



Assessment tools for urban sustainability policies in Spanish Mediterranean tourist areas



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ABSTRACT

Spanish Mediterranean tourist cities have traditionally been developed under compact urban patterns, following pre-existing urban forms. However, during the last two decades, the transformation of these areas has challenged the original character of Mediterranean cities, replacing it with urban sprawl growth patterns; functional specialization areas derived from tourist and leisure economic activities; and the creation of new private open spaces. Assessing the current status of these urban tourist areas is crucial to developing the necessary strategies for their renovation and future transformation into sustainable and liveable cities and territories.

The objective of this research is to design a specific tool to assess Spanish Mediterranean tourist cities that considers their urban singularities. For this purpose, existing urban sustainability indicator systems were selected and reviewed. Due to the thematic gaps and inaccuracies found in these systems when applied to urban tourist areas, several indicators were tailored and a new set of indicators was included for their assessment. The new tool comprises twenty-seven urban descriptors including: pre-existing parameters; tailored indicators; and a new set of descriptors to reflect the specific features of Spanish Mediterranean tourist cities. They are grouped into eight approaches that provide in-depth analysis of the three singular urban attributes of these areas: land occupation; complexity of economic activities; and outdoor spaces.

1. Introduction

Traditionally, the urban development of Mediterranean cities, including their tourist areas, has been characterised by compact patterns, complexity of economic activities and social cohesion (Rueda, 1997). However, this territory now presents new features concerning its urban form, urban activities, and gathering spaces (Azcárate et al., 2012; Indovina, 2007; Munoz, 2003).

Among the multiple factors that have had an impact on this transformation, sun and sea tourism deserves particular consideration since the demands for accommodation; leisure urban activities; products and services; and close contact with natural landscapes (Arnstberg and Ergstrom, 2007; Cirer-costa, 2015) have influenced the urban development of these areas (European Environment Agency, 2006; Rico-Amoros et al., 2009). Furthermore, the new tourist territories and cities that have emerged from this process had not been strategically planned from the environmental perspective. Thus, critical attention must be paid to the assessment of these singular aspects in order to design urban regeneration projects and more sustainable future urban development (García Martín and Ros Sempere, 2016; Temes, 2014).

Sustainability assessment through indicators is used in the planning

practice nowadays to evaluate urban developments—existing and/or in project phase—and tools for the assessment of urban areas have been designed to facilitate strategic urban planning processes. Thus, the aim of this paper is to design a specific tool to evaluate Spanish Mediterranean tourist urban areas in terms of: land occupation; complexity of activities; and outdoor spaces. To achieve this goal, three tasks were undertaken: a) a review of the most renowned quantitative urban indicator systems to identify which parameters are suitable to assess tourist urban areas; b) an inspection of the gaps and inaccuracies of these parameters that did not tackle the singularities of tourist cities; c) a proposal for a new tool to assess Spanish Mediterranean tourist cities by establishing parameters that could fill the identified gaps and resolve the inaccuracies. Existing indicators were adapted and new ones were incorporated to better fit coastal urban areas. The novelty of this tool is that it includes the singularities of these specific areas.

2. Urban singularities of Spanish Mediterranean tourist cities

The main urban singularities of Spanish Mediterranean coastal cities have been produced by the demands of tourist activity and the requirements of the tourist industry to promote better tourist destinations

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(Martínez et al., 2016; Temes Cordóvez, 2015; Temes Cordóvez et al., 2016). These singularities are subsequently described in relation to three key attributes: land occupation [LO], urban complexity of economic activities [UC] and outdoor spaces [OS].

2.1. Land occupation [LO]

Land occupation on the Spanish Mediterranean coast has been stimulated by the increasing demand for holiday housing (Arnstberg and Ergstrom, 2007). This fact has encouraged real estate developers to promote the creation of new settlements (Mankalpa et al., 2015; Pons, 2013) resulting in the growth of urban areas with very different morphological patterns (Gaja, 2008, 2012; Mas et al., 2015). However, despite the diversity in urban patterns to support tourist activity, the most commonly found ones are urban sprawl patterns. They have the greatest impact on land occupation figures and a significant influence on future strategies of regional planning (Burns and Romano, 2012; Huete and Mantecón, 2011; Martí and Nolasco, 2012).

Low density and discontinuous urban areas are the most outstanding features of current urban sprawl settlements in coastal tourist areas (Catalán et al., 2008; Munoz, 2003). These are frequently located near the highest natural value coastal spaces because of their innate attractiveness. Although low density and scattered buildings grant closer contact with nature, an excessive use of urban sprawl patterns could endanger natural beauty and the scarce unspoiled coastal landscape.

A high land occupation figure is a matter of concern not solely because it represents an unsustainable growth rate, but also because it results in a huge ecological impact. At this point, three considerations should be taken into account. Firstly, an increase in artificialized land means a corresponding increase in the soil sealing surface area which, in turn, alters the hydrological cycle by the creation of impervious surface coverage (Pagán et al., 2016; Romano and Zullo, 2014). Secondly, population figures and the amount of land occupation should be balanced in order to avoid excessive land consumption; especially in those cases where, for example, tourists are interested in direct contact with open natural spaces. Thirdly, coastal areas are spaces of great ecological and environmental value and, as such, their singularity should remain as intact as possible. Thus, conservation of water bodies, wildlife habitat, native plants and wetlands are crucial to guarantee a sustainable development (LEED, 2009; Vera Rebollo and Ivars Baidal, 2003) and future tourist attractiveness. In summary, designing sustainable strategies of urban growth and avoiding urban sprawl patterns would lead to more compact tourist cities that would ecologically benefit coastal systems and processes.

Thus, there is a twofold reason to explain the singularity of land occupation in tourist areas: high land occupation figures; and seasonal residence given that these tourist settlements are partially and temporarily inhabited on an annual basis in line with seasonal demand. Both factors imply a significant ecological impact as well as the underuse of infrastructures and facilities, among other unsustainable consequences.

2.2. Urban complexity of economic activities [UC]

A good quantity and variety of urban economic activities, services, and land-uses —urban complexity (UEA, 2012)— promotes sustainable urban development models as their resilience is strengthened in terms of facing economic upheaval. In general, the mix of activities and land-uses has been identified as a distinguishing feature of traditional Mediterranean cities and one of the core characteristics of urban social cohesion. In particular, when considering the tourism industry, the variety and mixture of activities, products and services has been recognised as one of the five most significant attributes for tourist destination competitiveness (Crouch, 2011; Sánchez and López Siles, 2015). Recently, both mature and emerging tourist destinations have

broadened their offer by building entertainment, sports, wellness and recreation facilities (Goula, 2012) along with very different types of accommodation. In order to maximize profits and improve the quality of destinations, stakeholders have promoted the diversification of products with a wide range of leisure activities such as amusement parks, golf courses or wellness oasis facilities located outside the city. In fact, this variety of tourism products generates multiplicity of opportunities and situations that meet the expectations of a wider range of tourists (Ivars i Baidal et al., 2013; Vera et al., 2011). However, according to various scholars, tourist areas must maintain a certain level of specialization in leisure activities and recreation services (Antón Clavé and González Reverté, 2007; Vera et al., 2011).

Among all tourist economic activities, special attention should be given to lodging businesses as they play an important role in tourist cities. Secondary dwellings and other types of lodging required for short-term stays —such as hotels, rented apartments, campsites, hostels, etc. — have to be considered when analysing and planning coastal urban areas (Exceltur, 2007).

Moreover, occupancy rates of lodgings and of secondary dwellings vary according to the typical weather conditions during the two main seasons: the low season —from November to March— and the high season —from April to October—. Therefore, seasonality in the demand of accommodation and also the variety of economic activities greatly affect the economic performance of tourist activities in these areas.

2.3. Outdoor spaces [OS]

Outdoor spaces and their role in cities have changed from traditional to modern patterns involving a new larger surface area of open spaces, better performance of their urban structure, and the highest quality of free space. There are two main reasons why outdoor spaces have a particular relevance in tourist cities. Firstly, the tourist's enjoyment of urban and natural landscapes suggests that open spaces are considered to be a valuable resource; and, secondly, the city's actual and perceived image has a strong correlation to the particular brand of tourist destinations (Doxiadis and Liveri, 2013). In this regard, there is strong evidence linking the perception of the city's image to whether it is experienced as an attractive place (Judd and Feinstein, 1999; Urry, 1997). Furthermore, the image of the urban environment plays an important role in creating a tourist product as a “consuming place” (Urry and Larsen, 2011).

In tourist destinations, outdoor spaces with pleasant climate and landscape have an important function as gathering places (Niemann and Weber, 2013). Their existence has resulted in a positive socio-economic impact on urbanized areas because they are perceived as more attractive spaces (Roebeling et al., 2016). Therefore, as public spaces play a key role in the social dimension of cities albeit from very different approaches (Gehl, 1987, 2009; Gehl et al., 2013; Jacobs, 1961), outdoor spaces affect social interactions in tourist destinations.

Given that different types of outdoor spaces exist in tourist areas compared to conventional cities, this singularity is also reflected in their more varied ownership and management structure (Serrano-Estrada et al., 2016). Accordingly, private management and exploitation of certain open spaces is frequently found in tourist areas. For instance, open communal spaces, such as hotel sports and leisure facilities, are privately managed and, consequently, the enjoyment of these places requires payment for use (Giampino et al., 2012). These types of outdoor spaces are popular and common in tourist areas, but rather different to the recreational outdoor spaces of conventional cities where gathering is by and large free.

2.4. Eight singularities in Spanish Mediterranean tourist areas

The described features and singularities of Spanish Mediterranean tourist areas shed light on the approaches that should be used to assess these areas. Considering the three attributes —land occupation,

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