

FIGHTING OVERTOURISM IN LANZAROTE (SPAIN)

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Abstract

Lanzarote, as a tourism destination, suffered a rapid tourist expansion for many years, and this has endangered its sustainability. The key purpose of this piece of study was therefore to investigate the case of overtourism and its consequences for the local population and the environment, and to finally identify ways to mitigate same.

The study chooses a case study approach. The analysis shows the rapid growth of the arrival of tourists to the island and how it affected the accommodation offer and the population. It exposes what was the solution that the authorities and tourist accommodation of the island took to solve the problem.

This research proposes practical solution to tackle overtourism at a destination which has been used by the United Nations as an example to establish sustainable tourism development guidelines. It proposes a unique mitigation strategy which is derived from the use of natural recreation.

Keywords: overtourism, environmental impacts, Lanzarote, Mitigation strategies, sustainable development.

Resumen

Lanzarote, como destino turístico, sufrió una rápida expansión turística durante muchos años, y esto ha puesto en peligro su sostenibilidad. El objetivo clave de este estudio fue, por lo tanto, investigar el caso del turismo masivo y sus consecuencias para la población local y el medio ambiente, y finalmente identificar formas de mitigarlo.

El estudio ha hecho un enfoque de estudio de caso. El análisis muestra el rápido crecimiento de la llegada de turistas a la isla y cómo afectó a la oferta alojativa y a la población. Expone cuál fue la solución que tomaron las autoridades y empresas turísticas de la isla para solucionar el problema.

Esta investigación propone una solución práctica para abordar el turismo masivo en un destino que ha sido utilizado por Naciones Unidas como un ejemplo para establecer pautas de desarrollo turístico sostenible. Propone una estrategia de mitigación única que se deriva del uso de la recreación natural.

Palabras clave: turismo masivo, impactos ambientales, Lanzarote, estrategias de mitigación, desarrollo sostenible.

1. INTRODUCTION

Tourism can be a source of economic wealth for a destination, but if it is uncontrolled and disorderly, it can be harmful and even carry out total collapses at the destination. But what attracts tourists to a destination? Tourists usually travel to a destination based upon word of mouth and recommendations and because they are attracted to the image they perceive of the destination. Since tourists often have a limited knowledge about the destinations they have not visited, and since tourists frequently form mental image of the destination mostly through their previous visit(s), the literature reports that the destination image is a crucial factor to attract visitors (Carballo, León & Carballo, 2019; Séraphin, Butcher & Konstanje, 2017; Carballo, R, 2015; Chen & Phou, 2013; Assaker et al., 2011; Chi & Qu, 2008). Image can help tourists to evaluate the destination thereby influencing the choice process. Thus, it is clear that image influences the way tourists make a decision about a destination, evaluation of the vacation and their behaviour. There have been important developments in the literature about the influence that cognitive and affective factors have on the perception of a tourist image of the destination (Carballo, Araña, León, & Moreno-Gil, 2015; Carballo, Araña, León, & Moreno, 2011; Stern & Krakover, 2010; Moreno & Ritchie, 2009). However, the analysis of some aspects of the tourist image has not been overtly explored, and only recently have specific aspects of a destination, - e.g. geographical, environmental and sociocultural characteristics- been analysed (Carballo & León, 2018). While there are possibilities for a destination that may be learned from other destinations, or improved by using new image-making techniques, specific conditions such as location, nature and environmental assets, history, culture, and the arts, are always specific to a destination, and can be differentiated between destinations (Carballo & León, 2018). Former studies have also argued that the image of a destination is not only based on the cognitive and affective aspects, but it should include the elements of what is called the “unique image of a destination” (Qu, Kim & Im, 2011). This image is made up by those factors providing unique exclusivity, identity and personality to destinations, such as the scenery and natural wonders, cultures, natural environment, clean environment and historical attractions. They are essential to tourism as a key attraction (Carballo, León and Carballo, 2017; Holden, 2017). Destinations are not created in the same way (McCartney, Butler, & Bennett, 2008) some have quite enough resources while others have limited resources and heritage to support tourism development (Hsu, Wolfe, & Kang, 2004). However, the environmental sustainability of destinations is being jeopardized by the continuously growing number of tourists visiting a destination. When tourism is not acting well it has the possibility to lead to a total destruction (Coldwell, 2017; Seraphin, Sheeran & Pilato, 2018). Mass tourism often entails losing control of natural resources, disorganization of ecosystems and losses of landscape conversions.

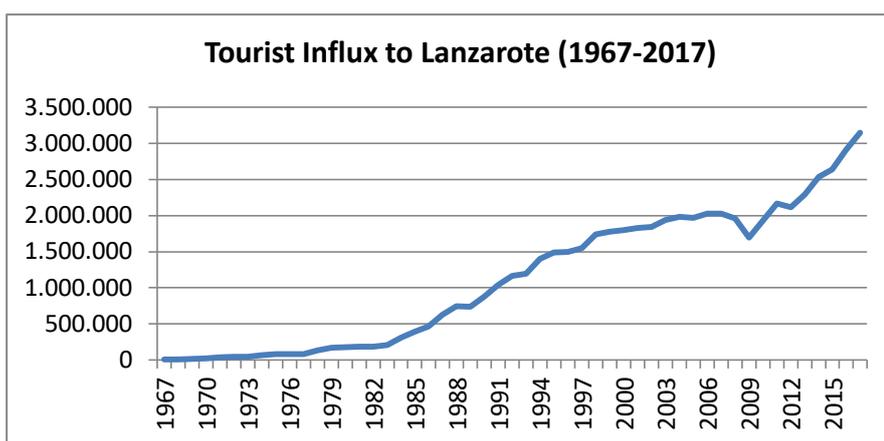
Overtourism is not the same as overcrowding or a crowded destination, it projects a situation where numbers of tourists overload the services and infrastructure available and it is a serious inconvenience for permanent residents of such locations (Butler, 2018). Residents’ perceptions of tourism impacts are heterogeneous. Previous studies on residents’ attitudes to visitors has growing in the past years because of the importance of marketing involvement in the tourism industry. Some residents are now much more interested in their quality of life than the profits generated by the tourism market (Seraphin, Sheeran & Pilato, 2018; Croes, Rivera, Semrad, & Khalizadeh, 2017). The participation of residents is important for the sustainability of the tourism destinations (Muler, Coromina & Galí, 2018; Stylidis, Biran, Sit & Szivas, 2014; Gursoy, Chi, & Dyer, 2010). The way in which residents perceive tourism industry is a predictor of the support for visitors to the destination and their engagement in promoting tourism destination (Martín, J, Guaita, J, & Salinas, J, 2018).

While most destinations strive to project a positive image to attract as many tourists as possible without taking into account the characteristics and capabilities of the destination, few destinations sacrifice tourism revenues in favour of the conservation of natural and environmental resources and for the sustainability of the destination. In this paper the case of Lanzarote is analysis, a destination with great natural resources that knew how to manage them and put a solution to the overtourism to which they were being subjected over the years.

2. OVERTOURISM IN LANZAROTE (SPAIN)

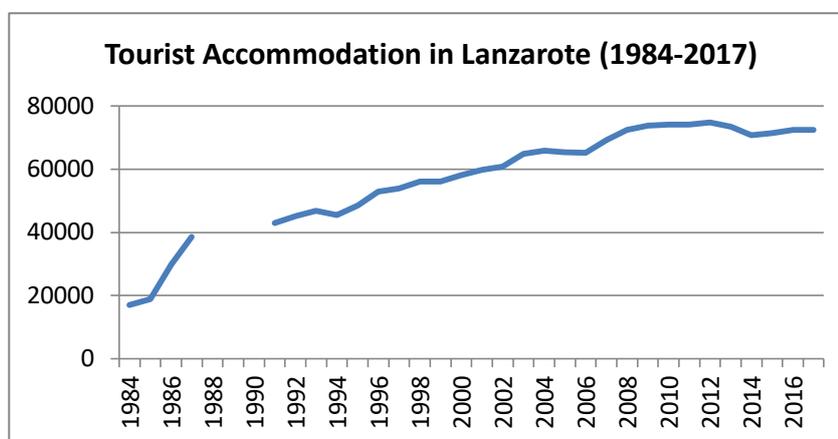
Lanzarote is an island of natural volcanic of 846 square meters. It is located to the east of the Canary island (Spain). Apart from being a significant tourist reference, it was one of the first territory in the fight against land speculation battle against overtourism. Lanzarote has been one of the few exceptional destinations in which a majority public opinion was raised against an accelerated development that threatened the environmental balance in the island. In the 70s Lanzarote was subjected to a rate of expansion that caused overtourism. The period that covered from 1967, year in which the tourist activity as such begins, until 1980, the visitors went from 9.585 to 174.709 (figure 1), an increase of 1.722.3% coming mainly from Nordic countries: Sweden, Holland, Finland and Norway (Libro Blanco, 1997). In the 80s to 1991 the influx of visitors to Lanzarote increased by 493.2%, while the number of tourist beds did so by 152.1% (figure 2).

Figure1. Tourist influx in Lanzarote (1967-2017)



Source: Centro de Datos del Cabildo de Lanzarote a partir de Anuarios de la Delegación de Turismo, Dirección General de Policía, CEDOC. Desde 2010 ISTAC (Instituto Canaria de Estadísticas), Frontur.

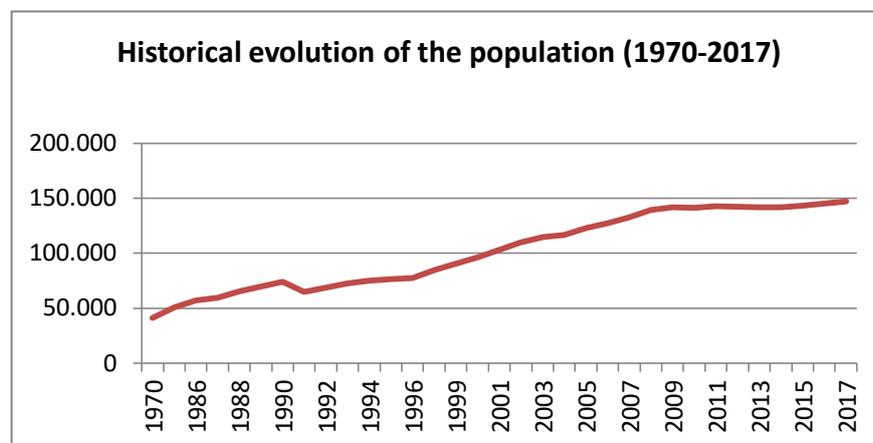
Figure 2: Tourist Accommodation in Lanzarote (1984-2017)



Source: Elaboración Centro de Datos. Cabildo de Lanzarote. A partir de los datos de la Oficina de Ordenación Turística del Cabildo de Lanzarote hasta 2008 y a partir de 2009 ISTAC.

The population of the island suffered a growth of 79.9% from the beginning of the tourist activity until 1990 and a growth of 257.3% until now (figure 3). With these numbers, not only the evolution of the island economy would be increasingly fragile and the risks of social dislocation would be exacerbated,

but also the island's ecosystem and the quality of life on the Island would be degraded. And such deterioration would not be imputable, only and exclusively, to an excessive tourist expansion, but also to a resident population that is increasingly numerous and less sensitized with the limitations and fragilities of the Island. We have to dare to change course; otherwise it would be recklessness and collective irresponsibility (Lanzarote Biosphere, 1991).



Source: ISTAC

Figure 3: Historical evolution of the population (1970-2017)

Since then serious attempts have been made to put limits to the accelerated and disorderly growth of tourism. In this uncontrolled urban expansion, the case of Lanzarote is absolutely disconcerting because of its unusual features. Lanzarote has been one of the few exceptional destinations (another case is one of the Balearic Islands) in which a majority public opinion was raised against an accelerated development that threatened the environmental balance on the island. As Fernando Prats, architect who led the development of an important territorial plan for the whole island, said: "The majority opinion that growing is not a solution for this island, is a great social achievement of this land and a situation that does not exist in the rest of Spain, except for Menorca and maybe in some other place". However, this accelerated growth of tourism on the island does not in itself explain the emergence of a broad social movement in favour of restricting the growth rate of tourism. In fact, the tourism sector of other islands of the archipelago grew at a similar or even higher rate, but this social resistance did not develop in those cases (Jiménez, Villoria & Madrid, 2015).

The particularity of Lanzarote is due to the existence of a very important social leadership, with solid business skills, incorporated by the local artist Cesar Manrique (1919–1992), who was a hard influential people in the beginning of tourism development of the island. He had a strong influence on the planning regulations in Lanzarote, seeing the dangers of tourism, but also its important for conservation and for the economy prosperity of the island: he was in favour of the sustainable development of Lanzarote as a tourist destination. After César's went back from New York in the 60, The tourism in Lanzarote grew rapidly. What worried the artist enough, led him to collaborate with the Insular Council, and fight against the situation in which the island found itself. In his own words: "I'm a little worried about the impending avalanche of tourists we'll be seeing in Lanzarote" (1965).

The island was firmly on its way to becoming a prosperous tourist service economy and Manrique said that, given the value and beauty of its landscape, it will be the island's primary source of wealth. He also said, however, that because of its high fragility, some action could compromise that resource irreversibly. This is all the more important when considering how important the destination image is for the capacity to attract visitors and how difficult it is for a destination to recover the image after being damaged (Séraphin, Butcher & Konstanje, 2017). In regard with those concerns, when building industry is intensifying in the nineteen seventies and before in the eighties, Manrique participated in

protest against the increase of the tourist building and in many occasions warning about the dangers of the indiscriminate growth of the tourist sector in the island. This attitude of the architect was important to understand his personality and image as an artist with an important influence in the community. His commitment, his strong condemnation and struggle with those responsible for the tourist industry, his commitment to the culture and landscapes of the island, turned him into a symbol, adding to his artistic training create an unknowing social and political dimension in the tourism sector.

In his own words “Lanzarote is dying”: “Rampant insensitivity allied with the total lack of enthusiasm are annihilating what started out as love. All that matters to them is to sell by the tonne and earn millions, wholly oblivious to the source of it all. That such clumsy wholesale trafficking should capitalise on the allure that we created in Lanzarote is outrageous, for without our contribution, there would have nothing to sell. This is terribly demoralising: it’s like cutting off our nose to spite our face”. Manrique influence has been the cause of the decrease in the development of luxury hotels in Lanzarote, and the use of colours and construction styles on the island and in tourism-related buildings. Manrique's ideas led to the creation of a tourist product that combined art and nature, along with the definition of landscape infrastructure, the use of white colour and low-rise accommodation facilities.

3. THE STATE OF THE ART

Lanzarote is an island that over the years has developed an internationally renowned tourist model consisting of a network of natural recreation spaces designed to enhance tourism experiences through art, nature and sustainability. This is known as the Art, Culture and Tourism Centres (ACTC) and was designed by Cesar Manrique. These tourist centres contribute to the management and conservation of the natural aspect of the sites, in the same way that offering tourists a unique experience adding a distinguishing artistic value. The ACTC have projected a positive image that directly influences the image of Lanzarote as a tourism destination (Carballo & León, 2018). They are one of the most important tourist attractions in the island and receive more than 2.5 million visits per year¹. There are seven centres in the ACTC network², they represent the specific natural and cultural characteristics of the island. All of the Centres, represent a symbol of the island's natural and cultural values; Cueva de los Verdes (1964), Jameos del Agua (1968), Monumento al Campesino (1968), Mirador del Río (1973), Museo Internacional de Arte Contemporáneo (MIAC) (1976), Jardín de Cactus (1990) and Timanfaya National Park.

4. LANZAROTE’S BATTLE AGAINST OVERTOURISM

It was Manrique who, in the first place, denounced the negative effects of the tourist growth for the fragile balance of the island to later influence the institutional reaction giving way to the Insular Plan of Territorial Organization. There are two factors that explain the defence of the sustainability of Lanzarote since the 70s, the existence of a very important social leadership embodied by César Manrique and the limited resistance against the 1991 Plan.

The Plan is an instrument of territorial planning that integrally orders the urbanism of the island, began in 1987 and was approved in 1991 by the regional government. The Plan opts for the preservation of the extraordinary natural heritage of the island, propitiating a new criterion of quality development based on an integrated and long-term conception of tourism, which in theory should have been compatible with the environmental and cultural conditions of the place.

¹ This number includes visits to all seven centres in the network. The number of tourists in 2017 was about 3.2 million, hence it is clear some of the tourists visits various centres during their stay since there are all also promotion strategies selling tickets with discount for visits to a bundle of centres.

² For more information about the centres please visit: <http://www.cactlanzarote.com/en/>

The Plan firmly supports the principles of sustainable development and proposes a series of actions to correct the situation, drastically reducing the area available for new urban and tourist developments. The plan established a maximum limit of beds (111,000) that could be allocated to hotels, apartments and residential homes throughout the island. It even determined the construction limit of buildings for a period of four years. It indicated that the tourist residences could not occupy more than 50% of the built surface. In addition, the construction of low height, five star hotels and residential tourism in specific areas was envisaged, in order to ensure the greatest economic return for the economy of the Island with the lowest territorial impact (Lanzarote Biosphere, 1991).

In 1993, mainly in recognition of the 1991 Plan as a safeguard of the ecosystem, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) granted Lanzarote the named as Biosphere Reserve (UNESCO Biosphere Reserves)³. It was the first time that this status was applied to a whole destination and not only to a protected natural park. UNESCO began with this award a new strategy to support local examples of truly sustainable practices that include not only the preservation of natural values, but also the organization of the usual economic activities of complex societies. The designation of the island as a Biosphere Reserve was accompanied by the creation of a "Council of the Biosphere Reserve", a unique organization in which all the voices of the society of Lanzarote were represented: The Island Council and the Municipal councils, seven political parties, trade unions, associations, NGOs, employer representatives and the César Manrique Foundation. The Biosphere Reserve Council became an important forum to discuss strategic decisions about the future of the island and opened the door to new innovations.

Following a proposal from the forum, the Island Council obtained a grant from the Life-Environment program of the European Union (EU) to carry out an in-depth examination of the most worrying problems for the sustainability of the island. Thus, in July 1997, the Island Council commissioned the implementation of the Sustainable Development Strategy "Lanzarote in the Biosphere" (E. L+B) (La Biosfera, 1998). An ambitious strategy with two central objectives: to preserve the basic balances of the insular system, and to improve the quality of life of the Lanzarote population and its visitors. The group of experts who developed the E. L+B. evaluated the main challenges that the island society would have to face if significant growth of the visitors present daily on the Island were maintained, with the corresponding expansion of the population, and the development patterns that have characterized the last years have not been significantly modified. The strategy proposes a change of direction from the island development model towards sustainability. The alternative that E. L+B proposes to change this situation is the action on transport, energy, heritage, culture or the elimination of waste, among other issues. As an essential program to achieve a change in direction, there is the so-called "tourist moratorium", which is a review of the Insular Territorial Ordinance Plan of 1991. It warns of the consequences if Lanzarote did not change the development model adopted in recent years. It cannot afford even one more bed and better a few thousand less (Gimral, C. 1997).

The moratorium stated that the 1991 Plan had been unable to rationalize enough the urban development of Lanzarote. What is needed is a Plan that "prevents what the document says will happen, which is nothing more than a process of growth and massification that would forever invalidate what, in spite of everything, continues to be today. Lanzarote". The "moratorium" is an invitation to stop the development of the tourist construction industry for ten years as a way to reconsider the territorial imbalance resulting from the continued urban and tourist growth. It warns of the consequences if Lanzarote did not change the development model adopted in recent years. It cannot afford even one bed more, and better a few thousand less (Gimral, C. 1997). As a result of this proposal, the Island Council initiated a review of the Plan in 1998, whose final approval took place in 2000. The new Plan of 2000 supplemented the 1991 Plan and proposed new content measures to have real effects. Limiting urban growth rates and setting a maximum of 10.707 new tourist beds, all of them hotels. The new hotel beds must be at least four stars, and adapt to the Canary Islands Tourism

³ <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/natural-sciences/environment/ecological-sciences/biosphere-reserves/europe-north-america/>

Law, with a building parameter of 60 square meters per accommodation. In addition, 17.943 residential spaces can be built in those same tourist areas, for the next 10 years (until 2010) (Lanzarote Biosfera, 1998).

This island is focused on environmental conservation with an artistic profile, created by Manrique. Because of its environmental efforts, Lanzarote has been awarded several environmental certifications. In 2015, it received the UN declaration of Geopark (UNESCO Global Geoparks)⁴ in recognition of its environmental management. In addition, in 2015, Lanzarote gained the Biosphere Responsible Tourism Certification by the Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC)⁵ an organization under the World Tourism Organization. The GSTC recognized the trajectory followed by the island in advancing sustainability. The award further recognizes the importance of social responsibility, economic development, environmental conditions, cultural protection and tourist participation in the island development.

5. CONCLUSION

The rapid expansion of tourism in the last two decades has not taken place thanks to the ideas of the group led by César Manrique, as negative effects as in other coastal areas of the country, but it cannot constitute an indisputable reference model for the future either. It should not be forgotten that tourism has made it possible to overcome emigration and improve the harsh living conditions of a large part of the island population. A rhythm of growth of the tourist affluence as described above, although being of less intensity than that of the past decade, would significantly affect the basic urban and population balances of the Island, directly affecting the deterioration of the quality of life of its population and the loss of tourist attraction for potential visitors. The case of Lanzarote shows how natural resources can influence in the image of the destination and deserve environmental certifications that help to promote the destination as a sustainable tourism destination (Carballo & León, 2019).

Within the Biosphere Reserve a great variety of similar cases may be identified. Some are closer to the idea of the National Park -greater weight of an exceptional nature and scarce population and human impact- while others represent situations that, within being privileged, are closer to the conflicting reality, which is life itself. Lanzarote is, without a doubt, a clear example of the second type. It is precisely this perspective of challenge to be considered as a society, of conflict to overcome collectively, which makes suggestive the figure of the Biosphere Reserve and its conceptual framework. The idea of a Biosphere Reserve is still an instrument, a reference for environmentally conscious management.

The contribution of the residents is a key aspect that guarantees the success of the destination and long-term sustainability (Martín, Guaita, & Salinas, 2018). In the case of Lanzarote, the participation of the population in the elaboration of the strategy has been vital, assuming itself from the beginning. Four lines of action have been adopted so that this participation is as well-founded as possible: to incorporate local experts to the technical teams that are preparing the Strategy; to know the vision of the population on the main problems existing on the Island and the best ways to solve them; provide maximum information to society about the consequences that one or other development options would bring for the future of the Island; and contrast, at the end of the process, the degree of identification of the insular society with the proposals of the E.L+B. With this, it is intended to strengthen social knowledge about the challenges and opportunities of the island's evolution, and thus increase its possibilities of choice and participation of the population in the construction of the future of the Island (Biosfera Lanzarote).

⁴ <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/natural-sciences/environment/earth-sciences/unesco-global-geoparks/list-of-unesco-global-geoparks/spain/lanzarote-and-chinijo-islands/>

⁵ <https://www.biospheretourism.com/en/entity/lanzarote/136>

The number of tourist arrivals indicates an improvement for the environment on the island and a better use of infrastructures and resources, which also affects the satisfaction of the tourist and the feeling of the residents (Martín, Guaita, & Salinas, 2018). Tourists have a weakness for the conservation of destinations, and therefore form a cognitive image based on these aspects that influence their decisions about which destinations they choose to visit and what services and experiences to enjoy in the chosen destinations (Fuentes, Moreno-Gil, González & Ritchie, 2015; Hamilton & Lau, 2005; Fridgen, 1984). So, all destinations can improve their attraction by promoting a better image based on environmental aspects and activities related to their use of nature resources and its conservation (Akama, 1996). There are useful items to do this, such as the implementation of a “green branding” approach which helps destinations to position themselves in a better competitive environmental profile (Mihalic, 2000).

The case of Lanzarote has been an example of how destinations can fight against overtourism using their natural resources to project a positive image (Carballo et al., 2019)

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