

COMPETITIVENESS OF THE TOURISM SECTOR IN PORTUGAL – THE CASE OF BAIXO MONDEGO AND BAIXO VOUGA

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ABSTRACT

Our main objective is to analyze how a great, diverse tourism offer in a quite limited geographic area, corresponding to the Baixo Mondego and Baixo Vouga, can make it more competitive. We propose to identify the territorial factors that can increase competitiveness of the tourism sector, both regionally and nationally. We intend to identify the region's most valued aspects by visitors, as well as its least praised ones; additionally, we will pinpoint existing and potential outbound travel markets, and identify those that are characterized by higher levels of wealth and touristic demand. A quantitative approach will be complemented by a qualitative analysis, based on interviews of entrepreneurial, academic and institutional entities. Deeper knowledge of the regional tourism sector will allow us to contribute to the adaptation of tourism oriented policies and strategies that would promote the role of tourism in the regional, economical development. As the relevance of the tourism sector for wealth and job creation becomes ever more acknowledged, we intend to clarify the measure to which the tourism economic impact affects the region.

KEYWORDS

Tourism Economics, Destinations Competitiveness, Sustainable Development.

1. OBJECTIVES

Our main objective is to analyze how a great, diverse tourism offer in a quite limited geographic area, corresponding to the Baixo Mondego and Baixo Vouga, can make it more competitive. We propose to identify the territorial factors that can increase competitiveness of the tourism sector, both regionally and nationally. We intend to identify the region's most valued aspects by visitors, as well as its least praised ones; additionally, we will pinpoint existing and potential outbound travel markets, and identify those that are characterized by higher levels of wealth and touristic demand. We will attempt to answer the following questions:

How can touristic competitiveness, both regionally and nationally, of the Baixo Mondego and Baixo Vouga regions be increased?

How to attract tourists with higher purchasing power and, therefore, contribute to a more sustainable wealth growth?

2. METHODOLOGY

When analyzing the importance of tourism in the regional economic development, we will consider the offer, demand and characteristics of the destination area.

We intend to characterize the travelers visiting these Portuguese regions, as well as analyze the attractiveness of their specific characteristics (e.g., natural resources, culture, infrastructure, etc.).

In a complex market, where the tourist looks for an experience instead of a particular service or good, and the offer is characterized by the availability of multiple services and structures (e.g., transportation, accommodation, food and beverage, etc.), it will be necessary to select particular variables that we deem crucial for the analysis of these two regions/NUTIII.

Based on our literature review, which identified the most relevant factors for the competitiveness of touristic destinations, and comparing the different presented models, we concluded that the Ritchie and Crouch conceptual model (2003) is the most complete.

However, given the great number of variables accounted in this theoretical model, which cannot be fully operationalized in a practical way, we will select only those that are more relevant to study the above mentioned regions.

Considering the theoretical contributions of others (Kozak, 2002; Enright and Newton, 2004; Kim and Dwyer, 2003; Mihalic, 2001), we aim to select the key variables that will allow us to identify aspects that could make this destination more competitive.

Following this study, we will estimate an econometric model of the Baixo Mondego and Baixo Vouga tourism offer determinants. We will use available statistical data and collect additional data through the 'EFS Survey', a tool that accesses the Unipark platform (www.unipark.info: software solutions provider for research projects that allows on-demand, web-based enquiries).

In the questionnaire that targets visitors of the regions under study, we will include questions about the potential alternative regions, in order of preference, so that we can better identify the competing destinations; we will additionally classify visitors according to nationality, age and academic experience. The main objective will be to identify the target market(s), so that we can differentiate and add value to the studied destination area.

Some of the questions will serve to assess the importance of the attributes deemed fundamental to the competitiveness of the touristic destinations:

- 1 – Physiography of the destination area (scenery and climate)
- 2 – Culture and history
- 3 – Entertainment and activities available in the area
- 4 – Transportation systems
- 5 – Touristic infrastructure and accommodation
- 6 – Hospitality and regional safety

This quantitative approach will be complemented by a qualitative analysis, based on interviews of entrepreneurial, academic and institutional entities.

3. MAIN CONTRIBUTIONS

Our ultimate goal is to contribute to a higher competitiveness of the national tourism sector. The proposed study (*) aims to do so by identifying the main determinants of the Baixo Mondego and Baixo Vouga regions' touristic offer, as well as characterizing the current and future visitors' profile.

Deeper knowledge of the regional tourism sector will allow us to contribute to the adaptation of tourism oriented policies and strategies that would promote the role of tourism in the regional, economical development.

As the relevance of the tourism sector for wealth and job creation becomes ever more acknowledged, we intend to clarify the measure to which the tourism economic impact affects the region.

4. EXPECTED RESULTS

It is crucial to identify the essential aspects that contribute to the competitiveness of this touristic destination, in order to assure the importance of tourism in the regional and national economy. We hope to contribute towards that objective with this new study.

The distinct characteristics of the different counties in terms of natural resources, local hospitality, historical and cultural richness are factors that may help this region become more attractive for tourists and, therefore, become a larger contributor to the national economy.

The diversity of resources and touristic products offered by the Portuguese 'Centro' region may potentiate its competitiveness.

With our analysis we also intend to show how the articulation between different economic agents and cluster formation can increase the advantages of the tourism sector in this region.

Finally, we will focus on the importance of innovation, sustainable growth and green policies, which are key in virtually all economic sectors.

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(*) Study that we intend to carry out as part of the doctoral thesis of one of the authors.