

FISHING TOURISM AND SUSTAINABILITY IN THE CANARY ISLANDS, SPAIN

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ABSTRACT

Fishing tourism is an activity that has shown great potential to improve the living conditions of fishing populations, reduce the pressure on fishery resources and singularize the tourism offer of coastal tourist destinations. However, its adequate formulation requires strategies for the participation of the different groups of agents involved in the activity. In addition, the incorporation of fishermen as tourism service providers would require the development of training and awareness strategies. From an ethnographic approach, this paper analyses the possibilities and limitations for the development of fishing tourism in the Canary Islands, after the approval of Law 15/2019 of 2 May of the Canary Islands Fishing, showing the perceptions of professional fishermen about the barriers and potentialities of the incorporation of traditional fishing to the list of tourist experiences in the Canary Islands.

Keywords: massive sun and beach destinations, Canary Islands, fishing tourism, regulation, sustainable development.

1 INTRODUCTION

A highly significant portion of the large mass tourism destinations that have been developed internationally since the 1960s are located in coastal areas with favourable climatic conditions. However, tourism activities are not normally the only human activities that take place in these scenarios. Fishing and shell fishing have coexisted for decades with the massive tourist exploitation of the coast in multiple destinations and contexts.

The relationship between coastal mass tourism and fishing activities is very diverse. On the one hand, tourism is a source of business for fishing populations due to the increased demand for fishery products, the emergence of new job opportunities, or the possibility of participation in tourism entrepreneurship or through tourism marketing of fishing activities as a resource around which to generate experiences for visitors. On the other hand, tourism activities lead to the transformation of the coastal environment and can reduce fishing resources or access to them, the increase in demand for fishery products can promote their production reaching unsustainable rates, tourist activities can also compete for resources (such as labour) with traditional productive activities, while new populations and urban growth are attracted by new employment opportunities, and, finally, tourism can promote gentrification and touristification processes.

The variability of the relationships between tourism and fishing activities in the environment of massive sun and beach tourist destinations is very wide. But, at the same time, it is common that direct relationships between tourists and fishermen, as guests and hosts, occur only at a very superficial level. Relationships between visitors and the cultures, realities and local population of the destination has been defined as inauthentic. Many are the authors who have marked the relationships between tourists and residents as a parody based on their commercial, accessory, transitory and superficial character [1]–[5].

Although professional fishermen may be constantly surrounded by tourists and tourist services, they seem to be part of the landscape. In this type of massive destinations, local populations tend to depersonalize tourists through their identification with certain stereotypes. Tourists are part of their environment, but they are mostly conceived as homogeneous groups of people with interests and perspectives very different from those of



the local populations, who will be replaced in a short time by other groups of similar and depersonalized individuals, in a sort of continuous parade. In general, tourists are not identified for locals as subjects with whom to establish genuine personal relationships.

On the other hand, the perception of tourists is conditioned by the experience of an extraordinary space and time. A vacation context marked by the transcendental objective of having fun, contact with exotic environments and cultural practices, as well as the development of recreational activities that allow them to disconnect from their daily experience to return home with new motivations and experiences to remember and share. Tourists consume the destination conditioned by a set of stereotypes that have motivated them to select the environment to visit. The need to confirm these stereotypes has important implications for how they perceive and establish relationships with the destination and its local populations. In general, the tourist will fix his attention on certain exotic elements, hindering the authenticity of the contact and even distrusting the real nature of what contradicts what configured his image of the destination in origin. [6], [7]. The tourist gaze [8] will be directed towards those elements of the destination encouraged by the promotion and interests of the tourist industry. Tourists will focus the lens of their cameras towards these elements, ignoring many other aspects of the reality of the destination visited. In many massive coastal destinations, the fishing activity remains outside these stereotyped constructions, or they constitute complementary elements that contribute a certain degree of exoticism and authenticity to the tourist image of the destination.

Even so, there are many examples in which fishing activities have been directly incorporated into the stereotypical constructions and the list of tourism products of the massive coastal destinations [9]. In these cases, this produces positive effects on the economic exploitation of tourism by local communities, strengthening the possibilities of interaction with tourists and promoting tourist experiences of great value for them. The different forms of inclusion of fishing activities in tourism are presented as strategies for economic diversification responsible with the culture and the territory, based on the enhancement of the historical productive activities of fishing collectives. Trying to cover the various meanings mentioned in the legal framework of the different Spanish territorial areas where it is applied, Moreno Muñoz [10] defines fishing tourism as those “activities developed in a coastal environment, on board or outside fishing vessels, with the aim of diversifying the economy and adding value to a singularity that positively affects the fishing and service sectors in traditional coastal areas through economic consideration, to disseminate the seafaring culture, its traditions, the work in the marine environment and port facilities, the associated material and immaterial heritage and the fishermen’s way of life”.

Although with different results depending on the locations where fishing tourism has been implemented, we can find successful applications in America, Asia and Europe [11], [12]. The European experience shows that professionals linked to fishing tourism tend to focus on land-based activities, such as gastronomic activities or visits to factories and museums, as opposed to less use, especially in Spanish cases, of fishing vessels [13], [14]. The possibilities of using fishing activities as a tourist experience are very varied. They include sea and land products, active and passive, related to tradition or cutting-edge technology. Given its characteristics, it is understood that fishing tourism requires specific regulations for its development.

In this paper, we analyse the potentialities and conflicts surrounding the possibilities for the development of fishing tourism in the Canary Islands, a destination clearly identified with forms of sun and beach mass tourism.



2 FISHING TOURISM AS A SUSTAINABLE OPPORTUNITY

The European Union's Blue Growth strategy specifically promotes proposals for the sustainable development of coastal destinations based on the creation of small and medium-sized marine tourism enterprises (among others), which diversify tourism demand and promote its deseasonalization, with an impact on the reduction of the carbon footprint and the environment. However, on too many occasions these interventions are conceived more as neoliberal resource privatization strategies [15], [16] than as a conservation tool and a means to promote quality of life.

In the Spanish case, with the original initiative of the Galician fishermen's guilds, regulations, projects and specific actions have begun to emerge, trying to break the limitations that prevent the correct development of this type of products. The main blockages perceived by the affected agents seem to be the lack of specific regulation, the inadequate infrastructure and the lack of training and experience of fishermen in touristic sector. The potential positive effects of the development of fishing tourism activities seem clear. On the one hand, the popularization of the activity through heritage and dissemination of the fishing culture and its traditional practices provides an added value compared to the usual sport fishing trip in commercial boats [17], which can promote the prestige of the profession, affecting the fishermen's standard of living and quality of life, and fostering their self-esteem [18], [19]. The consolidation of the product would mean an increase in the usual income and an attraction that would contribute to avoid the transfer of status, capital and personnel, due to the characteristic abandonment of traditional professions of tourist destinations [20] and the aging of the fishing population, favouring generational replacement. Precisely, economic diversification due to the complementarity of this activity, together with its strategic use to fix the fishing population and attract new professionals, appear as the main motivations for promoting this type of enterprise in Spain [14]. In the rest of Europe, on the other hand, its interest is centred on its use as a strategy for taking advantage of and adapting to the new tourist demands derived from the dynamics of touristification of coastal destinations [11].

In addition, this type of tourism activities favours environmental education on coastal environments, both for local populations and visitors [21]. The decrease in fishing trips and times, as well as the reduction of catches during tourist activity, would imply a decline on fishery resources pressure [22], [23]. In fact, the search for strategies to reduce catches is among the main objectives of the European Union's Common Fisheries Policy, promoting interaction between fishing and tourism [9].

Coordination between administrations, scientists and fishing organizations in reconciling the fishing world and tourism in a sustainable way must be an indispensable requirement from the outset. Real participation, beyond consultation, must be accompanied by appropriate technical, regulatory and training support. In this context, it is essential to support horizontal collaboration in the offer of, at least, professional fishermen, accommodation providers and catering professionals with a differentiated gastronomy in accordance with the seafaring culture [11]. At the same time, the complementarity of these activities with other resources linked to the visibility of cultural assets related to the world of fishing (tourists routes, museums, interpretation centres, etc.) will contribute to the objective of economic profitability, socio-cultural equity and heritage sustainability [17]. The lack of collaboration and the shortcomings in the creation of an organized and integrated project that considers the specific characteristics of each locality has revealed structural tensions between artisanal and sport fishing or tourist agencies on many occasions [24]. However, an adequate management of the valorisation of knowledge and practices of fishing communities not only involves the activation of resources that can benefit society [25], but also favours the management of tourism development in coastal destinations [26].



3 FISHING TOURISM REGULATION IN THE CANARY CONTEXT

Canary Islands organizations and administrations have been showing interest in the implementation of this activity for decades with little success. Although it has great potential for the development of fishing tourism (wide representation of traditional and artisanal fishing techniques, large tourist influx, good annual weather conditions, etc.), no business venture in this regard has been carried out. Recently, Law 15/2019 of 2 May about Canary Islands Fishing has been enacted, which seems to open the door to the implementation of these products in the islands. However, the activity presents difficulties in taking root as an economic diversification strategy in the archipelago, despite its explicit search for differentiation strategies and mechanisms to overcome its current dependence on tourism. The reasoning included in the preamble of this law refers to its necessity based on the historical demand of the fishing sector for a regional regulation of complementary economic activities related to fishing and aquaculture. The search for diversification strategies for Canarian fishermen has been justified by the Coastal Action Groups themselves for decades [27]. During the 1950s and 1960s, it was common for professional fishermen to sporadically, on weekends and holidays, take tourists and locals on board to supplement their income. Currently, many fishermen use the rental of houses or the operation of bars or restaurants where their fresh fish is offered to increase their income, although both services lack the potential of the added value that their offer could have linked to fishing trips [27].

In addition to emphasizing the complementary nature of these activities (they may not provide more than 40% of the total income of professionals), the Canary Islands Fishing Law provides that fishing tourism activities must be oriented towards the objectives of disseminating heritage (traditions, trades, gastronomy, culture, arts, gear and techniques), enhancing the social, economic and technological evolution of these communities. The regulations also stipulate the essential requirements for the development of the activity. Among them, the need to have certain licenses, authorizations and permits can be highlighted. But especially relevant are the requirements for a boat to be able to carry out tourist fishing activities (minimum size of the boats, safety conditions, bathroom on board, etc.).

4 FISHERMEN'S PERCEPTION OF PESCATURISM: POTENTIALITIES AND CONFLICTS

The perception of fishing professionals regarding the possibilities of fishing tourism in the Canary Islands has been approached from a qualitative approach through: (i) observation of dissemination activities of the Canary Islands Fishing Law 15/2019 and the possibilities of business entrepreneurship organized by the Cabildo of La Palma, the Coastal Action Group of La Palma and the Coastal Action Group of Tenerife in 2019; (ii) in-depth interviews with professional fishermen in the locality of Punta del Hidalgo, on the island of Tenerife; and (iii) ethnographic fieldwork during seven months, in which participant observation techniques and in-depth interviews were used in the main fishing localities of Fuerteventura.

Previous studies [28] indicated an enormous predisposition of Canarian professional fishermen towards the implementation of tourist fishing, although with certain misgivings. However, fishermen maintain that the current regulations imply a blockage for the development of the activity. The main argument for this consideration is based on the fact that the regulation does not take into account the specificities of the Canarian artisanal fleet. The small size of most of the traditional inshore fishing boats of the Canary Islands can be an added value to the product, both for the picturesque appearance of the boats, as well as for the ease and safety implied by the short distance from the coast in which they usually fish. However, their size is one of the main limitations for the development of fishing tourism in



the region. This is because it makes it impossible to comply with the regulations designed for larger vessels: minimum crew requirements, safety structures such as handrails and lifeguards, toilets on board, etc.

The perception of Canarian fishermen of the laxity of these regulations in other international contexts causes a feeling of helplessness and incomprehension in these agents, who try in vain to refute the administrations with ad hoc arguments against a regulation considered generalist and ambiguous, which does not take into consideration local particularities.

“The toilet... I had a meeting and it is complex. Because it has a measure and I was not in agreement with that. I have filed a complaint about that. If it is done, I am not in agreement at all, because then the whole northern fleet of Fuerteventura is left without fishing tourism. The Azorean boats are like mine, smaller boats and they are going with fishing tourism. The women’s association of the Azores is taking pesca turismo, they are the ones that started first. And they are 6-m boats. What are you telling me?! Because one day I was with the merchant marine in Tenerife, and they told me that no, I should have a cabin at the front and put a tiny bathroom like the one in the caravans inside, with its little door (...) Those who are going there [initiatives similar to pesca turismo developed with commercial pleasure boats], half of them have nothing and you see them coming and going in a zodiac. And I at least have a chemical toilet inside the cabin. And they said it was a danger...”

(Senior Patron of the fishermen’s guild 1)

“Is that a problem? What can I tell you... on a trawler. As long as it doesn’t go too far... Because if you put it, as is being done in France and in those places... France is already working with tourist fishing; Italy is working on a project and the Azores are working on tourist fishing. And the guys said ‘no, we put a glass window and no one will pass from here to there’, they built it and you can’t pass. One of our sardine seiners, well, look, it’s small, you get inside the cabin and: ‘Hey, you can’t go out until the fishing is done!’ So... And with me, on my boat, you give him a rod, two people... I’m not going to take 10, I can take one or two at most. For me, the one who pays 50€ solves me half a day.”

(Professional fisherman 1)

(All interview verbatims originally in Spanish have been translated literally.)

The Canary Islands law expressly prohibits the development of fishing activities by tourists in professional boats. This prohibition does not extend to other types of tourist activities not related to professional fishing and contrasts with the numerous companies that offer sport fishing activities in recreational boats with certain safety and habitability requirements. This issue reinforces the scepticism of the professionals regarding the way in which decisions are made, increasing their feeling of disregard.

“The most absurd of all this is that you get the title of Pleasure Craft Skipper or any title of yacht skipper or yacht captain or whatever you want, and you get it today and tomorrow you can go sailing. And I can have been going to sea for 20 years as a sailor... whatever you want, and I get my local skipper’s certificate and I have to do 6 months on the bridge, 6 months on deck and 6 months on engines. With all the experience I have! I have the sailing license



that says that I have been sailing for 5 years, 10 years or 20 years, [and they tell me:] ‘No, what you have to do is this’. They don’t give it to you. But tomorrow you get the title of Pleasure Craft Skipper... or whatever you want, tomorrow you buy the yacht... and you can go around the world if you want. But I don’t understand that...”

(Professional fisherman 4)

The fishermen concerned consider that the fishing tourism product could be much more attractive if tourists were allowed to participate in traditional fishing practices, understanding that a more flexible regulation, similar to the Italian one, would facilitate the growth of the activity and its associated socio-environmental benefits. In this way, it is argued that the participation of tourists in fishing would not only constitute an added value, but would also favour economic diversification, contributing to the self-esteem of fishermen and to the reduction of pressure on fisheries. The adequacy of such arguments to those of public administrations, point to the strategic appropriation of institutional discourses on socioeconomic and environmental sustainability, redirecting them in their favour. This practice has been observed in other contexts of territorialization conflicts in local Canary Islands populations as a tool to legitimize their postures and position themselves in the decision-making arena in the management of their territory [29]. A discourse that sometimes even includes the suitability of their justifications for the general tourist offer.

“Here, when tourism started, what we had were fishing boats. People came to the beaches and went out with the people from the villages, they went and learned... And that is what was asked for. I mean, I am a sailor and I can take two people today and two people represents a profit of 100 euros? Well, that will mean that I will not need to fish so much and the little fish will rest. It is compatible with something! (...) And, for example, if you are a tourist, ‘You are going to go to sea, do you want to go with a professional sailor and spend a day...’, ‘Yes’. It’s not the same to say, ‘I’m going on a boat and I’m going with somebody’. You get that anywhere. But a fishing boat, you tell them how to fish, how to... And it’s different even in the sense of... even the people, you meet the people afterwards and you say ‘Well...’ and you make bonds with that family, with those people, they recommend them to someone else, they come and you invite them to eat at your house, you go to that country and they invite you, they introduce you to the other one and send you to the other one... and so we all create bonds of friendship. (...) These are the best ambassadors we have in relation to tourism. They are not the tour operators, nor are they anything else: they are those people. You take 10 and 10 inform 10,000. And the other one informs so and so. And those people already come recommended by those people, not by tour operators or anything else. And they come straight to it and leave money directly here (...) The nice thing is that, that you have contact with them and say ‘Look, I’m not going to see it as making money, but as a way of living and opening myself to the world’. It is a way of life that is not with the ambition of saying ‘I am going to get rich and buy a cruise ship’. No, it’s living and going back days and years, and meeting people, and enriching yourself in culture, getting to know others, talking with some, with others...”

(Senior Patron of the fishermen’s guild 2)



“It would be fine with me because the fishing is... decreasing. (...) And you have to be fishing from sunrise to sunset. It was not like before, when we used to get there and do nothing more than fishing, a good catch, and at two o'clock in the afternoon we would go ashore with a full catch, with the fish caught. It is noticeable that fishing is decreasing (...) We have to consider, for example, to take tourism on all our boats and leave a year without fishing. That is, you go with them and throw a fine nylon so that they... you know? But we don't go for all I can, but to spend a little while with them. Or to see the dolphins, to see the whales... and all that. And it seemed to me that [if we do that] on all ships... and leave the sea for a year. We... look, every day, with four or five tourists it solves us. They are amazed if you take them on a boat... Damn! How many have come asking about the boats here? The tourists. They don't want to go to where the tourists are, they want to go on a fishing boat. A lot of them!”

(Professional fisherman 8)

Even those fishers who are not interested in participating in fishing tourism understand the potential of the activity. Many fishermen allude to past times when professional fishermen took tourists aboard their boats to fish and are aware of its usefulness in supplementing the fishermen's income with less productive strategies. In contrast, those professionals who are more productive (with longer working days, at greater depths, etc.), consider that taking tourists on board may be an inconvenience that hinders their work.

“The one who lives by fishing doesn't really need to take two people on board who are of no useful for you. And then, more than anything else, the stomach in fishing when they are at sea. We sometimes... the smaller boats had Germans on board. A lot of years ago they always took them to fish. And that was one thing... And many times they were around here and so on... But we can't take them. Many people prefer to go fishing in a professional boat rather than in a sport boat... But I, for example, would not be interested, at least it's not for me. People who fish less or more sporadically might be interested. We are talking about conditions that are sometimes... hard. If you are going to put a tourist there at... with 25 knots of wind... I must take him back to land and I lose a day of fishing. It is not worthwhile.”

(Professional fisherman 7)

The safety discourse is another recurrent argument perceived by artisanal fishermen as an ambiguous impediment imposed by the institutions. Once again, we can see how the discourse of danger is appropriated by these agents when it comes to positioning themselves as a group worthy of participating in the activity, deserving of a leading role granted by the knowledge of the profession and the tradition and uniqueness of their techniques.

“Danger, in a boat of mine, to go fishing for 'vieja' [*Sparisoma cretense*, fish with high local significance]? That 'vieja' is fished with a meter of depth in the shore of the island... On one hand, that I don't go out with bad weather; and in the other hand, you are always there, at two meters. The 'vieja' is fished in the shore because you can't fish it where there are waves. And we fish 'vieja' at one meter deep, one and a half meters deep and 20 meters from the shore. Is that danger to take one or two guys, and with me three? Man, I'm not going to take 10 guys on a 6 meters boat! But two people with you?”

(Professional fisherman 1)



Some professional fishermen interviewed were sceptical about the potential of this type of tourism product, understanding that if visitors cannot participate in the fishing operations, the activity resembles a boat trip, a practice with wide competition, marketed by specialized entities and at very low prices. Other professionals, on the other hand, show the discourse of fishing specificity, both when fishing and for their knowledge of the environment, to legitimize their position in favour of the compatibility of their profession with tourism. Both may be key aspects to their empowerment and the enhancement of their daily cultural practices.

“That area, above all, I love that area. I go fishing and I usually stay on my boat... I usually go that way during the summer. And I go fishing and I’m in that area one day, I jump ashore, I arrive in the afternoon, and I have my little meal there on the sand... but fish or anything else. I jump into the water... it’s a small cove with a white sandy bottom (...) And I’m there in the rocky area. I don’t go fishing the next day, but I say to myself ‘come out the next day, there’s a paradise here’. And then you have some puddles, some lakes in between... You take tourists, foreigners, you put them there and they go crazy”

(Senior Patron of the fishermen’s guild 2)

Regarding the link with other types of tourism, only the possibility of developing diving activities related to aquaculture tourism, apart from the complementary nature of coastal walks or gastronomic activities, was mentioned. This contrasts with the potential for linking artisanal fishing with other forms of tourism developed in the coastal or marine environment, apparently very broad. The fact that this is not evident may be related to one of the key limitations perceived by some fishermen: their low involvement and knowledge of the tourism sector. The information gathered suggests that their interaction with tourist activity is very limited. Although professional fishermen in the Canary Islands are constantly surrounded by tourists and tourist-oriented services, they seem to be part of another layer of reality with which they interact only superficially, as just another component of the landscape.

The low knowledge of the tourism sector is related to limitations in designing attractive products adapted to different visitor profiles, interaction with tourists in other languages, and communication and marketing strategies for their products. Professionals in the fishing sector are hesitant about the way in which their offers could reach the demand, as well as the management of this activity. Giving a relevant role to fishermen and the presence of cooperatives can be an effective tool when proposing and advertising offers, coordinating activities according to the capacity and fishing strategies of the vessels, as well as for administrative, financial or commercial tasks. In this sense, to increase the chances of success, the activity should begin by being implemented in those localities where there are already cooperatives or operational fishermen’s associations that can offer the necessary support.

The mistrust of Canarian fishermen due to the feeling of lack of real involvement in decision making is related to their scarce entrepreneurial practice and to past experiences in which the benefits of exogenous implementations have fallen in few hands or directly outside the community [29]. Their fears thus lie in the possibility of a poorly recognized effort that would mean, in the medium term, opening the door to unintended harms. This concern has been observed in other contexts [30] where insufficient or no local participation in development projects, rigid bureaucracy and administrative and institutional incoordination hinder the success of new initiatives, while hindering the dynamics of adaptation and



appropriation by local populations [19], [31]. The feeling of imposition and lack of transparency, the impersonalization implied by the generalization of regulations and the wariness about the modification of certain historical patterns that fishing tourism entails [19], [28], puts on alert a collective that distrusts an administration that unilaterally regulates its daily life and fears the effects of the loss of control over the activity.

5 CONCLUSIONS

Fishing tourism has the potential to complement and diversify the productive activity of this sector. On the one hand, it can be a tool to improve the quality of life and self-esteem of the population linked to fishing by enhancing the value of their practices. On the other hand, it can be a key factor in reducing pressure on resources and promoting tourism that respects the environment and local culture. For this, it is essential to have an adequate management that takes into account the demands and perceptions of the main agents involved, taking advantage of the inertia of fishermen's collective organizations that can offer their support and exploring ways to help overcome certain limitations contemplated by professionals in the sector. The research shows an active position of fishing professionals, in which institutional discourses on socioeconomic, environmental and cultural sustainability are apprehended and used strategically by the fishermen's collective to justify the appropriateness of their intervention in the decisions at stake.

Appropriate regulation is a basic requirement for the development of an activity that links artisanal fishing with tourism, but it must be complemented by active training and incentive measures to ensure that this set of tourism proposals effectively results in the sustainability of the areas concerned. An imposing approach, which does not contemplate an effective participation of fishing populations in decision-making and does not reinforce the processes of appropriation of symbolic identification referents by fishing professionals, can have the opposite effect, accelerating the performativity of traditional practices, the trivialization of identity assets and the undervaluation of the activity, as well as opening the door to a new possibility of territorial consumption, not necessarily complementary.

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