

The Threat of Tourism to Beach Conservation in Minorca (Balearic Islands, Spain, 2000-04)

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The issue from the nature conservation perspective

Minorca is a small Mediterranean island (700 sq. km) designated in 1993 as a Biosphere Reserve. As opposed to other Balearic Islands, tourism has left a smaller footprint in Minorca since its reputation as a resort destination began some 10-15 years later than the rest of the islands. This means that there are still natural beaches that have not—and will not - be affected by urbanization. However, beaches that have been built nearby suffer from the pressure of massive affluence brought by tourism. The 70,000 inhabitants that live on the island throughout the year swell to more than 180,000 in August. All of these people visit beaches - both natural and urban ones - and most expect to find them kept as ‘gardens’ and fully equipped (showers, bars, dustbins, etc.). As a result, uncontrolled access and mechanical cleaning methods have threatened the conservation of dune and beach systems.

Previous approach

Historically, there has been no recognition of a problem with the beaches; beaches were not seen as threatened ecosystems but rather as a service or a product to be “consumed” by tourists. Until 1999, each of the eight municipalities in Minorca took care of their beaches and decided which services could be offered and how they were to be cleaned. These decisions were based mainly on the ideas and points of view of tour operators and hotel owners, who were primarily concerned with keeping tourists happy. In this way, unbeknownst to most, beaches were being permanently eroded (losing sand) because the mechanical cleaning of the beaches permanently disrupted dune morphologies. Dune-fixing vegetation could not root properly and a protective layer of the dead leaves of *Posidonia oceanica* were being stripped away.

The issue from the “people management” perspective

The local administration that gathers the eight municipalities together identified three main beach types and classified all the beaches into these three categories:

- **A** (beaches in tourist or urban centres);
- **B** (non-urban beaches easily accessible by car); and
- **C** (non urban beaches with pedestrian or maritime access only).

It proposed to manage the whole beach system according to these types, with more frequent mechanical cleaning of A-type beaches and only manual cleaning of

C-type beaches. This proposal had to be explained to both municipalities and hotel owners, who also needed to be convinced that tourists would be given more choices, since they could choose which kind of beach they preferred. The owners of some facilities and services on the beaches (bars, showers, umbrellas, etc.) also had to be informed that some restrictions would be imposed on them.

The new approach with attention to CEPA

Hotel owners, municipalities and local people had to be told that a change in beach management should be undertaken if beaches were to be preserved and if the island wanted to depend on beach tourism for the long term (*Communication*). Without integrated beach management there was the risk of losing the beaches themselves and, with them, the most important economic resource of the island. Most visible changes related to the new management system were seen as ‘negatives’ by locals and hotel owners: dustbins to be taken out, parking areas moved away from the beach, a more limited supply of beach bars, pedalos and parasols, and so on. Here, communication and education helped to explain the importance of dune ecosystems and why mechanical cleaning had to be restricted. Different leaflets and booklets were produced that targeted tourists, locals and scholars (*Education and Awareness*).

The ‘Tipping Point’

The new beach management system was developed for all of the island beaches (78 in total), but was first tested on ten beaches over the course of a year (1999). After the one year trial, results were clear enough for us to demonstrate that none of the ‘catastrophic’ results foreseen by the most reluctant stakeholders had occurred. Apart from that, we spent the year working hard with the educational sector, publishing educational material including a storybook called “*The beach is alive*”, which could be painted by even very young children, and which conveyed the ecological importance of beaches and the negative impacts of humans to older readers. During this time we worked with an NGO that was heavily involved in nature protection, called GOB Menorca.

The ‘snowball’ effect began when the major Hotel Owner Association of the island admitted that the new beach management system was a good solution. Following that endorsement, the municipalities began adhering to it. In the meantime, an effort was made to educate beach users through local media (newspapers and radio) and leaflets published in six different languages.

Since then, we have continued to report on and inform the public about the most important results of the new management approach, such as beach recovery projects. We also try to educate by responding to undesirable public demands such as beach regeneration with undersea sand or the removal of dead leaves of *Posidonia oceanica* from the beach. These demands appear in the media each summer and every year we explain that beaches are natural ecosystems where natural processes occur, and that we try to manage them by interfering as little as possible. When sea storms take away sand from the beaches, for instance, we tell

everybody that this sand will return to the beach if we wait long enough (providing that sand dunes are preserved), and that no regeneration is needed.

Results

Through informal and formal communication, effective cooperation among different interests was achieved. Clearer choices are now given to tourists and locals understand that leaving dead leaves of *Posidonia* on the beach is not the same as having the beach 'dirty'. Since 2000, some 3000 beach users have been personally informed (on the beach) about the environmental values of dune systems, and how services are offered with their preservation in mind. When asked about *Posidonia*, almost 50% knew about its ecological importance and why it must be left on the beach.

Success factors

- The fact that the whole island is a Biosphere Reserve implies environmental protection and a 'different way' of doing things;
- Internal communication among interest groups; and
- Strategic external communication with visitors, students and local people.

Room for improving success

Visitors and residents have changed and adapted their behaviour on the beaches but there are still many things that can be done to improve the quality of littoral ecosystems. For example, keeping mechanical cleaning methods to a minimum or moving parking areas a bit further away from beaches so that they do not affect the dune systems. These changes will require more public participation and awareness.

Key CEPA interventions

The first main step in the project was to unify the management of the beaches under a single administration - a Beach Management Service. Once established, the Service participated in a scientific assessment of the beaches, directed by a geographer with deep knowledge of dune and littoral systems. Then, municipalities became well informed about the need to change the way beaches were treated and, afterwards, this information was communicated to hotel owners. Meanwhile, educational campaigns were organized (and continue to be) to inform tourists and residents about the natural value of beaches.

The added value of using CEPA in this project was the diversity of channels and ways through which relevant information reached the target stakeholders. The need to manage beaches under more sustainable criteria was communicated effectively and efficiently.

Conclusion: ‘CEPA principles of excellence’

Beach conservation directly depends on management and user’s behaviour. As long as the island’s economy is based on a ‘sun & beach’ brand of tourism (though it is slowly shifting to ‘natural & historical heritage’ tourism) the need to conserve the beach ecosystem for as long as possible has been articulated to inhabitants and stakeholders, who have accepted beach conservation as an important need.

Without effective communication of this central idea - the need to keep beaches as natural as possible in order to keep them for as long as possible - would not have had the compliance that was required to implement it.