



## THE ROLE OF HEALTH AND WELLNESS TOURISM IN SUSTAINABLE TERRITORIAL DEVELOPMENT

113

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## Abstract

This study intends to analyse the role of health and wellness tourism in sustainable territorial development. Under a perspective of sustainability, tourism industry contains the potential to facilitate and to contribute to quality of life of communities since the moment it combines their different interests with the visitors' and respects the natural, cultural and economic resources of the territories. This balanced combination of factors reveals crucial for local and regional development that reveals even more important to the inner regions.

Under this postulation and considering that the central region of Portugal is health and wellness tourism centre of attraction – where 50% of the total of thermal units of the country are concentrated – the main goal of this research is to evidence the potential of health and wellness tourism in local and regional development.

Methodologically, this research will combine qualitative and quantitative research methods, using the *delphi* and survey technique among the administrators, managers and users of health and wellness units. In this paper, only an exploratory and conceptual approach is made based on the literature review. Although, the intention is to contribute to advancing knowledge in the field of health and wellness tourism, demonstrating and providing evidence in the future through the empirical research, about its potential as an element to settlement of the population on the inland regions of Portugal.

**Keywords:** tourism, health, wellness, sustainability, territory, development.



## Introduction

Health and wellness tourism has become a growing force driven by the changes on lifestyles simultaneously by demographic and psychographic factors. The ageing of the European population and the growing health awareness to live better with a non-stressful state of mind has been creating demand for a new range of health related products and services in a large leisure setting (Smith and Puzckó, 2009; Pforr *et al.*, 2014).

115

This fast growth of health and wellness tourism is also reflected in academic research, emerging as one of the fastest growing areas. Although being a rapidly expanding sector it still requires theory and investigation (Hall, 2005; Bushell, 2009;). According to Voigt *et al.* (2011), there has been some acknowledgment for wellness tourism, but no research examining the importance of local values to the sustainability of wellness tourism regions. In what concerns to the research on the field, most of the studies were developed under a marketing and management approach, living aside its relation with the sustainability and territorial development. Recognising the force and the impact of tourism to many regional economies, it is imperative that regional tourism organisations are prepared and oriented to develop strategies that sustain and improve tourism as an economic driver for local communities (Wray *et al.*, 2010).

Identifying this and considering the growing demand for but also supply of health tourism products and services, – the recent re-emergence of demand for wellness experiences has presented destinations with a new opportunity to develop innovative products in this area (Prideaux *et al.*, 2014) – competence management in a destination or region will play an increasingly significant role (Wray and Weiler, 2009), it is also very important to analyse the subject as an important contributor to the economy and to the sustainable development of many regions, even and particularly the ones that are in the interior.

In this context and knowing that nowadays the country inner regions are closer to the littoral in its' relative distances of cost and time, due to the new net of accessibilities by road and by virtual and technological means, its' development must occur steadily through the attraction of new economic activities and in terms of quality of life. Besides that, 50% of the total of thermal units of the country are concentrated in the Central region which reveals that health and wellness tourism constitutes an important attract center for the region.

Wellness – here, wellness is understood as the sum of all the experiences located within the destination that promote health and wellbeing, including holistic enrichment of tourists' physical resources such as mineralised waters and other facilities that offer wellness treatments and experiences, reinforced by other related services like hotels, restaurants and entertainment and cultural activities (Prideaux *et al.*, 2014) – may offer a way to distinguish and place some regions, particularly in a perspective of regional development strategy that consists in attracting domestic markets, extending tourism product and experience offerings, attracting off-season visitors, increasing visitors' length of stay, and recovering and revitalising the destination image (Wray and Weiler, 2014). As will be shown in future research, wellness tourism also has the advantage of attracting visitors who are seeking well-being and lifestyle experiences, thus potentially aligning more easily with host community values in comparison with other forms of leisure and tourism, such as cultural, rural, nature, spiritual and gastronomic tourism.



Besides that, according to Wray and Weiler (2014) wellness tourism supports sustainable development and may reveal particularly useful for regional tourism destinations, because potentially supports more easily with host community values in comparison with other forms of tourism, increasing its capacity to contribute to sustainability.

Under this perspective, health and wellness tourism may become a booster element of these new forms of economic growth, socially sustained, promoting the sustainability of regional development creating a territorial balance and improving quality of life that basis on a well-balanced relationship between economic, environmental and social indicators, revealing as an gradually important factor in regional competitiveness, considering that soft location factors play an important role in attracting or retaining simultaneously residents and companies, visitors and guests in a region (Pforr *et al.*, 2014).

The paper is structured by three more sections that consists in the first place in a theoretical framework based on the literature review, where the concept of sustainable tourism development is analysed as well as the role of health and wellness in sustainable regional development, indicating the resources, factors and processes that can be and bee used to develop and sustain wellness tourism as an instrument for competitive advantage and for the sustainability of regional tourism destinations. The following section briefly describes the basis of the methodology that will be conducted during the empirical research. Finally, the last section presents the contributions that this study may bounce to the field.

## **Theoretical framework**

### **Sustainable Tourism Development**

In theory, the concept of sustainable development identifies the interdependencies between environmental concerns and economic policies, “protecting and enhancing the environment, meeting basic human needs, promoting current and intergenerational equity, and improving the quality of life” (Inskeep, 1991) or in a simplified explanation by the World Commission on Environment and Development (1987), sustainable development “meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.” (Mill & Morrison, 2002).

When this concept is transferred do the tourism industry, it can be translated in another and more specific words trough the definition of WTO: “Sustainable tourism development meets the needs of present tourists and host regions while protecting and enhancing opportunities for the future. It is envisaged as leading to management for all resources in such a way that economic, social and aesthetic needs can be fulfilled while maintaining cultural integrity, essential ecological processes, biological diversity, and life support systems.”

According different authors (Inskeep, 1991; McIntyre, 1993; Mill and Morrison, 2002), and having as reference this basic statement, the key to achieve an suitable balanced between the positive and negative impacts of tourism seems to be in adopting the principles that leads to the main goals of sustainable tourism development, can resumed by the development of a larger consciousness and understanding concerning the significant and beneficial contributions and impacts that tourism can make to the



environment and the economy of destinations, such as the growing of foreign exchange earnings, the increasing of income, and the creation of employment (Inskeep, 1991), promoting equity in development. Improving the quality of life of the host community, maintaining and strengthening the community identity and providing an extraordinary quality experience for the visitor, attaining a higher level of tourist satisfaction. This fact retains and assures the return of the visitors, contributing to the marketability and popularity of the destinations in a large spectre, making tourism development economically efficient. It is also essential to maintain and improve the quality of the environment where needed, on which both the host community and the visitor depends (Mill and Morrison, 2002) and where the biological, natural, historical, cultural and other resources for tourism are managed and conserved for continuous use in the future, supporting next generations (Inskeep, 1991).

### **Health and wellness in sustainable regional development**

World Tourism Organisation (WTO, 2001) defends that, when a local area or community is considering to develop its tourism sector, should prudently value its resources for tourism, because it provides the basis for steering a detailed tourism planning study. And one of the resources referred is “related to health, rest and medical treatment of mineral springs, healthy desert and mountain climates and modern, traditional and naturalistic medical treatments which provide an opportunity for developing health resorts and treatment facilities” (WTO, 2001: 33).

With this approach and reference, we intend to introduce the idea that health and wellness tourism contains the potential for a sustainable regional development.

According to Wray and Weiler (2014) there is a group of multiple factors that contribute to the sustainable regional tourism development in a health and wellness tourism context, that can be seen as a competitive advantage for the sustainability of regional tourism destinations.

One of the factors that determines the design of this framework of territorial development is the *significance of historical antecedents and existence of natural resources*. Although more research is needed to identify in which degree the environment drives the sustainability of wellness tourism regions (Voigt *et al.*, 2011), it is a fact that the natural resources – in its’ diversity, uniqueness, abundance –, combined with the built and human resources – accessibility and attractiveness – tend to be a determinant element of the competitiveness and sustainability of a destination region (Ritchie and Crouch, 2003) and it reveals a competitive advantage when destination managers have the capability of planning and management their distinctive combination of resources effectively over the long term (Ritchie and Crouch, 2003). Besides that, the historic context such as the complex and dynamic relations between community members, business interests and government can facilitate or the levels of support they receive from governments and their capacities to innovate and compete for visitors may influence positively or constraint the development of wellness tourism for regional destinations (Wray *et al.* 2010).

The other factor is related with the *values of host populations with respect to natural environments and wellbeing*. In this point, the focus is on the assurance for quality of life in the long-term, simultaneously for host communities and visitors’ satisfaction (Ahn *et al.*, 2002).



This requires a balanced relation between the stakeholders' interests regarding and respecting the conservation of the natural and of the sociocultural resources.

The *diversity of destination experiences and wellness tourism practices* is one of the factors that contribute to a 'destinations comparative advantage' (Ritchie and Crouch, 2003). This diversity includes the natural, historical and cultural resources and attractions of the destination and all the infrastructures and a wide range of facilities that offers a diversity of combined products and experiences to the visitors, mixed with complementary activities that . This fact is essential to the maintenance of a competitive advantage of these regions. Although, to assure the benefits of this competitive advantage, Voigt *et al.*, (2011) determined that places that bargain wellness tourism services are guarantying its success when planned as a component of a broader service offering and advices that an appropriate place-branding strategy based on wellness component.

*Strategic initiatives to plan and achieve sustainable tourism development* is another determinant factor based on effective planning processes, requiring a partnership composed by the different actors that represent different tourism players (McCool, 2009). Nowadays, there is a tendency to develop health and wellness strategies based exclusively on an organic response to consumer demand and other influence drivers, instead of being planned under a strategic and sustainable perspective.

Finally, *stakeholder cooperation in planning for wellness tourism* is a determinant factor to provide and assure a diversity of tourism products and services for visitors. To improve the process of sustainable destination development, it is absolutely necessary coordinate the different interests and define harmonious interactions and a spirit of cooperation between the multitude of stakeholders and the interests of the community and the destination resources in a long-term perspective, engaging with sustainability networks and fostering the interconnectedness of diverse destination stakeholder groups (Timur and Getz, 2008), across governments. For regional destinations with existing health and wellness tourism resources and providers, this interaction must happen and also a strategic approach to branding and positioning of regional destinations as wellness or sustainable destinations that are integrated with other destination products experience (Voigt *et al.*, 2011) is important to assure its' sustainable territorial development at a regional scale.

## Methods

Methodologically, and considering that the aim of this research is to evidence the potential of health and wellness tourism in the appearance of a new paradigm based on the assertion of inner destinations and its' main goals are identify the variables that contribute to the promotion of quality of life that induce to the settlement of population to the territory, particularly in the inner regions of the country; evaluate the interrelation between recreation, leisure and health and wellness tourism; analyse the role of health and wellness tourism in the promotion of new dynamics and territorial balance; contribute to the comprehension of the potential of health and wellness tourism in a geographical and territorial viewpoint and investigate the future impacts of health and wellness tourism in local and regional development.

This research is designed to basis the empirical study on the combination of qualitative and quantitative research methods using both *delphi* and survey technique by



the administration of a questionnaire to administrators and managers of health and wellness units of the central region of Portugal and its' users, respectively.

We intend to conduct and apply the *delphi* technique to develop our empirical study because it is a methodological process frequently used to evaluate information systems related with planning and development. Since 1966, that Helmer considers it a method that allows a systematic focus on the search for an opinion consensus of groups of specialists in what concerns to future events (Helmer, 1966). The *delphi* method is a popular technique for forecasting and an aid in decision-making based on the opinions (Landeta, 2006) of experts that allows to make predictions and help decision-making. The Delphi technique attempts to make constructive and systematic use of informed intuitive judgement and it is used to determine factors that will eventually alter the future of an industry (Kaynak *et al.*, 1994). According to Ramos (2005), it has revealed very proficient in the tourism area, specifically in the change of technological and scientific information among different specialists. Besides that, it is considered a research tool to serve a variety of different purposes in the theorizing process. Increasing the rigor will increase the confidence with which researchers can use the results in subsequent studies and managers can make decisions based on information gathered using these methods (Okoli and Pawlowski, 2004).

### Contributions to the field

The results we can find through this study in the future may reveal relevant information in what concerns in one hand to the evaluation of the potential of health and wellness tourism as a booster element of new and sustainable forms of regional development and as booster element to improve quality of life in the inner regions, considering that quality of life might be achieved in practice through tourism, and in particular, through wellness tourism – considering it is synonymous of relaxation, escape from stress and revitalization of body and mind (Bushell, 2009).

On the other hand, to the evaluation of the satisfaction levels of the users of health and wellness services and to the promotion and the improvement of the global quality of the offered services that correspond adequately to the needs of the public on the different dimensions of cure, prevention and recreation.

Besides that, as tourism industry contains the potential to facilitate and contribute to the quality of life of communities and its development reveals crucial for the sustainability of regional development, we believe this research will contribute to advancing knowledge in the field of health and wellness tourism and intend to furnish evidence about its potential as an emboldened element to settlement of the population on the inner regions of Portugal.

Finally, at the scientific level, health and wellness has become an important subject of research. Although there is a tendency to focus mainly on the marketing and management questions, in an economical stance. For this reason, it is essential to analyse it under a geographical and territorial perspective, where recreation and leisure components should assume a more dominant role in the definition of sector policy, due to the dynamics that can cause on the territory.

Under a perspective of sustainability, tourism industry contains the potential to facilitate and contribute to the quality of life of communities and its development reveals crucial for the sustainability of regional development. So, we believe this



research will contribute to advancing knowledge in the field of health and wellness tourism and intend to furnish evidence about its potential as an emboldened element to settlement of the population on the inner regions of Portugal.

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120

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