

DEVELOPING SUSTAINABLE TOURISM PRODUCTS AT GEOPARK NATURTEJO: THE IMPORTANCE OF COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT

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1. Introduction

Geopark Naturtejo Meseta Meridional (GNMM), the first in Portugal under the auspices of UNESCO, established a sustainable development strategy, with lines of action geared towards qualification and heritage of its population, based on the consolidation of activities related to Nature Tourism, through the design of innovative tourism certified products, leading to increased efficiency and competitiveness of public and private institutions.

The relevance of an installation and development of a matrix of internal networks, based on the lines of strengths identified in the territory and introducing the concept adopted by the European Geoparks Network has high chances of success, and is a crucial and unique opportunity to its implementation.

The coordinated integration of local staff, according to the “vision” designed here, is involving the technical training and its reversion to the follow-up sessions (diagnosis, construction, information and entertainment network, induction of ranks, construction and project support, continuous assessment process).

The strategy behind the development of the Geopark Naturtejo is to:

1 - Stimulate and coordinate the various stakeholders - both public and private - who act or are related direct and/or indirectly with the Environmental/Geological, Historical and Cultural heritage by committing them to contribute and be pro-active in the development and implementation, in the formation and consolidation of the proposed network;

2 - Enhance the capacity of the territory, respecting the principles of classification of assets already assimilated and promoted by Naturtejo, allowing the perspective of the diversification of tourism products, with a particular focus on the skills of traditional products, through innovation in the supply markets and the production and acquisition of knowledge. Ensuring the contribution of these to increase the attractiveness and competitiveness of the territory and act effectively in the promotion and distribution, applying the same philosophy of the network mentioned.

GNMM has a certain number of geological sites of particular importance in terms of their scientific quality, rarity, aesthetic appeal and educational value. GNMM has also a strong historical, cultural and human component connected with nature, promoting the integrated development of tourism. GNMM is a stronger partnership of municipalities and local players for developing innovative synergies in local economy and sustainable development.

Geopark Naturtejo has an active role in the economic development of the territory through enhancement of a general image linked to the geological heritage and the development of Geotourism, Nature Tourism and Ecotourism.

GNMM is having a direct impact on the territory by influencing its inhabitants to recover the values of the Geopark heritage and actively participate in the territory’s cultural revitalization as a whole.

Naturtejo worked from an early stage with local companies who can provide not only investment but also skills, such as foreign languages and specialised knowledge. Naturtejo establishes linkages between the community and the national and international tourism market.

The Strategic Plan for the Establishment of Geopark and even the Tourist Development Plan and the Marketing Plan, were followed and monitored by the Forum that assessed and analysed the various lines of action and projects, giving suggestions and involving the people of the territory in order to them feel totally involved in the actions undertaken.

It should be noted, that in addition to the active participants in Naturtejo, who finally have the opportunity to influence the strategy for the integration of all their views within the Forum, Naturtejo promotes sessions and dissemination of information with minimum monthly intervals throughout the territory.

Nature and Sustainable Tourism is a niche market that is showing significant growth rates, both domestically and in other markets issuers. Increasing the capacity of accommodation and training of operators in the domestic market, including the growth and consolidation that has occurred within the local companies, confirm this trend.

The strategy of developing a Nature Tourism product relies primarily on the existence of a particular environmental context in which the natural characteristics are preserved and are likely to be tourist resources and cultural elements that are interesting and representative of a certain region. Accordingly, the “original offer” supported by those local resources, should be promoted and consolidated.

The concept of Nature Tourism assumes that the project should contribute for sustainable development of the location or region where it installs. In this vein, the planning and development of tourism must necessarily integrate the compatibility of the following 4 levels of interest: 1. The population receiving (hosts); 2. tourists (guests); 3. tour operators; 4. natural environment.

The philosophy of Nature Tourism relies on recovery, use and improvement of natural and cultural systems, but also on building and launching of innovative and creative activities compatible with the sustainable use of components of biological and cultural diversity.

Naturtejo Strategic Development Project is based on the definition of a particular context of environmental, natural and cultural conditions with characteristics of strong traditional components, taking into account the actions proposed by Centre of Portugal Tourism Agency and the priorities selected by the Tourism National Strategy Programme.

It is intended that Naturtejo must be a consolidated and innovative touristic destination, under the Strategic Tourism Plan and representing an additional “apport” of quality in tourism development through the implementation of the following objectives:

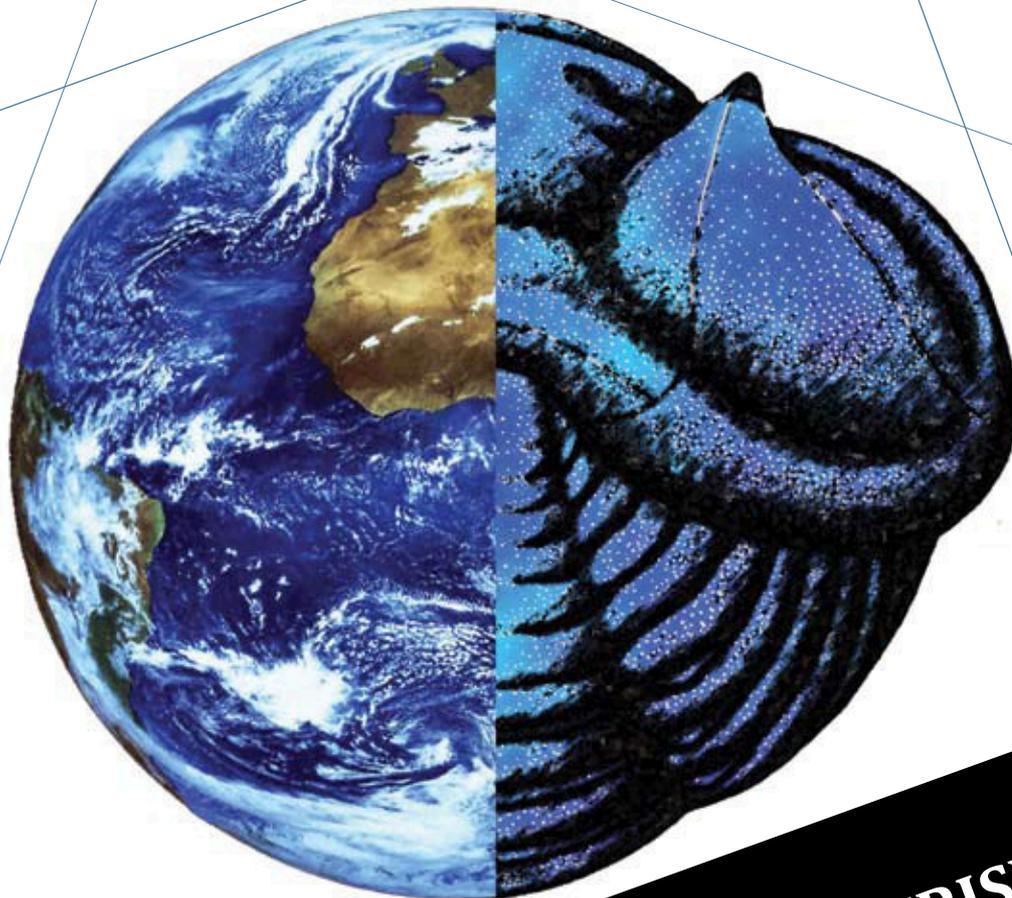
- GNMM as a touristic destination, clarifying the emphasis on increasing tourist demand;
- Increasing the range of provision of tourism products based on the main drivers of Naturtejo and that are in its Strategic Development Plan;
- Consolidating the role of GNMM on the EGN and GNN, including with Spanish Geoparks, with whom Naturtejo set up an Iberian network;
- Improving products and services related with nature and cultural tourism;
- Restoring and enhancing the natural, historical and cultural heritage;

- Promoting tourism and cultural programming, bearing in mind the regional and national planning for this area;
- Increasing the level of use of equipment and services and cultural tour to both the resident population and the tourists, developing networks

Local leaders became the “movers and shakers: and the “spark plugs” providing the driving force for programs, festival and special events. They provide leadership and in terms of strengthening relationships, get others actively involved and coordinate activities of different agencies and organizations.

Reliance on volunteers is critical to an event’s or program success. The success of many projects has rested upon the demonstration capacity of local leaders and officials to coordinate efforts among local residents and both local and outside agencies. As volunteers working with volunteers, such leaders unselfishly work on key committees throughout the year, up-front or behind-the-scenes.

The result of this process of overall involvement and strengthening relationships can be understood as a global ownership of a festival, a special event or program by whole the community.



NEW CHALLENGES WITH GEOTOURISM

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