natural environment and culture, but will also make a financial contribution to conservation measures. Such benefits will not only be valuable for visitors, but will



Picture 1:

The approach of this project has been inspired by The European Charter for Sustainable Tourism (ECST) in Protected Areas. The ECST is a voluntary agreement that aims to encourage good practices by recognising protected areas that meet agreed requirements for the sustainable development and tourism management. Through the MEET initiative, ECST principles can be adapted and applied to the diverse Mediterranean region.

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just as importantly influence and impact the local stakeholders and communities involved.

Rather than imposing mechanisms of financial contribution, the MEET project allows these to be adapted to the different financial and regulatory realities of each protected area. For example, areas in Catalonia (Spain), Italy, Malta and Tunisia have very limited funding from the government (national or regional), and are not permitted to charge tourists fees for visiting the areas. The case of Greece is quite the contrary; protected areas charge visitors entrance fees, however, they do not receive any funding from the government. Protected areas in Lebanon and Jordan follow completely different financing structures, with Al Shouf Cedar Reserve (Lebanon) getting most of its funding from projects and NGOs, and protected areas in Jordan being run by the Royal Society for the Conservation of Nature (RSCN) and getting funding from business related activities such as entrance fees, lodging and handicrafts, as well as from projects and NGOs. Each protected area will be able to use (?) and apply the financial benefits that MEET activities bring on a case by case basis.

Governance and financing challenges: from local to Mediterranean scales

Despite the participative approach and local focus of the developed tours, the political structures and consequential financial and managerial implications pose great challenges for ecotourism in the Mediterranean. Governance structures and legislations often impede national parks and their management bodies from charging entrance fees, which could be used for management and conservation actions. Whether public or private, the sustainable management of protected areas in the Mediterranean requires high degrees of cooperation, coordination and strong partnerships. Goals and resources are often mismatched, misunderstood and mismanaged among and between the tourism industry, governments, local communities, managers and planners of protected areas, and tourists themselves.

Regardless of the highly effective results in some MEET protected areas, convincing the local communities of the benefits of such activities is not always easy. The challenges

of cultural contamination and visitor number controls remain at the forefront of MEET's priorities in ensuring the development of responsible tourism offers. The project aims to achieve this by establishing a touristic model beneficial to the natural and cultural environment, and by attracting visitors with a heightened environmental and cultural conscious, in very small quantities.

As humans and their activities already heavily dominate the region and its landscapes, developing tourism packages that are sustainable proves to be a significant, yet achievable, challenge. There are various factors that come into play to complicate the process such as the governance structures, financing and cultural diversity, which results in mottled definitions, processes, priorities and benefits for and from tourism and sustainability across the eight countries involved. Although there is much debate about tourism in protected areas and the topic can often be adversarial, the MEET project has taken on the challenge, and is well on its way to success in contributing to the improvement of management and conservation of Mediterranean protected areas.



Picture 2:

Vallées de la Roya et Bevera, Mercantour National Park (France) © *Claude Gouron*.

Mercantour National Park is one example of a MEET park in southern France which has developed a MEET package as the result of a collaboration between the park (as a values guarantor) and the private sector (tour operator and other service providers), while at the same time ensuring that the local people work together to achieve their goals in a way which can be supported and well sustained into the future.

Although Mercantour has followed the participative approach model proposed by MEET, French national parks are provided with significant public financing; therefore, gaining additional funding from tourism in protected areas is not a priority. Furthermore, Mercantour National Park (France) as a public institution is required to cooperate with various actors from the private sector, which can prove that working towards a common goal is difficult when each body has differing visions and objectives.

The future of the MEET project

Beyond the official end of the financed MEET project (expected December 2015), it is envisioned that the partners and parks within the Network will continue to collaborate on issues related to sustainable tourism development and training in Mediterranean protected areas. Continuing to connect with local and worldwide experts on the relevant issues, the partnership aims to maintain and grow the network, offering the opportunity for other protected areas to become members and benefit from the numerous tools, resources, and lessons which being part of this Network and model offer.

There are, however, numerous challenges to be faced in the future, and priority questions to be addressed by partners as soon as possible. Three of the most important include: 1) Develop a common environmental impact model (footprint) for tourism in the Mediterranean 2), Standardise the certification (or validation) schemes for members (protected areas, service providers, etc.) including their links with international standards, 3) Create a common image and marketing pitch of the different Mediterranean realities to present MEET as a responsible tourism destination.

Regardless of the challenges, the future perspectives are optimistic and it is hoped that the MEET initiative will serve as a catalyst to join forces with other protected areas. As the network is enlarged, the advantages of such a synergy are expected to grow exponentially as a result of shared learning and a common marketing approach to create an image for Mediterranean ecotourism in the international arena.

N.L., M.V.

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Picture 3: Hiking in the Sasseto Woods, Monte Rufeno, Italy. © Filippo Belisario.

Monte Rufeno (Italy) is a great example of local cooperation allowing stakeholders to work with the community for conservation, education, sustainability and public awareness. MEET eco-tourist package helps participants to achieve conservation goals by undertaking simple environmental monitoring activities inside the PA, which have a direct positive impact on the conservation of the reserve, and additionally create emotional links and a heightened appreciation for nature among the guests. Compounding these positive benefits there are the financial contributions sourced from their participation.



Picture 4: Century-old olive trees, Dune Costiere, Italy © Dune Costiere Regional Park.

Dune Costiere Regional Park (Italy) is one of the best examples where local communities have been integrated in the management and tour activities of the protected area. The MEET package involves companies that provide services (hiking, ciclo-trekking, excursions...) and rural hospitality within the Park and companies that carry out tasting workshops of local products and visits to underground mills and villages carved into rocks. Rural churches and local farmers associations are also included as the main actors in preparing and providing fresh, locally sourced and prepared meals. The park management body stresses the importance of the tour package development in providing different opportunities to young people who want to start businesses and cultural associations, supporting the local communities while simultaneously combating the issue of youth unemployment in this region. All of these companies have a sustainable tourism focus and are, or will soon be, certified with the ECST II.

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For more information, and to follow the progress of the current test tours and project as a whole, visit:

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Summary

Mediterranean experience of ecotourism - Challenges and opportunities

This article presents the initiative of the Mediterranean Experience on Ecotourism (MEET), a project funded by the European Union (EU) involving eight countries in a common effort to develop a shared approach for the development of sustainable tourism in Mediterranean protected areas. This paper presents the general framework and previous cases of sustainable tourism in the Mediterranean, and explores how this initiative is facing up to the challenge of providing tourism offers that benefit local communities and are aligned with conservation objectives in the region. The project aims to define a common framework of governance for tourism planning valid in different Mediterranean realities.

Résumé

Une expérience d'éco-tourisme en Méditerranée - Défis et opportunités

Cet article présente ce qui a été initié par l'Expérience Méditerranéenne d'écotourisme (MEET), projet financé par l'Union européenne impliquant huit pays, dans une action conjointe pour conduire une démarche commune d'un tourisme durable dans les espaces protégés méditerranéens. Il présente le cadre général et les expériences antérieures de tourisme durable en Méditerranée, puis il étudie comment ces initiatives répondent au challenge consistant à proposer des offres touristiques qui bénéficient aux communautés locales et soient en conformité avec les objectifs de préservation de la région concernée. Le projet vise à définir un cadre commun de gouvernance pour la mise en place d'un tourisme acceptable vis-à-vis des différentes situations rencontrées en Méditerranée.

Resumen

Experiencia Mediterránea en Ecoturismo - Desafíos y oportunidades

Este artículo presenta la iniciativa Experiencia Mediterránea en Ecoturismo (MEET), proyecto financiado por la Unión Europea, que implica a ocho países para poner en marcha un enfoque común para el desarrollo del turismo sostenible en espacios protegidos mediterráneos. Este artículo presenta un marco general de turismo sostenible y experiencias previas en el Mediterráneo. A continuación analiza como MEET hace frente al reto de proveer una oferta turística que beneficie a la población local, y a la vez esté en línea con objetivos de conservación. Este proyecto busca definir un marco común de gobernanza para la planificación turística, que sea válido para las diferentes realidades mediterráneas.