

The Arganeraie Biosphere Reserve (ABR): entrepreneurship in ecotourism, opportunities and constraints

La Reserva de la Biosfera de Arganeraie (ABR): iniciativa empresarial en ecoturismo, oportunidades y limitaciones

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Aaziz Oulmoudne

LAREFMO (Laboratory of Research in Economics, Finance, Management and Organizations), Faculty of Legal, Economic and Social Sciences
Agadir- Morocco
a.oulmoudne@uiz.ac.ma

Fatima Ben Chakre

LAREFMO (Laboratory of Research in Economics, Finance, Management and Organizations), Faculty of Legal, Economic and Social Sciences
Agadir-Morocco
fatima.benchakre@edu.uiz.ac.ma

ABSTRACT

The objective of this paper is to determine the role that the dynamics of tourism entrepreneurship play in the sustainable development of the ABR territories, mainly in rural areas, by identifying the entrepreneurial process and the implications of the specificities of rural tourism entrepreneurship; that is, the criteria to be operationalized in the context of ecotourism activities to promote eco-responsible development.

After having evoked the theoretical and conceptual aspects relating to entrepreneurship, ecotourism and the ABR space using a literature review, an investigative study, an exploratory qualitative study, was then carried out among tourism stakeholders spread over the Souss Massa region, in the Arganier territory.

At the end of our survey, we found that the ecotourism sector remains underdeveloped in the ABR, and only marginally contributes to the local economy. The tourism activity undertaken shows insufficient dynamism to propel the development of tourism and sustainable economic development of the ABR. Entrepreneurship in ecotourism would offer economic opportunities while preserving the natural environment and the cultural richness of the ABR.

Keywords: ABR (Arganeraie Biosphere Reserve), entrepreneurship, ecotourism, sustainable development.

RESUMEN

El objetivo de este trabajo es determinar el papel que desempeña la dinámica del emprendimiento turístico en el desarrollo sostenible de los territorios de la RBA, principalmente en las zonas rurales, identificando el proceso emprendedor y las implicaciones de las especificidades del emprendimiento turístico rural; es decir, los criterios que deben operacionalizarse en el contexto de las actividades ecoturísticas para promover un desarrollo eco-responsable.

Tras haber evocado los aspectos teóricos y conceptuales relativos al espíritu empresarial, el ecoturismo y el espacio ABR mediante una revisión bibliográfica, se llevó a cabo a continuación un estudio de investigación, un estudio cualitativo exploratorio, entre los agentes turísticos repartidos por la región de Souss Massa, en el territorio de Arganier. Al término de nuestra encuesta, constatamos que el sector del ecoturismo sigue estando poco desarrollado en la ABR y sólo contribuye de forma marginal a la economía local. La actividad turística emprendida muestra un dinamismo insuficiente para impulsar el desarrollo del turismo y el desarrollo económico sostenible de la RBA. La actividad empresarial en el sector del ecoturismo ofrecería oportunidades económicas al tiempo que preservaría el entorno natural y la riqueza cultural de la RBA.

Palabras clave: ABR (Reserva de la Biosfera de Arganeraie), espíritu empresarial, ecoturismo, desarrollo sostenible.

1 INTRODUCTION

The development of entrepreneurship in rural areas constitutes a promising niche in terms of job creation, income generation, population retention, and ecosystem preservation. The optimal (economic) exploitation of a natural stock is the one that maximizes rent. However, the challenges of sustainable development, as it is now displayed as a goal of public decision-making, both locally and globally, are, by nature, multidimensional. It is indeed necessary to reconcile economic, environmental and social issues. In the case of argan farming, it is about safeguarding the argan tree, employment, while guaranteeing economic profits. The economic approach alone is no longer sufficient, and an interdisciplinary and multi-criteria approach becomes necessary.

In fact, the Arganeraie Biosphere Reserve (ABR) shelters the argan forest ecosystem, characterized by the presence of the argan tree (*Argania spinosa*), an endemic tree species of Morocco. The argan tree is considered a keystone species of this ecosystem, providing numerous economic, social, and environmental benefits. One of the important features of the biosphere reserve is the promotion of the sustainable use of natural resources, particularly the argan tree. Products derived from the argan tree, such as argan oil, are generally used in food, cosmetics, and other industries, providing economic opportunities for local communities while preserving the ecosystem. The ABR is also attracting tourists interested in the local nature and culture. The Ecotourism deserves to be encouraged in the region, by offering visitors the opportunity to discover the natural beauty of the argan forest, meet local people, and participate in eco-responsible activities. In this perspective, we will try to answer the following question, namely

whether "ecotourism can be considered as a tool for ecosystem management? And to what extent can ecotourism be a guarantor of the viability and sustainability of the ABR?"

2 MATERIALS AND METHODS

Our research is based on a qualitative approach which, as Blumberg, Cooper, and Schindler (2005) point out, allows us to illuminate and understand the characteristics and nature of a phenomenon. Our qualitative study is founded on semi-structured interviews, guided by an interview guide, with certain actors and stakeholders related to ecotourism in the Souss Massa region, namely: the Wilaya of Souss Massa, the Souss Massa Regional Council, the Agadir Regional Tourism Delegation, the Moroccan Society of Tourism Engineering, the Tourist Host Country Association, the Rural Tourism Development Network, the Chtouka Ait Baha Provincial Tourism Council (CPT), and 8 owners of guesthouses and inns. These interviews were conducted face-to-face and by telephone. The choice of these different organizations was primarily based on internet research. A convenience sample was built from the actors who agreed to answer our questions. In total, more than 45 actors were approached, but only 15 were responsive.

3 RESULTS

3.1 SUSTAINABLE ENTREPRENEURSHIP

Sustainable development is now an explicit objective of all policies. It aims to reconcile economic, environmental, and social issues, with a concern for intergenerational equity. The "viability" approach seeks to consider a set of sustainability challenges within a multi-criteria and dynamic framework. This approach, complementary to traditional approaches based on the optimization of a single criterion (for example, economic), makes it possible to define configurations for the sustainable exploitation of an ecological and economic system and to explore decisions likely to avoid or emerge from a crisis of overexploitation.

From 2007 onwards, researchers realized the importance of business opportunities in the field of sustainability. They thus began to make the link between market failures, social and environmental concerns, and entrepreneurial opportunity.

A- Sustainability

To use the terms of the Brundtland Commission report (1987), "sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising

the ability of future generations to meet their own needs." Present decisions must therefore aim for varied, and sometimes contradictory, objectives in a context of intergenerational equity.

The exploitation of natural resources results from the interaction of the natural dynamics of the exploited resource and the economic dynamics of the exploitation sector. If resource exploitation exceeds the regeneration capacity for a prolonged period, the resource can quickly become overexploited and face a risk of extinction. This is the case with the argan tree and the management of the Arganeraie Biosphere Reserve (ABR). The sustainability of exploitation has therefore become a central issue. The main objectives of argan tree management are:

- The sustainability of resource exploitation, in order to preserve stocks and the functioning of ecosystems.
- The economic profitability of exploitation, which must enhance the income derived from the use of resources.
- The preservation of jobs in the sector, and the maintenance of the communities or ways of life associated with it.

These objectives are multidimensional, and sustainability will be based on the achievement of all these objectives over time, considering ecological and economic dynamics.

B- The Viability Approach.

The viability approach allows addressing sustainable development issues by representing sustainability objectives as a set of constraints, such as, for example, the requirement that a certain number of indicators be above certain thresholds: minimum stock, employment, profits... If some of these objectives are not met, the territory faces a crisis, which may be biological, economic, or social. Seeking to define how to respect all viability constraints over time, in order to achieve all sustainability objectives, the viability approach no longer defines an optimal use of resources (optimal with respect to a criterion), but rather the set of viable uses of the resource, viability being defined by the respect of all objectives, whatever their dimension (economic, ecological, or social). The second key point of the approach is that viability does not aim to achieve objectives at a given moment, but dynamically.

C- Eco-Entrepreneurship

Before 2000, companies barely considered the environment; their efforts were limited to complying with legislation. In 1997, Boiral (1997) argued that environmental commitment had long remained reactive and motivated by the development of legislation, which constituted the main constraint that could compromise the sustainability and social legitimacy of their activities. Stakeholder theory conceives of environmental commitment as a strategic decision that initially responds to a moral objective by focusing on balancing the interests of stakeholders. This means that a company that does not manage its relationships with its stakeholders appropriately would potentially be subject to various forms of conflict, crises, and blockages, even calling into question its right to exist.

In this sense, Dean and Mc Mullen (2007) define sustainable entrepreneurship based on the definition of classic entrepreneurship by Shane and Venkataraman (2000) and on welfare economics. They put forward the idea that market failures due to environmental degradation are at the origin of the development of entrepreneurial opportunities. Similarly, Cohen and Winn (2007) explained sustainable entrepreneurship by comparing it to classic entrepreneurship. They base their research on the link between market imperfections and business opportunities that promote sustainable entrepreneurship.

Sustainable entrepreneurship is therefore located at the intersection of the spheres of ecology, social, and economy. Sustainable entrepreneurs have objectives that integrate the environment, social aspects, and economic performance. To do this, they rely on sustainable innovation, which is generally radical and oriented towards the mass market. The success of sustainable innovations leads to societal change, the development of new trends, and the transformation of values. Sustainable entrepreneurs create market dynamics that promote environmental and social progress in order to be fair to future generations.

3.2 ECOTOURISM

Over the decades, tourism has been in continuous expansion and has become increasingly diversified, becoming one of the fastest-growing economic sectors in the world. Modern tourism is closely linked to development and encompasses more and more new destinations. This dynamic has made tourism an essential engine of socio-economic progress. Today, the volume of tourism activity is equivalent to, or even greater than, that of oil exports, the food industry, or the automotive industry. Tourism plays a major role

in international trade and is also one of the main sources of income for many developing countries.

Ecotourism consists of a form of tourism oriented normatively and qualitatively to promote conservation, limit impacts on the environment, and maximize benefits for host communities. Indeed, according to Fennell (2000), protected areas are a prime location for ecotourism, providing access to quality natural environments, necessary for a tourist experience based on contemplative, educational, or other appreciation of the environment. He adds that ecotourism should be focused on local issues so that local communities retain control over its development and benefits.

In this context, tourism, particularly its ecotourism variant, is perceived as an activity that builds on comparative advantages (their wealth in natural capital), generates income for local communities, and encourages them to conserve this capital. In this paradigm, thanks to tourism, biodiversity pays for itself. Tourism activity is labor-intensive and can combat unemployment in rural areas, slow down the phenomena of migration and rural exodus, and reduce pressure on natural resources.

Thus, the concepts of ecotourism and biosphere reserves are interrelated in several respects. According to some, although tourism is, and should be, an important activity in biosphere reserves, the only tourism in these places should be sustainable tourism based on ecological awareness. Ecotourism can give rise to this understanding and commitment; it can help biosphere reserves fulfill their mandate to demonstrate a balanced relationship between humans and nature.

4 DISCUSSION

Following interactions with the various stakeholders in our study, several useful avenues of reflection emerged. Thus, all the organizations contacted were unanimous that ecotourism deserves to be encouraged in the region, offering visitors the opportunity to discover the natural beauty of the argan forest, meet local inhabitants, and participate in eco-responsible activities.

In this sense, and since 2001, within the framework of Vision 2010, a study on the rural tourism development strategy was carried out to analyze tourism supply and demand in rural Morocco. This revealed a mismatch between strong demand from both foreign and domestic tourists and a very rich and diversified but almost unorganized supply. Hence the need to develop and structure this offer to adapt it to the expectations of tourists. Certainly, the development and structuring of the rural product is the business of

all actors; but it must be initiated by local actors who are the pivot of any action in this area. To this end, the said study resulted in the launch of the "Tourist Host Country" (THC) plan, which aimed to federate all local actors called upon to combine their efforts to promote tourism in rural areas. It is in this sense that the Imouzer Ida Ouatane THC (THCI) was created in April 2005, following the signing of a partnership agreement between a group of competent organizations in the field. However, according to one of our interlocutors, twenty years after the launch of THCI, things have not changed.

Still with the aim of promoting rural tourism as well as the Souss-Massa destination, the actors of rural tourism founded, in 2011, the Rural Tourism Development Network (RTDN) thanks to the support of the Souss Massa Regional Council. The stated objective of the RTDN is to structure and organize the rural tourism sector and to enhance its potential. Rural tourism is undoubtedly based on sustainable tourism development. The RTDN today is a unifying and structuring actor in the rural tourism offer in the region.

Regarding labeling, initiatives are being carried out at the national and regional levels to promote ecotourism. Indeed, within the framework of decentralized cooperation between the Souss Massa Regional Council and the Hérault General Council, the Quality and Environment Label was developed in partnership with Gîtes de France Hérault. The Label is based on an evaluation grid that constitutes a precise set of specifications that establishments must meet. Subsequently, the audited structure receives a report of remarks and recommendations that allows it to be awarded 1 to 4 buckles corresponding to its level.

Launched by the Foundation for Environmental Education (FEE), Green Key is a label of international stature. With more than 2,200 labeled establishments in around forty countries, it is the most represented in the world. It is supported by the United Nations Environment Program (UNEP) and the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO). The awarding of this label is based on an international standard developed by the FEE and adapted to the national context by the Mohammed VI Foundation. This standard covers various fields: environmental management, staff involvement, customer information, water, energy and waste management, eco-responsible purchasing, promotion of local products, awareness-raising among partners, and carrying out green activities. Thus, several tourist structures in the Souss-Massa region have been awarded the Green Key label.

In terms of perspectives, the 2023-2030 tourism roadmap envisaged by the public authorities aims, in this sense, to improve the attractiveness of the territories via a priority project over the next three years. To this end, a budget of more than 2 billion dirhams will be mobilized by 2026, financed equally by the Moroccan Society of Tourism Engineering (SMIT) and the regions, to attract investments in 1,500 very small and medium-sized enterprises (VSMEs) that will create innovative entertainment products throughout the national territory. More specifically, the 2020-2030 Morocco forest strategy, led by the National Agency for Water and Forests (ANEF), consists of positioning national parks around an attractive and complementary offer to reach one million ecotourists by 2030. To this end, ANEF is focusing on the creation of a National Park brand, the marketing of labeled products and services, the development of adequate infrastructure, and the establishment of nature trails adapted to nature lovers.

Like the Ifrane National Park, which will be operational before 2026, the Souss-Massa region will have a green zone within the same timeframe that will offer visitors several services that will fall within the niche of green and sustainable tourism. Thus, the blue safari will offer a circuit of nearly 80 km linking the city of Agadir to the various sites of the park. The project is driven by an ecotourism development program by SMIT, in collaboration with the Department of the Water and Forests Agency.

On the side of civil society, a pioneering example in Morocco is given by the Moroccan Association for Ecotourism and Nature Protection (MAENP). MAENP is in the process of developing the first ecotourism village concept. An idea aimed at concretizing the definition of ecotourism and translating it on the ground. Currently, two project ideas are being prepared, namely: the ecotourism village of the Ifrane National Park: it is a question of creating an ecotourism offer based on conservation, enhancement, and adequate development, reconciling the preservation of natural ecosystems and the contribution to local development.

5 CONCLUSIONS

Currently, the demand for tourism in this rural area of Souss-Massa has not yet been the subject of a specific quantitative study. However, tourist numbers in the main city of Agadir can give an idea of the flows in rural areas. In 2017, Agadir recorded nearly 980,000 tourist arrivals with an average length of stay of 4.7 days (Regional Tourism Council - RTC, 2017). As for the number of tourists visiting the Agadir hinterland, it is estimated at nearly 25% of total arrivals in Agadir, i.e. nearly 246,000 visitors. In terms

of overnight stays, it is estimated that 7% of these visitors from the hinterland spend at least one night, which is equivalent to 24 people on average per day, i.e. 8,500 overnight stays per year.

Ecotourism is a niche activity that remains to be developed, since the different strategies have not made it possible to develop this tourism, including the current tourism roadmap. According to the World Tourism Organization, ecotourism represents 25% of the world tourism market and is expected to grow by 10 to 15% per year. Ecotourism, via eco-entrepreneurship, can promote the development of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) which provide goods and services to visitors, such as accommodation, transport, food, guides, crafts and souvenirs. These SMEs can create jobs, income and skills for the local population, especially for women, young people and indigenous groups. It is therefore vital to ensure that micro-enterprises and small and medium-sized enterprises, which are at the heart of ecotourism activity, are supported technically and financially, so that they can establish themselves and develop sustainably. By the same token, establish adequate infrastructure in areas that offer potential for ecotourism in order to stimulate the emergence of local businesses.

Although the motivations behind ecotourism are positive, there may also be drawbacks associated with the practice. For example, while ecotourism helps provide jobs for people living in the chosen tourist areas, many of these jobs may be unstable or seasonal in nature, which means that there may be periods of the year without work. Similarly, when steps are taken to minimize the damage caused by tourism, it is likely that carbon emissions will increase in the region as tourists bring in vehicles. The benefits generated by ecotourism may not be distributed equally or equitably, which can increase inequality, while overtourism is always possible.

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