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# *The mountainous space as a commodity: the Pyrenees at the age of globalization*

Ismael Vaccaro and Oriol Beltran

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## Commodifying the Mountains

- 1 During the last decades the Catalan Pyrenees have experienced important socioeconomic and environmental transformations. These mountains have been literally taken over by a new wave of uses. Protected areas, ski resorts, and cultural museums mainly compose this territorializing movement. These changes emphasize nature conservation, leisure, and traditional culture preservation. This process inevitably results in changes of the economy and the identity of mountain communities with effects on the ecology of the region (Vaccaro and Beltran, 2007)<sup>1</sup>. The conditions that have promoted the current forms of territorial and cultural appropriation, however, are not recent but the result of a long process that started around two hundred years ago.
- 2 The six Pyrenean districts and the four pre-Pyrenean districts of Catalonia encompass 965,324 hectares. In those districts there are, currently, at least 80 areas subject to some level of environmental protection adding to a total of 403,047 hectares, 41.75% of its surface. In the studied area the Natural Interest Spaces Plan (PEIN, in Catalan), approved in 1995, identifies a national park (Aigüestortes i Estany de Sant Maurici), three natural parks (Alt Pirineu, Cadí-Moixeró and Zona Volcànica de la Garrotxa), a natural place of national interest (Massís del Pedraforca), and five national hunting reserves (Alt Pallars-Aran, Boumort, Cerdanya-Alt Urgell, Cadí and Freser-Setcases).
- 3 In the Catalan Pyrenees there are also 21 ski resorts<sup>2</sup>. It is unclear how many hectares these resorts affect. It is obvious, however, that the social and ecological footprint of a ski resort affects much more territory than the premises of the resorts themselves. The amount of territory and resources that every resort needs exceeds the limits of the

specific locality that sustains the runs: we are talking about water, housing, roads, services, and infrastructures in general. The Pallars Sobirà, for instance, with 137,792 hectares, has more than two thirds of its territory under some level of environmental protection and it is also affected, in one way or another, by seven ski resorts. The Val d'Aran, which has 59.3% of its land under some type of conservation policy, harbors the largest ski resort of the region (Baqueira Beret) with an area of 1,922 ha, 104 km of marked runs and a capacity of 56,403 skiers per hours.

Table 1. Districts and protected areas in the Catalan Pyrenees (2008) (source: idescat.net and gencat.cat).

—	Population	Surface (ha)	Protected (ha)	% protected	Areas PEIN
Alt Urgell	21,942	144,748	49,052	33.89	11
Alta Ribagorça	4,332	42,686	20,929	49.03	5
Berguedà	41,488	118,489	38,128	32.18	12
Cerdanya	18,658	54,657	20,639	37.76	4
Garrotxa	54,437	73,539	39,439	52.63	5
Pallars Jussà	13,715	134,308	46,217	34.41	9
Pallars Sobirà	7,446	137,792	95,683	69.44	7
Ripollès	26,831	95,624	33,723	35.27	10
Solsonès	13,685	100,121	21,693	21.67	7
Val d'Aran	10,194	63,360	37,543	59.25	10
Total	212,728	965,324	389,475	41.75	80

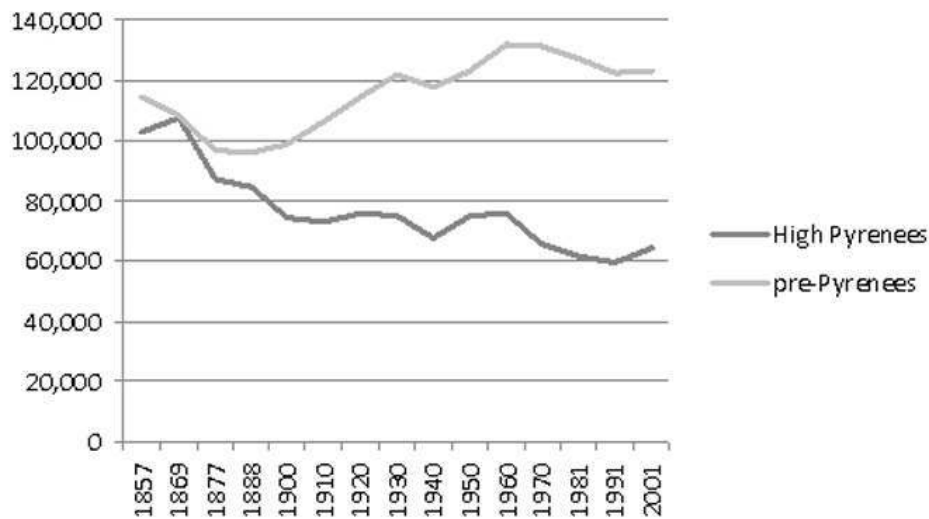
- 4 In addition, these districts have experienced the emergence of a significant number of "cultural museums", museums that describe the old ways of life and the material culture of transhumant shepherds, charcoal miners, timber folk, river rafters, salt producers, textile workers, and so on, main characters of the social life of the zone until not so long ago<sup>3</sup>.
- 5 Parks, resorts and museums link these, often historically marginal, regions to the national or regional societies through networks governed by very specific sets of values closely associated to leisure and services economies. Most of these initiatives are arguably created for the use and contemplation of non-local visitors, tourists or ecotourists. The mountains' natural and cultural values are deemed worth protecting because at some point they are declared national or human patrimony. We call this process "patrimonialization": they are preserved because they are valuable not just to the local communities but the national society at large.

- 6 These new activities have coalesced in two differentiated models of tourism: a mass tourism, mostly concentrated around large apartment complexes, and a small-scale tourism, often called “quality tourism” that is linked to ecotourism. Although they have different characteristics that set them apart, often both models overlap and interact in very complex ways. It would be a mistake to analyze them as completely separated entities.

## Government, Market and History

- 7 At the beginning of the nineteenth century most of the Pyrenean population still worked in agriculture and ranching. The bottom of the valleys, with their scarce but valuable flat areas suitable for the practice of agriculture and higher potential for connectivity with the low lands, had the major settlements. The ranges nevertheless were packed with small villages, hamlets, and isolated farms.
- 8 The modern Spanish state emerges during the second decade of the century. To achieve modern efficiency, the officials in charge of restructuring the administrative structure of the country decided to follow a series of rational and standardized criteria such as minimum demographic size, connectivity to markets, and economic viability. Only the communities that complied with those criteria could reach the status of municipality. And only communities that became municipalities were entitled to public services. This was the first large wave of territorialization policies issued by the modern Spanish state. Most little communities hanging near the top of the ranges and near the mountain passes failed to achieve this legal status.
- 9 In the Pallars Sobirà the modernization of the municipal structure of the Spanish state also contributed to the disbanding of villages. After 1842 at least thirty communities disappear from the official censuses. This "mortality" can be only compared with the disappearances due to the acceleration of the depopulation during the decade of the 1970s with sixteen losses. In the year 2005 the Pallars Sobira has only 15 municipalities.

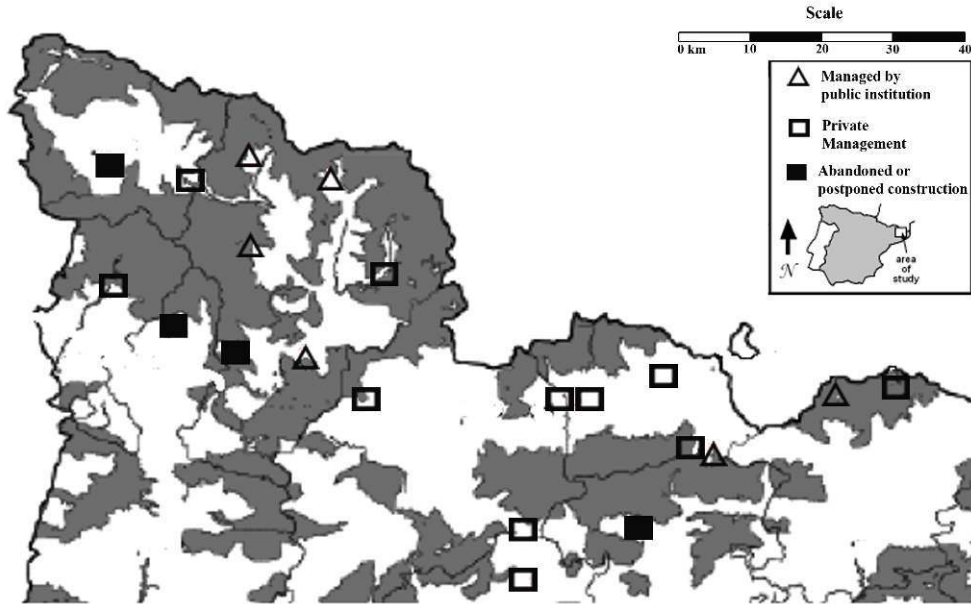
Figure 1. Demographic evolution of the Catalan Pyrenees.



Idescat.net.

- 10 Concurrently the state issued the next two waves of territorialization policies: the disentailment campaigns (1850-1900), and the expropriation campaign lead by the forest engineer corps (1900-1960)<sup>4</sup>. In the first case, the disentailment campaign, the expropriations attempted to introduce theoretically non-productive lands into the real state market. Following the recommendations of the forest engineers, thousands of hectares were expropriated. Traditional uses of the landscape were considered harmful and generators of erosion. The confiscated land from then on was enclosed, kept, and managed by governmental institutions.
- 11 These socioeconomic convulsions were not inconsequential to the environment of the Catalan mountains. Today, the old agricultural terraces still climb impossible slopes but not much is cultivated on them. The terraces are silent evidence of an era in which these mountains were densely inhabited and where agriculture and ranching were the main productive activities. These terraces penetrate deep into the forest. These forests were not present when these mountains were a functional agrarian landscape.
- 12 This widespread but low-intensity key anthropogenic influence on the ecology of the region was completely transformed by the irruption of industrialization in the low lands. The depopulation that started at the higher parts of the ranges and spread down the valleys, resulted in a reduction of human pressure over the environment. The forest started to recolonize long-abandoned fields, and charismatic species, due to natural processes or to reintroduction, returned to the mountains.
- 13 This situation prepared the stage for the next economic transformation of these mountains. The late twentieth century Pyrenees are characterized by low densities, communities mainly concentrated in villages, mountains mainly devoid of permanent inhabitants, and exuberant and growing forests. These new characteristics attracted a new wave of territorialization policies. The fourth wave since the beginning of the nineteenth century and the emergence of the modern Spanish state: the generalized implementation of conservation areas.

Map 1. Territories integrated inside the Natura 2000 network of protected areas (2006) and ski resorts (public, private and not in operation).



gencat.cat (map prepared by L. Zanotti).

- 14 The same characteristics facilitated the arrival of ski resorts. Adventure, and ski tourism have resulted in a social revival of many of these areas. The relative demographic recovery observed for the last ten years in some of the Pyrenean districts can be related to this economic transformation. The service industry generates significant revenue in terms of wages and benefits from land speculation. It is questionable however, if the economic benefits are fairly distributed across the mountain communities, and if they compensate for long-term damages to the social and ecological fabric.
- 15 The implementation of protected areas and ski resorts affects space more than specific resources. It consequently resulted in territorial appropriation and urbanization of the landscape for consumptive purposes. Public and private initiatives compete for the best areas of the mountains. The goal may be conservation or speculation, but in both cases territory is set apart for new uses and local development ensues. The newly perceived beauty of the high Pyrenees, combined with the improvement of infrastructures and the creation of tourist attractions such as parks and ski resorts, has resulted on a spectacular development of the processes of urbanization of the territory.

Table 2. Evolution of numbers of second residences (1960-2001).

	1960	1970	1981	1991	2001
Alt Urgell	87	437	1,093	1,094	2,035
Alta Ribagorça	19	123	247	648	867
Cerdanya	532	1,052	3,692	6,776	9,072

Pallars Jussà	105	619	1,960	1,946	2,649
Pallars Sobirà	21	204	1,065	1,797	2,235
Val d'Aran	18	347	2,676	3,980	4,345
Total	782	2,782	10,733	16,241	21,203

Campillo and Font, 2004.

- 16 New residences are built and old ones are refurbished to provide secondary homes to city dwellers. These homes, used during weekends or short periods during the summer holidays, remain empty throughout most of the year. In some cases, small villages become ghost communities for all but a few months of the year. On the other hand, apartment buildings surround towns such as Sort or Esterrri d'Aneu. These nucleuses are developing their own urban sprawl. The apartments, however, remain closed most of the year.
- 17 The territory was literally dumped into the market where it has to compete with other areas offering the same product: leisure. This process of commoditization depends on the virtual insertion of the marketed rural areas into the urban imaginary through publicity and media. Values and attractiveness are conveyed through images and words in schools, TV programs, and media in general. The territory becomes, so to speak, a flow of information that connects product and potential consumers.
- 18 The next step is composed of seasonal flows of urban consumers temporarily visiting the region. The consumption of the rural space is then, the result of a double and opposite, flow: information and people. Although the increase of tourism industry has provided an increase of local jobs that have helped to keep some youth in the region, second home owners, skiers, and tourists in general, do not contribute in a regular basis to reanimate the social vitality of the local communities. Small villages dominated by the second residences phenomenon are empty during most of the week or even the year. Second residence owners do not contribute to the demographic potential or the daily social life of these villages, which are mainly characterized by empty houses and an aging population (Butler, 1994). Moreover, the existence of a significant real estate market promoted by the tourist demand has contributed to the raising of housing costs with damaging effects to the local population, especially its youth. Nowadays, almost 53% of the houses of the Pyrenean districts are used as second residences.

## Patrimonialization and Consumption

- 19 The mountain has been radically reinvented to become natural patrimony or space for leisure. These new uses translate into the symbolic, economic and juridical re-qualification of the territory. Interestingly enough, these new uses imply a specific type of non-local actors. Conservation policies, generally, are declared and sustained by the state. Ski resorts, with their enormous initial investments are usually out of local communities' possibilities and, consequently, they imply the disembarkment of some type of corporation or consortium. Ski resorts however, tend to search for and work with

local alliances with some sort of local elites. Space is appropriated by large external institutions.

- 20 These appropriations are directed at securing important resources: singular nature and potential for leisure. It can be argued that the motivation behind the two types of appropriation is radically distinct. Conservation policies are designed to protect biodiversity, while ski resorts are designed to make money. Furthermore, ski resorts, collaterally, degrade biodiversity. They share, nonetheless, a few common traits: (1) they require large amount of space; (2) they are designed and managed by external institutions; (3) local traditional uses are excluded, or tightly regulated; (4) they imply substantial alterations of the property regimes in place; (5) the potential consumers, as skiers or visitors, are mostly outsiders; and (6) in both cases nature is commoditized as a place of fun or as natural patrimony.
- 21 Conservation areas are more than ecological necessities. They are political processes of appropriation of territory and resources. The creation of a park or a reserve entails the creation of new limits, of new jurisdictional lines over the territory. The area circumscribed by these lines is immediately transformed. The rights and duties associated with ownership are altered by the new regulations associated to the new jurisdictions. This is, then, a political process (Stonich, 2000).
- 22 A protected area is a political process that either tries to protect a specific type of environment or to restore another. Nature, however, is in permanent dynamic, not-stable change (Scoones, 1999). Conservation, in many cases, requires then to freeze an ecological situation or to transform another. In both cases we are talking about ecological engineering. The goal of conservation policies is to manage, intervene, and change if necessary, a landscape (Vaccaro and Beltran, 2009).
- 23 To proceed to an effective management of the landscape under their jurisdiction it is necessary a quantification of the resources and an assessment of their localization. To maintain a landscape protected is to keep it stable in a desirable condition. This need to manipulate the ecological situation of a landscape, combined with the obligation of parks, as public policies, to divulgate, to communicate with their constituency, points to the concept of "museization". Protected areas protect collective natural patrimony and this heritage is displayed to visitors. Nature is translated into brochures, guided hikes, or exhibitions. Nature is translated into culture and communicated via pedagogical tools perfected in museums. Nature, in other words, is managed at several levels. Protected areas, like museums, display culture and patrimony to societies (Honey, 1999; King and Steward, 1996; Whelan, 1991). Ecotourism emerges as a developmental tool that may provide legitimacy to the conservation process (Boo, 1990; Haenn, 2005).
- 24 These open air museums occupying the top of the ranges have their counterparts at the bottom of the valleys. It is there, at the towns, where one encounters cultural museums. These cultural museums display the traditional and not so traditional ways of life for the visitor. Tools, clothes, housing, habits, and traditions are gathered and explained for the visitors. In general they depict an ideal image of a specific type of individual: herders, miners, rafters, and so on (Cohen, 1988; Harkin, 1995). Daily life and tradition then are integrated as patrimony into another museistic institution. A coherent and, in general, homogenizing version of the past is constructed and communicated to the tourists (Howell, 1994; Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 1998).



- 25 This process of reconstructing and reenacting the past, both real and imagined, often places limits on local behavior and agency. Local councils, for instance, issue building regulations that force new construction to follow so-called traditional styles. Locals have to negotiate new regulations that attempt to harmonize culture, nature and tourism. Villages are supposed to look traditional and clean at the same time. This is not an easy endeavor when the traditional economy is based on herding and agriculture. Interestingly enough, those that practice traditional activities are more often than not at odds with "traditionalizing" measures, which are meant to attract tourists and are encouraged by those locals that depend on tourism, not on traditional activities.
- 26 The versions of history explained in local museums are also the result of political tensions and, ultimately, a compromise between historians, anthropologists, local communities, ideals, marketing needs (Dicks, 1999; Prats, 1997). These versions of history, nature and culture are the result of older and contemporary political negotiations between romantic views, economic rationales, local realities, and institutional and individual dynamics (Darby, 2000; Nogué and Vicente, 2004). This version necessarily includes detailed explanations of the interactions between traditional societies and territory. Agricultural, pastoral, or extractive societies human are depicted as intensively attached to the local territory and nature. This fact, is discursively presented as opposed to our dehumanized and denaturalized mall societies, and, thus, paves the way for a naturalization of the traditional societies.
- 27 Nature and culture become one at several levels: (1) they are unified by their integration as necessary halves of a whole called landscape; (2) both of them achieve a historical legitimacy that turns nature into part of our culture, and traditional culture into part of our natural roots; and (3) as a consequence of this historical legitimacy, both become collective heritage and, consequently, they get protected via museums and conservation policies. Nature is also harnessed by the ski resorts expansion in order to provide leisure (the culture of leisure). The three of them offer a product that the larger national society of consumers considers valuable and eager to purchase (Crandall, 1980; Urry, 1990).
- 28 These valleys, somehow, become leisure thematic parks. Their natures and their cultures are integrated by this process of museization of natural and cultural values, and of naturalization of so-called traditional culture. Culture however is hard to sell during the long, cold, and snowy winter of these mountains. Leisure, nature and culture interchange predominance seasonally.

## An Uncertain Future

- 29 The private initiatives directed at the construction of ski resorts have been connected, more often than not, to the development of residential complexes and the supply of subsidiary services directed at covering the needs of the seasonal visitors. The analysis of the economic exploitation of the different Catalan ski resorts only offer one case in which the resort has actually been profitable per se, Baqueira in the Val d'Aran. This resort is considered the only large ski facility of the Catalan Pyrenees. The need of significant investments on new lifts construction and, especially, the installation of artificial snow blowers (of increasing importance as a way to cope with the climatic variability associated to global climate change) situates the other resorts in a much less profitable situation. The public subsidies to this sector have not been limited to marketing and

infrastructure improvement. In some cases the governmental intervention has affected the actual exploitation of the resorts. Recently the Catalan public administration has taken control of the ownership and management of the two principal ski resorts of the Pallars Sobirà (Espot Esquí and Port Ainé), as it had done already with the resorts of Núria (Ripollès) and La Molina (Cerdanya).

- 30 The Pyrenean mountains have felt the great development that the real estate market and the construction have experienced in Spain in the last twenty years. During more than a decade the construction has been one of the main economic sectors of the national economy. In the year 2004, across Spain, 700,000 new houses were built. In the Pyrenees, most of the larger real estate projects of the region have been associated to the implementation of important Winter sports tourist infrastructures. The expansion of Baqueira Beret to the Alt Àneu, and the creation of a new ski resort in the Vall Fosca have been at the center of the public debate on the right development model for the high mountains communities. In the first case the company wanted not only to increase the surface and length of the runs with 186 new hectares and diversify the road access with a new entry inside the Pallars Sobirà, but also built 40,000 m<sup>2</sup> of new second residences. The Vallfosca Mountain Resort, the second case, was initially presented as a construction project (1,085 new apartments) connected to the development of a tourism resort that included a new ski station (that in a second phase would link itself to the Boí Taüll ski resort in the other slope of the range in the Alta Ribagorça), a golf court and other establishments devoted to services (convention center, spa, and so on) designed to increase the frequency and length of visitors beyond the winter months.
- 31 In the year 2000 a former loose front of social opposition to the project of expansion of Baqueira, consolidated into a formal movement. The leadership taken by environmental groups and hiking clubs pushed significant segments of the local population to show support for the expansion of the ski resort. The resort promoted the expansion by using a sustainable development rhetoric menaced by an alleged intervention of environmental activists from the cities. The solution adopted by the Catalan public administration attempts to partially satisfy the demands of the confronted groups. On the one hand, it partially limits the expansion plans of the ski resort over zones previously declared protected areas while, at the same time accepting the possibility of growth over other territories. The creation of Alt Pirineu Natural Park (the largest of Catalonia with 69,850 hectares) pleased the demands of the environmentalist movement, invested in the promotion of the natural values of the area to sustain a different type of tourism, ecotourism, characterized by a lower environmental footprint.
- 32 The different tourism models and their effects on the environment are also at the center of the movement of opposition to the residential complex of Espui, in the Vall Fosca (Pallars Jussà). In this case the company promoting the project enjoyed significant support from the local and the regional public administrations. Things, however, have changed significantly in the last year due to the direct effects of the profound crises in which the Spanish real state sector is currently experiencing. The company declared bankruptcy in 2008, suspending payments and completely paralyzing its activities. The unfinished works of the first phase, initially comprising 99 apartments, offer a desolate appearance as a result of the scars from massive soil removals, the presence of ditches, and the abandoned building materials scattered all over the place.
- 33 The unfinished resort at the Vall Fosca is not, however, the only failed project of the Winter tourism sector in the Catalan Pyrenees. The closed ski resorts of Era Tuca (Val

d'Aran), Llessui and Bonavé (Pallars Sobirà) and Rasos de Peguera (Berguedà), with their facilities and infrastructures abandoned in the upper parts of the mountains, bear witness of the fragility, and the deep ecological footprint, of a model of tourism development based on the exploitation of snow and the massive construction of second residences. Dependence on artificial snow and the uncertainty brought about by climate change force us to question the viability of this sector: a viability that is questioned further by the realization that ski resorts' economic profitability, and therefore their own capacity to survive, completely depend on scale. As mentioned earlier on, the only profitable resort of the Catalan Pyrenees is the largest one. The rest have either been intervened by the public administration or receive subsidies from it to keep the resort on operation.

- 34 Despite their obvious differences, mass tourism, connected to ski, other outdoor sports, and large residential complexes, and ecotourism, linked to the consumption of the natural and cultural values of the mountains and lower impact housing patterns, are part of the same transformative process and reinforce each other mutually. The pressure of the real state sector is an important reason to promote the declaration of new protected areas. The reduction of widespread environmental impact also provides some level of legitimacy to large but concentrated groupings of second residences and infrastructures. The patrimonialization of nature (and some manifestations of the local culture) adds distinctive values to the leisure market. Tourism marketing in the mountains regularly highlights these combinations. The Vall Fosca apartments were sold under the motto "Nature marks your Fate".
- 35 The long term consequences of the two tourism models that coexist in the Catalan Pyrenees are difficult to predict. Although the small scale tourism is theoretically less aggressive with the environment and local communities, we cannot forget that it depends on the existence of empty old houses and abandoned landscapes. This type of tourism, as the mass tourism does, only energizes the Pyrenean villages during a few weeks every year although, obviously, both models have different impacts on the mountainous landscape. Mass tourism generates a significant ecological footprint but it also has a significant impact on the local economies. Ecotourism, however, attempts to reduce its environmental impact, but its generation of economic revenues in the area may be also modest in comparison. The sustainability of both models is inextricably linked to preferences and cultural values of the social actors involved. The two models of tourism generate different type of benefits and create some negative collateral effects. The acceptance of one model or the other, or whatever combination of both, will necessarily depend on the ideal project of landscape and country that the different implicated social actors will have.

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## NOTES

1. A first version of this paper was published in 2007 in the journal *Tourism Geographies* (9: 254-274) with the title "Consuming space, nature and culture: patrimonial discussions in the hyper-modern era".
  2. Here we include alpine and cross country ski resorts, as well as resorts currently out of business but that left significant tracks on the landscape.
  3. Amongst many others, one could mention the Mines of Cercs Museum, the Museum of Shepherds of Castellar de n'Hug, the Ecomuseum of the Valls d'Aneu, the Sheppard Museum of Llessui, or the Raiers Museum of the Pont de Claverol.
  4. To see more about the local consequences of such policies see Gómez (1992) and Vaccaro (2005)
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## ABSTRACTS

In these pages we reflect on the process of transformation of the Catalan Pyrenees from a peripheral and economically decaying area to a first-rate tourism center. Real estate speculation has replaced depopulation. The economic and social value of the territory has dramatically shifted as it has gone from supporting low profitability ranching activities to become the space where resorts and parks are built. The paper analyzes the process of commodification and patrimonialization that have reintegrated the area into the national and international leisure markets paying special attention to the role of conservation practices, ski resorts and second residences in such a process. Finally, we attempt to identify the similarities and differences that characterize the two emergent tourism models: mass tourism versus small scale ecotourism.

Au fil de ces pages, nous réfléchissons au processus de transformation des Pyrénées catalanes de zone périphérique et en déclin économique en centre touristique de qualité. La spéculation immobilière a remplacé le dépeuplement. La valeur économique et sociale du territoire a radicalement changé, la promotion des activités d'élevage peu rentables ayant cédé la place aux stations touristiques et aux parcs. Cet article analyse le processus de marchandisation et de patrimonialisation qui a réintégré la région sur les marchés de loisirs nationaux et internationaux en prêtant une attention particulière au rôle des pratiques de conservation, des stations de ski et des résidences secondaires. Enfin, nous tentons d'identifier les similitudes et les différences qui caractérisent les deux modèles touristiques émergents : le tourisme de masse contre l'écotourisme à l'échelle locale.

## INDEX

**Mots-clés:** Pyrénées, économie de loisirs, patrimonialisation, embourgeoisement

**Keywords:** leisure economy, patrimonialization, gentrification

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