

**ASPECTS OF THE APPLICATION OF THE TOURISM
AREA LIFE CYCLE THEORY TO THE SUSTAINABILITY
OF THE COSTA DEL SOL, SPAIN**

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The Tourist Area Life Cycle, or otherwise known as the TALC, has been applied to very diverse locations, such as Hawaii, Lancaster, Pennsylvania (the land of the Amish), as well, as the Australian Gold Coast and even Venice, Italy. The purpose of this study is to take the focus of this theory to the Andalucian Costa del Sol in Spain, where, for the first time, this geographical space is the object of this analytical framework.

In the TALC, seven development phases are created and applied to the tourist destination, which is to be studied. The phases begin with the “exploration” phase. Then on to that of “participation”, after comes that of “development”, only to be followed by the desired stage of “consolidation”. This sought after stage may evolve into the questionable “stagnation” period. If the necessary measures are not taken either by the controlling private or public sector, this level may become a cliffhanger which could conclude in either the “stagnation” stage or finalize happily in the “rejuvenation” phase.

In this way, it is possible to deduce that Butler has found the similarity of life and death of a living organism with that of a tourist destination. A comparison may even be drawn to Hegel’s dialectics. This geographical space is born, the thesis, it lives, the antithesis and, thus, ends in either the “stagnation” or the “rejuvenation”, the synthesis.

This scientist has also proved to be a pioneering environmentalist when comparing a tourist destination to wild life. He found that the area grows rapidly without heeding the preservation of its resources and population, not unlike plants and animals, which increase in number without consideration for their future or for the capacity of their surroundings to sustain them.

Having discussed the organic modalities of the TALC, as well as, the phases of the theory, without qualifications, it is time to proceed from the general to the specific. The characteristics of each phase are far too numerous to mention in their entirety. What can be said, though, is that, in this study, and for the purpose of the Spanish Costa del Sol, I have created a new phase of “development“, which I have denominated the “pre-stagnation” stage. It is customized for this region’s reality.

Firstly, in order to comprehend this qualification, this space must be defined as a mature tourist destination. In order to do so, data on an area must be available for at least the previous thirty to forty years. Fortunately, in the case of the Costa del Sol there is plenty of quantifiable, as well as, qualitative information available since the early 1960’s.

On a selective basis, it can be said, that this destination is mature, as it may be characterized, on one hand, by the fact that the local population has lost control of the decision making process. This takes place even when it involves their own

spatial determinations. Therefore, artificial attractions, such as golf courses have been introduced in the area.

These characteristics can be projected in the two stages, in which the reality of the Costa del Sol is reflected and, thus, are of an interest to this study. These aforementioned qualities can be found in the “stagnation” stage and in the newly created for this project, “pre-stagnation stage”.

In the “stagnation stage” the maximum number of visitors has been reached. The carrying capacity of many variables has been exceeded such as those of environmental, social and structural nature. The destination is no longer fashionable. Repeat visitors are the basis for business. There are an excess number of beds. Attractions have been imported. There is development in the periphery. There are frequent changes of property ownership.

By contrast, in the “pre-stagnation” phase, which is, again, newly created and established, for the analytical purpose of the reality of the Costa del Sol, this tourist destination may be defined as mature, yet still fashionable. Golf courses with housing developments have been built on the periphery of the beach cities. This has occurred to such a degree that, since the 1960's, at least 83 courses have been constructed in the area, which has led the space to be called the Costa del Golf. Also the landownership has been altered, as historically, in place of these courses, there were potato and green pepper farms.

The numerous golf courses, as well as their surrounding housing developments, are spotted with private pools, filled with crystal clear water. In a water deprived culture overt displays of water and greenery are symbols of social status. The estimation is that an 18-hole golf course uses the same amount of water as a city of 15,000 inhabitants, that is, without counting the other water consuming infrastructures, which accompany them. These areas are environmentally draining due to their excessive consumption of water, the highly treasured natural resource.

The Costa del Sol's climate barely satisfies the demand of its local population for water, as this space belongs to a geographical area termed as "Dry Spain", denominated thus because it receives less precipitation than the national average. Also, it is feared that climate change may affect the area's hydraulic system. It is expected that, the Mediterranean climate will have an increase in temperature of 1.5 degrees by 2025, and 3.5 by 2050.

To make matters worse, there has been a tremendous increase in water consumption of this tourist destination since the 1960's. At this point, the increased tourism development began, defining the Costa del Sol as "La Costa del Concreto" or the Concrete Coast due to the larger than life hotel structures built along this shoreline. During this time, as well, the aforementioned 83 golf courses began to find their home in this space.

Marbella, alone has 33 square kilometers of this gaming space. Each cubic meter consumes 10 liters of water a day. The United Nations recommends that the average consumption of this precious liquid should be on the average of 60 liters per inhabitant. In Marbella an average of 210 liters is consumed per individual. The exact percentage of this amount destined to golf course consumption is unknown, due to the method of metering and a lack of public information.

Although an illegal practice, what can be said, though, is that the majority of golf courses in Spain are not watered with recycled water. Well water is usually the source of hydration. The cost of this resource in the Costa del Sol, and in Spain in general, is less than the European average. This is due to the fact that the exploitation of water is supported by direct public investment. Therefore, economic determinism is not a factor in the restraint of consumption of water.

The “Decree of Drought” regulates the consumption of this resource for the population in general and for golf courses in particular. The purpose of this legislation is to make water available for the population at large. In it, golf courses are forbidden the use of drinking water for irrigation. They are allotted a maximum of 200 cubic meters per hectare/month of non-drinking water. If duly recycled water is used, then the restriction is lifted.

This decree, composed out of desperation and as a response to an increasingly worsening environmental carrying capacity has proven to be inoperable. The

difficulty being that, applying legislation to this natural resource is comparable to coal or petroleum, in other words, it is found irregularly distributed throughout nature. Therefore, it is difficult to apply rigorous and structured norms to its usage.

Also, the recycling process represents the coming together of qualified technicians and personnel in this field, as well as, the necessary purifiers and the necessary networking for the process of pick-up and delivery of the water. The Costa del Sol does have a completely public enterprise called ACOSOL, which has been created by the municipalities of the western Costa del Sol.

Among other functions, ACOSOL is dedicated to the filtering and distribution of drinking water and the distribution and supply of recycled water for irrigation, along with its desalinization. However, it is a technical rather than a prescriptive organization.

These facts can only lead to the conclusion that the Costa del Sol is on the verge of becoming an unsustainable tourist destination, as its variables of water consumption and total precipitation are imbalanced. Perhaps, the Coast's main hope lies in the initiatives of Acosol to alleviate the scarcity of water through the technology of the recycling of this resource, thus bringing it into the realm of the twenty-first century.

The environmental unsustainability of the Costa del Sol may be demonstrated scientifically through the application of the theory of the Tourism Area Life Cycle to this destination. Concurrently, however B.S. Martin and M. Uysal's 1990 article entitled "An Examination of the Relationship Between Carrying Capacity and the Tourism Lifecycle: Management and Policy Implications", published in the Journal of Environmental Management and Policy Implications, sheds universal and timeless truths, on the matter.

In this article, these researchers state that it is impossible to establish a tourist destination's carrying capacity outside of the context of its position in the Life Cycle. They add that the carrying capacity is different for each Life Cycle. Martin and Uysal also believe that there is always at least one factor, which sets the limit of the carrying capacity, but not necessarily only one factor. They conclude that these concepts are dynamic.

In this way, the phases of the TALC are defined by the variables of the carrying capacities and vice versa. Thus, the sustainability of the destination may be established, as each carrying capacity represents the characteristics of each cycle of the TALC. There is a symbiotic relationship between the Life Cycles and the carrying capacities.

To this end, it is found that the Costa del Sol is in the pre-stagnation stage,

the cycle created by myself. This can be said, as it is a mature tourist destination, which is still fashionable, although its environmental carrying capacity has been exceeded due to the relationship of the variables of annual precipitation and the impact caused on the environment by the consumption of drinking water by the golf courses.

The Costa del Sol is also unsustainable anthropologically speaking, to use a term coined by Alejandro López López, Professor in the Human Ecology Department at the Universidad Complutense of Madrid, Spain, in his article “Turismo y Desarrollo Sostenible” which appeared in the scientific journal Sistema in 2001. This aspect is the more specific side of social unsustainability. Social unsustainability generally occurs on two levels and is generally not quantifiable.

On one hand, large groups of tourists travel to the place of vacation, as it becomes more and more fashionable. That is, the destination becomes over run with visitors. Then, it becomes less attractive because of over crowding. This, in turn, causes the area to lose visitors. This is one type of social insustainability.

This has not occurred in the Costa del Sol, as there is still an excess of beds, and overcrowding has not led to the deterioration or scarcity of hotel availability. There is neither saturations of the means of transportation, nor a lack of access to the area by land, air or sea. What has reared its head in the Costa del Sol and because of its

very different nature from this aforementioned type of social insustainability is the anthropological form.

The previously mentioned social insustainability is a rejection by the tourists of the deteriorating tourist destination and the anthropological insustainability is the rejection by the local population of the invading tourist population and all their accompanying infrastructure and services.

This negative situation began when the Costa del Sol was completing the “Consolidation” phase, which is the most sought after of all the stages. When a tourism destination arrives at this juncture, supposedly, all the elements have come together to bring prosperity to the area. However, there are nationals who do not reap the benefits of this industry. On the contrary, their most basic daily activities are limited, as well as, their more general “modus Vivendi” are limited by this imported presence.

During this period, which began in the 1950’s, in the Costa del Sol, the resentment of the local population towards the large and looming tourist population grew to a very great extent, due to their actual number, as well as, all the required structures and services that these invaders required. The rejection on the part of the residents, of this industry became so palpable that the Council on Tourism of the Costa del Sol initiated a doubtfully successful publicity campaign, with the slogan, “¡Al turismo una sonrisa!” or “A smile to tourism!”

The overwhelming numbers of tourists may be established, by stating, that at the beginning of this century, 600,000 English-speaking residents lived in the South of Spain. The small town of Mijas, which has a total population of 36,000 inhabitants, boasted 25,000 residents of British nationality. Such is their influence, and that of all foreigners, that they have been given the right to vote in municipal elections.

Resentment from a different source, however, comes from a radical yet unofficial movement of environmentalists, or the so-called Green Movement. This group existed even during the Franco regime. This faction was similar to what was then termed as the “conservationists” which functioned in Eastern Europe during the time of the Soviet Union. The very astute Spanish dictator allowed these groups to exist in Spain as an escape valve within his repressive government. They did not criticize “franquismo” but instead were only allowed to direct their attention to loss of animal and plant life and the deterioration of the environment.

The present day heirs to this movement are much feared by the Spanish financial establishment. They are against the fertilizers used by the golf courses and the introduction of environmentally foreign plant species as well as the decimation of the native ones. This Green Movement abhors the voracious consumption of water these spaces consume along with their destruction of the historical land holding and land use patterns they cause.

Most importantly, the environmentalists believe there is a very poor relationship between the impact that golf causes on the natural surroundings and the economic benefit, which they produce for the society at large. Thus, in this time and place, it is very true that they do have their numerous militants and vociferous followers.

Instead of a positive force of social well being their manifestos state the courses to be a globalized capitalistic model of destructive development. They now propose small agricultural industries as an alternative to them. Their program includes the creation of ecological agricultural cooperatives based on direct sale to consumers. This group believes that such a program would develop rural tourism based on locally produced products.

In as much as the environmental carrying capacity and the anthropological carrying capacity have been exceeded in the Costa del Sol, the impact of golf on the Spanish nation cannot be ignored. Spain has the most square meters of cultivated courses per inhabitant of any country in the world. Also, the revenue from this sport represents 6% of Spain's GNP. Therefore the importance of golf as a player in the social as well as economic landscape of the country must be acknowledged.

This being determined, and in spite of having exceeded its carrying capacity on, at least, two levels, it may be more accurate to say three. This is due to the extreme political corruption on the municipal level, as well as, provincial, regional and even national. Thus, the political carrying capacity has been exceeded, as well. According

to López López in order for this dimension to have a balanced impact on the destination, it must directly coordinate tourism management for the good of all the parties, without seeking personal profit. In view of the recent scandals, involving money laundering, bribery and embezzlement by public officials, in Spain, this is clearly not a reality.

Tourism in the Costa del Sol has a long history, as it dates back to before 1865. The destination has progressively entered all the phases of the life cycle except during the period of “Dark Tourism” during the Spanish Civil War, when it regressed from the “Development” stage back to that of “Participation” and even to the incipient phase of “Exploration”. It may even be established that it completed, since 1976 to the present, the “Pre-Stagnation” period, created by this author. It may also be said that the destination is currently found, at least partially, in the “Stagnation” stage.

There still may be hope for this beleaguered tourist destination, however. If Butler’s TALC is applied to the region, it may be observed that historically, La Costa del Sol enters and exits the different stages of the Life Cycle slowly. This is precisely what needs to occur if the destination also enters the final stage of rejuvenation, according to the Tourist Area Life Cycle.

At this point, the situation of the Costa del Sol is a cliffhanger. If it is able to get its house in order, that is, in the first place it must increase production and consumption of recycled water for the golf courses. This should be done by efficient

networking of pipelines to these green spaces by ACOSOL. Also a system of implementation of fines needs to be applied to those golf courses, which break the existing legislation.

If the local population feels less pressure put on their natural water resources by the golf courses, it is entirely possible that this environmental relief would allow the national residents to view the sport as both more democratic and more beneficial economically to the local population. This might then generate more good will towards the tourist industry, which has been qualified as the largest industry in the world.

The same system that created the political corruption that plagues the economic development of the Costa del Sol has created the office of the Anticorruption Attorney General. The police along with this organization have begun to function effectively in order to extract, as much as possible, the tumor, which began to grow from convenience or negligence of political parties and police. This cancer took root in the 1990's when a perfect storm was created by the symbiotic relationship of politics and real estate development.

Therefore, if this environmental, social, as well as political effort is accomplished, the Costa del Sol would be well on its way to a thorough recovery. It would find itself in a transformation from being on the brink of "Decline" to being on the happy road of "Rejuvenation" or simply put, a renaissance.

The Costa del Sol's benign climate also offers low priced and accessible tourism to the rest of Europe and even the Middle East and North Africa. These are precisely the criteria, which define the tourists' appetite, rather than their likes, dislikes or preferences. If the environmental carrying capacity were put into balance, golf would serve to lengthen the tourism season both in quantity and in quality in an environmentally healthy way.

In this final stage of "Rejuvenation" I differ from Butler's theory, as this scientist believes that the only way in which a tourist destination can enter this phase is if it changes its identity completely. He cites the example of Atlantic City, which went from a bankrupt and decrepit destination of sea sun and sand to a more prosperous gambling hub, when the casinos were introduced. This has prolonged their tourist season both in quantity and quality, also.

Richard W. Butler, however, does state, though cautiously, in his theory, that not all tourist destinations fit so clearly into the scheme of the Tourist Area Life Cycle Theory. In the study of the development of the Costa del Sol's tourism product, I believe that it is one of them. In this sense, this shore has been a tourist destination since the 19th century and it is still fashionable. With some rehabilitation it can come from being called the once "Crumbling Coast" to becoming the newly revived "Complete Coast".