

## Notas de investigación

### The difficulties in the development of mining tourism projects: the case of La Unión Mining District (SE Spain)

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**Abstract:** Mine sites are atypical industrial sites because they encompass not only economic but also landscape and anthropologic components. The need of developing new economic opportunities in areas, where a “mining monoculture” was the economic backbone, has resulted in the re-interpretation of mining activity from a cultural viewpoint. Some traditional mining towns from both, recent and ancient times, have forgone mining activity and have become new tourist attractions sites. However, the process of developing tourism in these zones is not easy and necessarily incorporates social, economic and environmental requirements. This paper describes the constraints, possibilities and efforts that meet in the former mining town of La Unión, Southeast Spain. It will be investigated in a critic point of view the current projects that, though in low number, try to preserve the identity and history of the town while generating relatively significant economic incomes.

**Keywords:** Mining Heritage; Landscape; Cultural Tourism; Environmen; Souteast Spain.

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**Resumen:** Las zonas mineras constituyen lugares de interés especial desde el punto de vista cultural ya que reúnen matices económicos, de paisaje y antropológicos. La necesidad de desarrollar nuevas oportunidades económicas en áreas dedicadas en exclusiva a la actividad minera ha llevado a reinterpretar dicha actividad desde el punto de vista antropológico y cultural constituyendo en la actualidad importantes focos de atracción turística. Sin embargo, este proceso no es fácil y presenta una serie de condicionamientos sociales, económicos y medioambientales. Este artículo describe los puntos fuertes y débiles para el desarrollo del turismo minero en el pueblo de La Unión (Sureste de la península ibérica). Se investigará desde un punto de vista crítico los proyectos actuales, que aunque en pequeño número, tratan de preservar la identidad e historia locales a la vez que generar ingresos económicos.

**Palabras clave :** Patrimonio minero; Paisaje; Turismo cultural; Medio ambiente; Sureste de España.

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## Introduction

Traditional mining sites from ancient times are places where cultural, social, economic and anthropologic aspects meet. Mining zones may have had this consideration during thousand of years, generating the accumulation of "historic signals" of the mining activities within local areas. Since in these places the local history is joined to mining, and mining is joined to the local identity, the recording of the history through the mining activity is a "walk" through the ancient human generations of the specific site. In other words, in these zones there is a "perfect" assimilation between mining activity and local idiosyncrasy.

In the last twentieth century many of the traditional mining sites suffered economic crisis due to the evolution of the extractive techniques (more efficient and with less manpower requirements), the new global mineral market with the decreasing in metal worths or the higher importance of environmental issues. These economic crisis had lately social effects such as the progressive abandonment of mining towns by working class people, the disturbances of the traditional mining style of life, the impossibility of getting new economic alternatives, high rates of unemployment, etc.

Nowadays, tourism is an important aspect of the human societies. Additionally, the modern society has developed a wide concept of tourism not only such as "leisure time", also like a cultural expression. This concept of culture includes all the possible manifestations of the human activities, from the art to economic activities. In this case the culture integrates activities that have had strong influence in the human style of life and by its strong relations with certain communities may be considered specific and endowed of time. The consideration of mining such as part of the historic culture can be affirmed because: 1) it is an historic activity which in some cases flows from ancient civilizations till nowadays; 2) it has elements that affect the style of life (i.e. economic crisis, social work resistance periods, harsh working conditions) forming community feelings with "epic" and morality shapes (Ruiz-Ballesteros and Hernández-Ramírez, 2007); 3) there is an interaction man-earth that creates images, infrastructures, processes, techniques and goods that reflects scientific or engineering aspects.

Tourism has a dynamic nature which reinterprets continuously the heritage (Nuryanti, 1996). Nowadays, the possibilities of generating new socioeconomic dyna-

mics and, at the same time, performing actions to conserve the heritage and the cultural identity are based on the exploitation of the potential of the cultural tourism (Padró-Werner, 2000). The European Commission considers the cultural tourism like a basic element in the European tourist strategy (CEC, 2002).

Conversion of mining sites in "cultural" targets for tourism has been done successfully in the last decades. In these sites there is a change in the perception of the resource, from a productive raw material to a consumptive viewing of the past (Pretes, 2002). Moreover, this heritage represents the own identity and idiosyncrasy of this local communities, it is the testimony, signs, emblems from one prosperous and glorious past that help to strengthen the image and self-esteem of these populations (Carvajal et al., 2002).

At the moment, initiatives in this context are being carried out in the U.K., Germany, The Netherlands, Belgium, Austria, France, Spain and Italy (Hospers, 2002). According to Armesto-Peña (2002) there are in Europe at least five hundred sites in old mining exploitations which have been converted into mining museums, natural protected areas, leisure sites, etc. Some mining landscapes and their related elements are considered a part of the human heritage because of their historic values. Some old mining sites around the world have been included in the world heritage list of UNESCO (UNESCO, 2005a).

The trend is reconstructing sites, buildings and instruments in situ, protecting the natural and cultural environments and showing the elements in their context. In some of these sites the tourism constitutes an important roll for economic development and local restructuring (Fernández and Guzmán-Ramos, 2004; Edward and Llurdes, 1996).

Tourism in mining sites (like a type of a cultural tourist experience) generates different feelings in relation to traditional sun/beach culture. It is necessary then to offer specialized services and offers different from the conventional parameters of tourism. According to Stebbins (1997) in the cultural tourist attractions there is a higher identity tourist-object than in the mass tourism sites. Mining tourists have different parameters of satisfaction in relation to the traditional ones. Then the services have to be improved in order to satisfy these aspects.

Nevertheless, this mining heritage tourism has four problematic points according to Edwards and Llurdés i Coit

(1996): 1) the low attractiveness for people due to a different standard of beauty, 2) the huge size of the mining exploitations which makes them very expensive to restore, 3) the degradation of the environment associated to most mining sites and iv) in most cases a location far from traditional tourist circuits. The same authors mentioned two additional factors that affect cultural tourism in Spain: the traditional mass tourism in Spain has been based mainly in the traditional offer of sun/beach and the scarcity of political interest to support mining heritage projects.

According to Cameron (1999) four issues have to be overcome in the development of industrial heritage projects: a selection of the suitable heritage elements for presentation; to determine to whom belongs the "ownership" of the industrial heritage; if heritage can attract a sufficient number of visitors; and finally, what is the time scale of the heritage making.

In Spain, the case of Riotinto in the Southern region of Andalucía is the best example of mining heritage tourist projects. The development of these projects have been carried out by the Fundación Río Tinto and are based on the "heritagitation" of the area: mining museum, restoration of a mining railway, rehabilitation of urban areas and archeologic, and the organization of trips by the mining area (Hernández-Ramírez and Ruiz-Ballesteros, 2005). The success of the activities in this region is supported by the increasing trend in the number of visitors (from 8000 in 1992 till 62500 in 2005).

### The case of La Union town

La Union town is located at Southeast Spain and belong to the Murcia region. La Union has been during a long time "synonym" of mining in a regional and national level.

The mining history in this site started during the Iberian period (Bronze Age) and continued with Phoenicians, Carthaginians, etc., reaching a crucial point during the Roman domain (209 b.C.). In this way this area has one of the longest mining history in the Iberian Peninsula.

After the Roman decline, the mining activity decreased among others reasons due to the depopulation of this zone (Manteca and Berrocal, 1997).

The middle of the XIX century marked an inflexion point in this region taking place a "boom" of mining activities in Southeast Spain based on a lot of small underground exploitations. Thousand of people that came to this zone from different

regions worked in deplorable working conditions. This facilitated the fast growth of a strong class conscience which generated a good organized proletariat (Egea-Bruno, 2003). The mining activity acquired a new dimension in the middle of the XX century due to the new extractive techniques which changed the traditional concept of underground mining to open cast mines. The economic crisis at the end of nineties last century caused the definitive closing of the mining activities in this region.

In La Unión Council, which is located in the center of this mining District, the mines constituted the only economic activity during centuries. This reason has conditioned the socio-economic situation of this council which was tied to the up and downs of the mining activity throughout the years. In spite of this "monoculture" character, economic alternatives to mining were not proposed by successive Governments.

This "mining-dependence" has caused a lot of population fluctuations with a decline from 30'000 citizens in 1900 to 13'900 in 1991 when the mining activity ceased. These aspects have left a strong mark in the idiosyncrasy and character of La Union's citizens, apart from the aforementioned strong proletarian feelings.

This situation has persisted during one decade until now when the nearby mass tourism center of "La Manga del Mar Menor" has stimulated the local economy and is seen as a new source of richness to overcome the crisis. In the last years conventional mass tourism projects and small heritage projects "coexist" in this area. The possibility of higher and faster cash-flow- results of the first ones is hindering the possibility of developing projects related with the local mining heritage which seem to have a long time response in the economic point of view.

The objectives of this work are pointing up general statements about tourism in mining sites focusing in negative points, necessities, opportunities and targets, and applying to the case of La Union town.

### The constraints and difficulties in the development of the mining tourism in La Union's town

The following aspects are generally common in the most of mining sites and condition further projects of heritage:

#### Crisis after mining decline

The traditional monoculture character in mining sites has hindered in the most of cases the development of economic alter-

natives in parallel to the mining activities. The searching for these alternatives usually takes place during the decline or just after the ending of the mining works. These situations are generally less favorable for the development of new economic alternatives due to the following factors:

- in case of declining economic situations, the possibilities of doing high invests result riskier than in a normal economic juncture.
- the change of activity in a society with strong identity marks can not be assumed in short period of time. This fact needs a progressive assumption in the citizens and authorities.
- during an economic decline there are social factors which are unfavorable to carry out new: laboral conflicts, high unemployed ratios, emigration to another places, etc.

In La Union town the ending of the mining activity at the turn of the last century brought a socioeconomic crisis to this Council, manifested in one of the highest unemployment ratio in the Murcia Region (more than 20%) and resulting in the loss of population by emigration. This fact hindered the possibilities of carrying out big projects due to the absence of investors and the unfavourable social situation of the town. Nevertheless, politicians and government trust in the tourism like the best economic alternative for the town (La Verdad de Cartagena, 2005).

The nearby high mass tourism site of La Manga del Mar Menor has stimulated the local economy of La Union in order to facilitate services to tourists. At the same time the urban growing of the town is receiving potentially tourists since the prices are relatively cheaper and the atmosphere is less crowded in comparison to the main tourist resorts. Moreover, the communications with the nearby tourist places are suitable. This could be taken for the local authorities to offer much more than simple "residence" to these tourists and at the same time to reaffirm the identity of the town.

#### **Who has the initiative?**

Generally, the mining towns come from periods of economic recession (see latter paragraph). This aspect promotes the searching of new economic opportunities but at the same time is a signal that points up the lower economic capacity to effect big investments. Then, it is usual to recur to public investments in order to carry out projects. In this case the time-scale gets longer and the projects are generally spread in decades.

In the case of La Union, private inves-

tors or old mining owners have been more focused in reconverting mining lands in high mass tourism zones, obviating the cultural or indiosincrasic aspects of the local community.

It is usual the most of projects are canalized by association or foundations with the support of the public institutions (Hernández-Ramírez and Ruiz-Ballesteros, 2005).

In the case of La Unión, local and regional authorities have developed small legal figures in order to protect the mining heritage. However in some cases, this mining heritage has been damaged (Manteca, 2003). Projects such as the creation of a mining thematic park have focused the interest of both administrations in the last years. However, these projects are overdimensioned and need high investments which are difficult to provide. Till now, local Foundations, nearby universities, local Council and particulars have carried out small projects in order to preserve "cultural and heritage aspects of the traditional mining life". But these projects have not enough size to consider the tourism like an important economic source.

#### **Lack of tourist infrastructures**

Generally mining sites have no tourist infrastructures: hotels, tourist information places, good communications, restaurants adapted to tourist necessities, etc. Complementary tourist services or leisure activities (sport facilities, another cultural facilities) are also commonly absence.

Mining sites located near "mass tourism" places may solve the lack of lodgings or other leisure services and moreover may offer an additional attraction to conventional tourists. On the other hand, in these cases the mining sites are reduced to a simple "one journey" attraction with limited capacities to generate important cash-flows.

La Union's town has the particularity of been situated near one of the most important mass tourist centers in the Spanish Mediterranean coast: La Manga del Mar Menor. This fact, increases the possibilities of receiving tourists and take the advantage of "using" the important tourist infrastructures of the nearby areas: good road communications, airport, hotels, restaurants.

#### **Environment, safety...**

Mining activities are well known for their deleterious effects on the environment. Mining wastes are sources of pollution to the ground- and surface- waters, and soil in their vicinities. This pollution

is especially important when these lands are used for crops or urban development, since there is high risk of metal exposure to humans (Conesa et al. 2008). All these factors can compromise the “future” of the mining tourist generating rebuff and bad image. Carrying out environmental restoration works are necessary in order to offer a good image and attract people.

In other hand, mining exploitations and factories need to follow some rules and fulfill legal dispositions about emergencies, accidents, safety, etc. In this way, a small accident, even without any injured people, may damage strongly the future of the attraction.

The most significative element in relation to environmental pollution from this area is the Portman Bay. This Bay, whose area covers around 1.5 km<sup>2</sup>, was completely filled with the mining wastes generated by the mining refining processes. Martínez-Frias (1997) considered the Portman Bay “the most contaminated bay in the entire Mediterranean”. Nowadays, the regeneration of the Portman Bay, including the construction of nautic sport facilities, is considered the key to the tourist development of the Council.

Soil contamination has become an important issue worldwide because its consequences in environmental health, loss of soil productivity and therefore the related socioeconomic impacts. The remediation of polluted soils is then considered a key for the economic reactivation in many sites, however this issue is not easy to achieve since in remediation projects usually meet multiple factors (environmental, technical, legislative, economical) which are site specific dependent. Nowadays the public health concern in relation to soil contamination has taken the attention of regulators which have brought the publication of norms, contamination thresholds and legally rules in relation to soil pollution issues. In general, laws have included the obligation of effecting the soil reclamation if some previous proposed thresholds are surpassed (BOE 2005). Conesa et al. (2008) showed a proposal for the environmental restoration of the Cartagena-La Unión Mining District under the adequate protection of the mining heritage elements. According to these authors, the environmental restoration may be seen by the local authorities or local cultural associations as a barrier that can strangle the economic development. Usually, the environmental or restoration actions that have to be carried out are expensive and local administrations are not able to cover these expenses.

### **Specificities and possibilities of the mining tourism in La Unión town**

Not all the tourists which visit cultural attractions can be classified as cultural tourists since in the most of cases there are higher percentages of people that go to the cultural attractions as part of a wider tourism experience (such as beach holiday) (Richards, 1996). This aspect and the proximity of the mass tourism at La Manga del Mar Menor may stimulate the visits to La Unión’s town.

There are some aspects that have to be pointed up in relation to the development of the “mining tourism” in La Unión.

#### **Promotion of the Mining Landscape**

Landscape is part of the culture and is considered also a human heritage. For the UNESCO (2005b) the cultural landscapes “are illustrative of the evolution of human society and settlement over time, under the influence of the physical constraints and/or opportunities presented by their natural environment and of successive social, economic and cultural forces, both external and internal”. Fowler (2003) considers that industrial and urban landscapes can be included in the World Heritage list “if they are of outstanding universal value and meet the criteria”. Bridge (2004) affirms that “as a cultural landscape, the mine sits at the nexus of history politics, and culture, the focal point of a contested moral landscape”.

In La Unión a small Project supported by Cartagena University and La Unión’s Council has reconverted an old road that crosses mines and interesting geologic formations into a walking cultural route which provides an exciting view of the past of the mines (Manteca et al., 2000). This road, called “Carretera del 33”, has been promoted in local scale by brochures or newspapers notes and offers the possibility of mixing culture, science, sport and nature. Another route called “Lo Veremos”, placed at the urban zone, allows observing from outside two examples of the old underground mining activity and some mining machinery.

More efforts have to be done in this aspect: hiking routes, eco-tourism, autochthonous medicinal flora of the zone, bicycle routes, etc...

#### **Museums, machinery and infrastructures**

Buildings, refining centers, old machinery, factories, smelters, pit head frames, etc. All these elements are present in the most of mining sites and reflect the history of the human technology. There are some inventories of the mining heritage of the

zone (Manteca and Berrocal, 1997), that include mining machinery, underground galleries, open pits, etc., in total more than one hundred sites. However, there is not a general plan to restore them or make them visitable. In this way, the heritage seems to be "present" but only in an academic point of view. The existence of a mining heritage is then justified by some academics and historians but it is not assumed completely by the "society". This aspect is pointed up by Prats (2003) when affirms the theoretical and methodologic weakness in the development of a lot of tourist heritage projects and the assumption of "thesis" not completely signed up. The "heritagization" in this case, seems to be "artificial" and the local population does not feel recognized in this process. It is necessary then, a better establishment of the mining heritage concept and to preserve those elements that really define the "art of the local mining". The implication of the local miners with their work experiences, "mining legends" may generate feelings of "true experiences" in the visitors and at the same time may implicate the local community in the development of the mining heritage projects. The question the remains is if the mining heritage is valid by itself to stimulate the development of projects (internal development from the local community) or if it is necessary the intervention of public institutions (external development from not-local community). This is the key of the mining heritage projects and may condition the future of these activities since at long term a project without the support (at least emotional support) of the local community is almost a failed trial.

The projects that have been carried out in relation to mining heritage are scarce. Recently, a former mine has been opened to public visits which also offers the possibility of celebrating social and cultural events for reduced groups. Other initiatives came from European projects such as the case of the "JARA" project, a European LIFE project, (see at <http://www.fundacionssierraminera.org/proyectos/jara/index.htm>) that has been managed by the "Sierra Minera" Foundation. In this project two mines have been restored including actions to decrease the environmental risks of the surroundings. Nevertheless this project seems to be reserved for the local community, which includes schools or local cultural associations. The attraction started its visits in July 2005. From august 2005 to December 1600 people visited the mine: 350 from schools, 350 from different associations. The most of visitors come from the local area (55%), 16% come from the rest of

the province, 17% from the rest of Spain and 12% are foreigners.

Another kind of projects related with the traditional local life is the Huerto Pío Project, also carried by Fundación Sierra Minera. It consists in the reconstruction of a traditional local garden in which the endemic autochthonous flora is shown. In spite of the small size of the attraction the number of visitors has increased continuously from its inauguration in 2002. During 2005 almost 2500 people have visited these attractions: 1800 from schools and 650 from the local area that in some cases also collaborate in works of environmental education.

The mining Museum of La Unión is the most successful action within the local mining heritage development. The visitors of the museum are not only restrained to a regional scale but more people from outside are currently interested in it. Around 10000-13000 visitors come annually to this museum, around 50 % from organized trips (schools, cultural associations, organized trips), 30% are tourists from the nearby tourist area of "La Manga" and 20% are others from the local and regional communities. The data of the last ten years reflect a constant number of visitors in the museum. However, the highest number of visitors was reached when the entrance was free, being the annual average of visitors around 15,000. The payment for entrance reduced the number of visitors, but mainly this decreasing came from the local community that visited the museum like a part of the routine walks.

### Other cultural aspects

Mining, like it was commented above, has an important mark in the idiosyncrasy of the citizens in mining towns. This idiosyncrasy may be expressed by ethno-cultural manifestations. In La Unión, the flamenco Festival called "Cante de las Minas" –Songs of the Mines- has recovered the local-traditional flamenco songs which were song by the local miners. The feelings of nostalgia or anachronism are present in the local community which remembers in this cultural manifestation the mining past of the town. Nevertheless, it seems that the most important success of the festival is that has connected with the "global" flamenco community and in this way its repercussion takes place in a national scale. During the weeks of the flamenco festival some cultural activities with the base of mining take place in the town: photography, paintings, etc. The

economic support of the Festival is provided by public administrations, banks, universities and private companies. All these aspects and the important mediatic repercussion of the Festival, may make us think about the long term of this activity for the town.

In La Unión town is celebrated during each Easter a Trade fair of minerals. The acceptance and affluence of this event is increasing each year showing the good acceptance of this activity.

## Conclusions

The necessity of searching for economic alternatives in traditional mining sites has found in the cultural aspects of the mining a good source to attract tourists. However, the steps are difficult to do due to the numerous constraints that appear in mining "monoculture" communities. In La Unión town (SE Spain) some projects to attract tourist are being carried out based on diverse aspects: industrial heritage, landscape, environment, cultural and ethnic aspects, history. All these projects are useful in order to preserve the identity of the town and also to generate some economic flow but to get this purpose much more efforts have to be done. Authorities see the tourism like the key for the economic development of the council. However, it needs to be defined if the town is going to play an active role (e.g. supplying its own tourist products) and/or a "collateral" role (e.g. simply providing services for the nearby mass tourism area).

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