



Analysing the Public Administration and Decision-Makers Perceptions Regarding the Potential of Rural Tourism Development in the Azores Region

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ABSTRACT

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Considering that tourism is one of the drivers of the development of peripheral territories, it seems essential to understand the main regional actors' opinions and perceptions to design more coherent and successful sustainable development regional plans. In this regard, the present study intends to assess the Public Administration and Decision-Makers perceptions Regarding the Potential of Rural Tourism Development in the Azores. Contextually, through an exploratory methodology, it was possible to assess the Azores Public Administration and Decision-Makers perceptions. Therefore, it was possible to understand that the majority believe that rural tourism has increased in the Azores Region's last decade (90.2%). Regional development has been positive and has positively impacted the local population (97.6%). Besides, the decision-makers and public administration assign greater importance to the "Protection and conservation of Nature" and "Greater commitment and political transparency" as the most critical factors for the success of rural tourism in the Region. The study also identifies the main benefits of this type of tourism for local communities: job creation, Strengthening the local economy, countering local desertification, and developing trade, services, and activities. Therefore, the design of future regional plans that aim at sustainable development must definitely consider the factors identified concerning rural tourism.

1. INTRODUCTION

It is a fact that rural tourism can add to the development of rural areas or low-density areas and their regional sustainable development [1-7]. In this regard, it should be highlighted that these areas have many problems related to economic decline, a large increase in unemployment, emigration, adverse impacts of the restructuring of agriculture, and the loss of cultural identity [8-10]. If we look at a European level, the countries whose preponderance of its regions are less competitive are Southern Europe, where agriculture performs a relevant role. So, Labrianidis et al. [9] argue that entrepreneurship, associated with small and medium-sized businesses, is one way to achieve sustainable development in Southern European countries once it allows increasing the employment and the incoming. The experimental results of a research that discussed the variation of entrepreneurship among regions of different sizes showed that external and local access to the Gross Regional Product (or accessibility to markets) has a significant impact on the entry and exit of new

companies [11]. This impact is negative for the primary and secondary sectors, while for the services sector, this impact is positive [11].

Also, employment in tourism has significantly contributed to the national economy's growth and the transformation of some regional economies [12]. The empirical evidence reveals that tourist spending creates more jobs and income than any other sector of the economy and generates and maintains employment in other sectors of the economy that support or provide visitors and tourist companies. Several studies conducted in developing countries and rural areas witness to this argumentation (see: [13-17] are just a few examples).

Furthermore, not all rural areas that lack employment opportunities and income are candidates to boost tourism as a strategy for economic development [14]. The rural areas must have quality resources and know-how to take advantage of them. In such cases, tourism can be one activity capable of contributing to the: (i) revitalization of local economies; (ii) diversification of activities that are tributaries; (iii) development of other economic sectors (by the multiplier

effect); (iv) creation and qualification of employment; (v) income generation; (vi) improvement of transport infrastructure, of services (which also benefit the local society); and (vii) the creation of local government revenue [18].

Still, a strategy may not succeed everywhere or under all conditions, but in some places, under some conditions. According to Kilkenny & Partridge [19], this means that: "(...) firstly, a country development policy must be based on large investments at the level of infrastructure and services essential to the investment (roads, railways, electrification, and so on) and the establishment of human resources." So, tourism should be only one component of a broader rural development program, being essential to a close collaboration between the public sector, the private sector, communities, and civil society, in order to ensure that the goals of its investment policy are achieved [15, 20].

Contextually, nowadays, sustainable development and growth are unquestionably one of the central concerns and aspirations of regional territories [21]. This growth is no longer just a dream but a territorial need to enhance the populations' quality of life and ensure future generations [22, 23].

Thereby, territorial planning policies are an indispensable instrument for empowering pre-conditions of resources to the inhabitants [24]. In fact, those planning instruments support success for future living in that region, promoting the dissolution of social unbalances and spatial inequalities and being an inspiration tool for sustainable development [21, 23].

Consequently, investigations that intersect and analyze territorial planning, strategic planning, other planning related methods, and their connection with tourism activities are crucial to the sustainable development of these regions. Thus, and based on the characteristics displayed by the isolated and ultra-peripheral territory of the Azores Archipelago, the following research question is established: "What is the perception of Public Administration and Decision-Makers About the Potential of Rural Tourism Development in the Azores Region?"

This article is the first to explore public administration and decision-makers' perceptions about the potential of rural tourism development in the Azores Region from an academic perspective. Once this study goes further than the theoretical sphere by examining the opinions of those in a position to design and implement regional public policies, it is expected that will add to the thematic literature.

Contextually, to solve the research question, we employed testing tools regarding Azores Public Administration and Decision-Makers' perception of the potential of rural tourism development in the Azores region.

2. RURAL TOURISM AND REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT IN BRIEF

The United Nations World Tourism Organisation UNWTO [25] defined tourism as "(...) *the activities of persons traveling and staying in places outside their usual environment for not more than one consecutive year for leisure, business, and other purposes.*" Based on this definition, three characteristics should be included: (i) transportation outside; (ii) reason for traveling; and (iii) the maximum number of days stayed [26].

Contextually, tourism development improves tourism facilities or activities to attract visitors, including the

sustainability of these activities with the benefit for tourists, community members, and the tourism destination. The resilience of a tourism destination should be advanced [27].

2.1 Rural tourism and regional development

Among the several tourism typologies, there are some more connected with rural tourism activity. Therefore, considering this research's scope, agritourism, ecotourism, nature-based tourism, or wine tourism deserve a closer look.

In this regard, agritourism can be defined as an activity, which inspires travelers to visit farms [28]. Different forms of agritourism exist, specifically farm, farm-based and rural tourism [29]. Sonnino [30] defines an agricultural producer's and their family's hospitality actions that link to any form of farming. Barbieri and Mshenga [31] identified agritourism as the operation developed to draw visitors to an operative farm. In some cases, these visitors are from urban areas rather than rural areas in which the farm is located [27]. Most of these individuals farm as substance farming. Here we exclude commercial farming, which is on a wider scale. Examples of agritourism include wine tourism, farmers' markets, or fruit picking, are just some examples.

Ecotourism aims to generate knowledge, generate capital for conservation, improve attention of cultures, and lastly, better regional communities, economic inclusion, and political power [27-29]. This kind of tourism brings tourists to a region that encompasses the fauna, flora, and culture. In this sense, we also have geotourism, a tourism type that means recognizing the physical environment that cultivates conservation through education and other procedures [32]. As examples of geotourism activities, we have geo-trails, protected area visits, or guided tours [27-29].

Wine tourism includes more than only the consumption of wine [27]. In fact, authors as Mitchell and Li [33] differentiated among primary wine tourism, which is for wine tasting and procurement, and secondary or 'peripheral' wine tourism motivations - i.e., festivals and gastronomy. Also, wine consumption close to the area where the wine was made is identified as wine tourism or enotourism [27, 28].

2.2 Rural tourism and regional development

Besides all the already knew benefits of developing tourism in a region as economic profit, the growth of a tourism destination could bring a sense of pride for local communities - i.e., cherishing culture and history [26].

Furthermore, event tourism raises the attention and encourages local relationships; also, well-organized events could create a positive image of a tourism destination [34].

According to authors as Smith [35], government authorities on a national, regional, and local level significantly impact tourism development through their policy implementation. Moreover, though the relationship between the development of the tourism industry and socio-economic progress has been investigated and accepted as an existing association, this relationship's impact has not been studied to the degree that it is meaningful [35]. Preservation of the environment could likewise be made feasible by tourism activities creating an income [27]. According to Rizzi and Graziano [36, 37], the tourism industry popularises resources and creates new destination images in terms of regional and local economic development.

2.3 Sustainable development and rural tourism in the Azores region

Nowadays, in the Azores Autonomous Region, tourism management models and those for regional socio-economic development include the basic principles of sustainability, centering on preserving and conserving the islands' endogenous resources. Technical documents as the Regional Sustainable Development Plan for the Autonomous Region of the Azores (PREDSA), the Tourism Spatial Development Plan for the Autonomous Region of the Azores (POTRAA), the Research and Innovation Strategies for Smart Specialization in the Azores (RIS3 Azores), or the Strategic and Marketing Plan for Tourism in the Azores (PEMTA) completely stress these problems, addressing them proper benchmarks of regional development [38].

Scholars as Couto et al. [39] state that "*the Azores have received several international awards and distinctions in recognition of the islands' sustainable development and sustainable tourism.*" Unique classifications and labels – i.e., Biosphere Reserve, OSPAR Convention, RAMSAR Convention, Natura 2000 Network, and World Heritage, have also been assigned to some natural areas and heritage sites. Lately, the Azores was designated the "Best Sustainable Destination in the Atlantic," a significant achievement for the Region's tourism and an acknowledgment of the quality of tourism on the islands, since the Azores' governing bodies continue to strengthen the destination's position regarding sustainability issues. Contextually, the process to approve the Region as a "Sustainable Destination" according to the Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC) criteria is currently underway. Should it be granted, it will be an unprecedented certification of destinations in the archipelago, strengthening the Region as a benchmark destination and bringing with it new competitive advantages [38].

Nature-based tourism strengthens the Azores as a tourism destination, not only regarding the contemplative aspects and ecotourism but also through action and engaging activities. A tourist can quietly contemplate the islands' landscape, be very active, experience unforgettable emotions, and enjoy memorable experiences [40]. Thus, nature-based tourism, particularly the active segment, was selected as the Azores' tourism development priority product. As the core product in the region's strategy guides the destination's positioning and its promotional actions. In order to diversify the offering, nautical tourism, cultural and landscape touring, and health

and wellness tourism were selected as complementary sectors [38].

Generally, the Azores' strategic planning as a tourist destination has been carried out with particular care regarding sustainability, despite some flaws. Due to the need to protect the region's competitive advantages – i.e., its natural assets and high levels of sustainability – a suitable model must be followed, at the same time as new products are developed, in order to increase the value of the experiences in the region and to boost the destination's ability to evolve. NEAT (Nature, Eco, and Adventure Tourism [41]), imbued with sustainability principles, can be critical products in this paradigm. These are the ideals that underlie the PEMTA, which has chosen active nature-based tourism as the destination's priority.

3. METHODOLOGY

Based on this study's scope, different approaches and methods were required, including direct and indirect analysis methods. Direct methods were used through site analysis and the implementation of the questionnaires. The indirect methods were used by analyzing the thematic literature.

Hence, the methodological framework was divided into four key levels: Interview design, data collection, case study analysis, and explanation of the results, concluding with the discussion and conclusions (Figure 1). The last stage converges on Public Administration and Decision-Makers' perceptions about the Potential of Rural Tourism Development in the Azores Region. From there, it was possible to propose some guidelines and suggestions for regional tourism planning.

3.1 Interviews design and implementation

The interview was designed considering online interviews. More precisely, we administered a web interview using Google Forms. Although online interviews are sensitive to biases in the results of an experimental study, such as in the respondents' age, this typology of the interview was selected due to social distancing in the actual pandemic crisis scenario requirements.

The interviews focused on obtaining the Azores Public Administration and Decision-Makers' perceptions about the Potential of Rural Tourism Development through close-up questions and open but short answer questions.

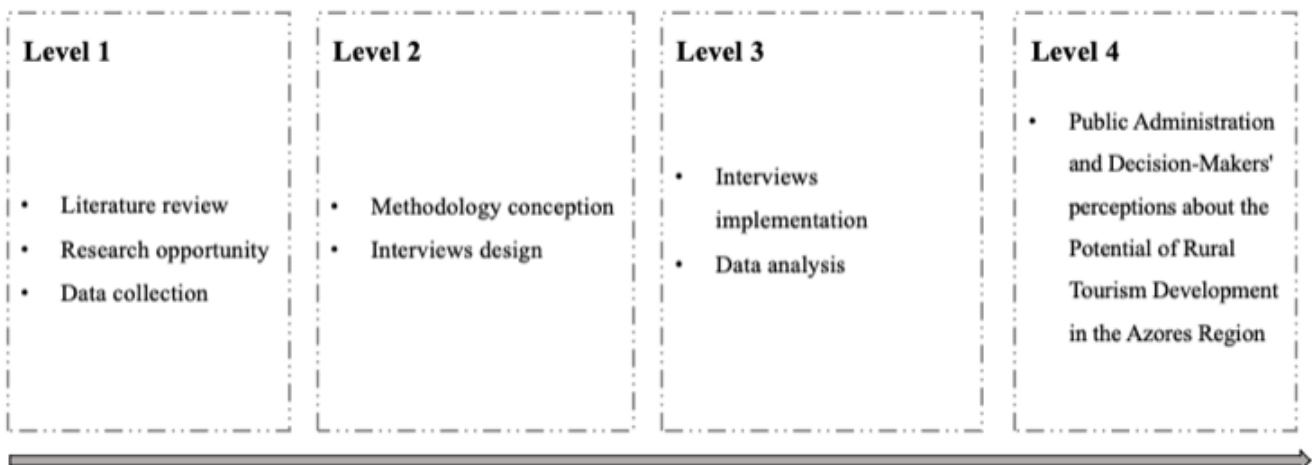


Figure 1. Different levels of the used methodology

The sample group consisted of the Azores Public Administration and Decision-Makers, which we believe are the most relevant participants for this study typology. The sample was formed by 45 participants. The web interviews were carried out over May and December of 2020.

Recognizing the research's purpose, the authors decided to use short and direct inquiries regarding the Potential of Rural Tourism Development's perceptions in the Azores Region.

After the interview data have been collected, statistical analysis was first performed, applying in a first stage spreadsheet to arrange the assembled data and then filtered by statistical analysis utilizing the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS).

4. RESULTS

The results listed below are given by direct analysis by the performed interviews.

The interview starts collecting the sociodemographic aspects of the participants (Table 1). Of the 45 participants in the study, 44.4% are female, and 55.6% male. The respondents were divided into three age groups: 18-35, 36-50, and 51-65. The most representative group was the 36–50-years-old group (44.4%), followed by 18-35 (37.8%), with the least representative age group being the 51-65 years (17.8%). The participants' academic degree most representative was University education (80.0%), and the least representative was basic education (0.0%). Also, 97.8% of the participants were natives from the Azores Region.

In Table 2 are shown the three main aspects that respondents associate most with Rural Tourism, which are: (i) Bed and breakfast in a rural context (option marked by 80.0% of

respondents and corresponds to 32.4% of the answers given); (ii) Country house (71.1% of respondents; 28.8% of responses); and (iii) Rural Hotel or Guesthouse (44.4% of respondents; 18.0% of responses).

Table 1. Sociodemographic aspects of the participants

	Variables	n	%	Valid %
Gender				
Valid	Female	20	44.4	44.4
	Male	25	55.6	55.6
	Total	45	100.0%	100.0%
Missing	99	---	---	---
Total		45	100.0%	---
Age Group				
Valid	18-35	17	37.8%	37.8%
	36-50	20	44.4%	44.4%
	51-65	8	17.8%	17.8%
	Total	45	100.0%	100.0%
Missing	99	---	---	---
Total		45	100.0%	---
Academic Degree				
Valid	Basic education	--	--	--
	High school	9	20.0	20.0
	University education	36	80.0	80.0
	Total	45	100.0%	100.0%
Missing	99	---	---	---
Total		45	100.0%	---
Native of Azores Autonomous Region				
Valid	No	1	2.2	2.2
	Yes	44	97.8	97.8
	Total	45	100.0	100.0
Missing	99	---	---	---
Total		45	100.0%	---

Table 2. Associations with rural tourism

What do you associate most with Rural Tourism? ^a	Activities such as (cycling, climbing, horse riding, etc.)	Responses		Percentage of Cases
		n	Percentage	
	Bed and breakfast in rural context	36	32.4%	80.0%
	Country house	32	28.8%	71.1%
	Rural Hotel or Guest House	20	18.0%	44.4%
	Farm with animals	13	11.7%	28.9%
	Other(s)	1	0.9%	2.2%
Total		111	100.0%	246.7%

a. Group

Table 3. Closed-up questions (i)

Question A: Have you ever had a Rural Tourism experience in the Azores?					
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	No	19	42.2	43.2	43.2
	Yes	25	55.6	56.8	100.0
	Total	44	97.8	100.0	-
Missing	Do not know / Do not answer	1	2.2	-	-
Total		45	100.0	-	-
Question A1: If you answered yes to the previous question, how would you rate it?					
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Good	4	8.9	16.0	16.0
	Excellent	5	11.1	20.0	36.0
	Very Good	15	33.3	60.0	96.0
	Satisfactory	1	2.2	4.0	100.0
	Total	25	55.6	100.0	-
Missing	-	20	44.4	-	-
Total		45	100.0	-	-

After, closed-up questions (i – Table 3 and ii – Table 4) were made to assess the participants' rural tourism experiences. Both tables presents two questions each (Table 3, questions A and A1, and Table 4, questions B and B1). More than half (56.8%) of the Decision-makers and Public Administrators respondents reported that they had already had some (at least one) experience of Rural Tourism in the Azores. Of these, 60.0% rated the experience lived in this context as “Very Good,” 20.0% as “Excellent,” 16.0% as “Good” and 4.0% as “Satisfactory,” thus, leaving the possibility of improving the experience/offer of Rural Tourism in the Azores Region (Table 3).

In this regard, through the analysis of Table 4 it is possible

to understand that the vast majority believe that rural tourism has increased in the Azores Region's last decade (90.2%). Regional development has been positive and has positively impacted the local population (97.6%).

In order to understand which activities and themes contributed the most to the Azores Region's development in the last years, an open question was made, and the answers were grouped by thematic options (Table 5). The decision to group the answers by themes was due to the considerable number of different answers collected – once, this was an open question in the interview. In the opinion of the respondents, it is possible to verify that the investment on tourism was the option that most contributed to this development.

Table 4. Closed-up questions (ii)

Question B: Do you believe that rural tourism has increased in the Azores Region's last decade from a comparative perspective?					
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	No	4	8.9	9.8	9.8
	Yes	37	82.2	90.2	100.0
	Total	41	91.1	100.0	-
Missing	Do not know / Do not answer	4	8.9	-	-
Total		45	100.0	-	-
Question B1: From a comparative perspective, with the last decade, do you believe that regional development was positive and created positive impacts on the local population?					
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	No	1	2.2	2.4	2.4
	Yes	40	88.9	97.6	100.0
	Total	41	91.1	100.0	-
Missing	Do not know / Do not answer	4	8.9	-	-
Total		45	100.0	-	-

Table 5. Activities that contributed the most for the development - grouped options

Options (1-4)	%
Bureaucracy and related	20.0%
Endogenous resources	30.0%
External funding	3.3%
Invest on tourism	46.6%

Valid	No	13	28.9	29.5
	Yes	31	68.9	70.5
	Total	44	97.8	100.0%
Missing	99	1	2.2	---
Total		45	100.0%	---
Gastronomy				
Valid	No	14	31.1	31.1
	Yes	31	68.9	68.9
	Total	45	100.0%	100.0%
Missing	99	---	---	---
Total		45	100.0%	---
Landscape				
Valid	No	0	0.0	0.0
	Yes	45	100.0	100.0
	Total	45	100.0%	100.0%
Missing	99	---	---	---
Total		45	100.0%	-
On the recommendation of others / Based on the experiences of others				
Valid	No	6	13.3	13.3
	Yes	39	86.7	86.7
	Total	45	100.0%	100.0%
Missing	99	---	---	---
Total		45	100.0%	-
Other				
Valid	No	26	57.8	59.1
	Yes	18	40.0	40.9
	Total	44	97.8	100.0%
Missing	99	1	2.2	---
Total		45	100.0%	---

Table 6. Main aspects that lead tourists to choose the Azores to carry out their experience of Rural Tourism

	Variables	n	%	Valid %
Adventure related activities				
Valid	No	17	37.8	37.8
	Yes	28	62.2	62.2
	Total	45	100.0%	100.0%
Missing	99	---	---	---
Total		45	100.0%	---
Classification of the destination on the Internet and in books/guides				
Valid	No	5	11.1	11.1
	Yes	40	88.9	88.9
	Total	45	100.0%	100.0%
Missing	99	---	---	---
Total		45	100.0%	---
Weather				
Valid	No	18	40.0	40.9
	Yes	26	57.8	59.1
	Total	44	97.8	100.0%
Missing	99	1	2.2	---
Total		45	100.0%	---
Culture				

In this sense, the participants were also asked about the main aspects that lead tourists to choose the Azores to carry out the

Rural Tourism experience (Table 6). In the perception of respondents, the main aspects that lead tourists to choose the Azores to carry out their experience of Rural Tourism are the Landscape (100% of respondents), *Classification of the destination on the Internet and in books/guides* (88.9%), *On the recommendation of others / Based on the experiences of others* (86.7%), *Culture* (70.5%) and *Gastronomy* (68.9%).

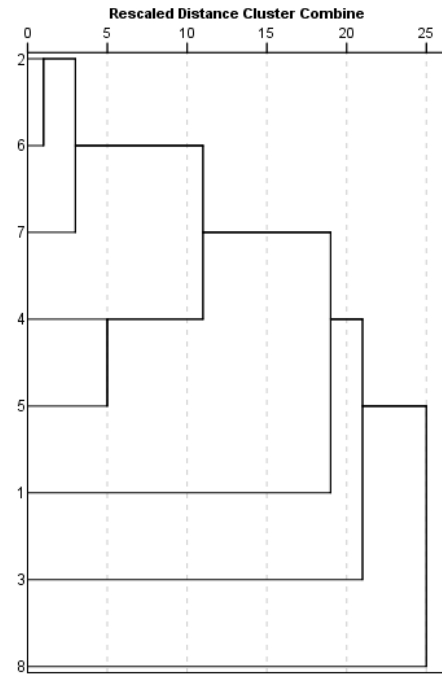
Furthermore, it was carried out an Ascendant Hierarchical Cluster Analysis (AHCA) of the items of Table 6. These items assessed the aspects that lead tourists to choose the Azores to carry out their rural tourism experience. Therefore, this analysis was carried out based on the Ochiai coefficient (Table 7) and in the aggregation criteria Single-Linkage, Complete-Linkage, and Average-Linkage [42].

According to the values of the global statistics of levels, STAT (e.g., [43, 44], the best partition (STAT = 4,1713) is the following partition into 4 clusters (level 4), obtained by all used aggregation criteria:

- Cluster 1: {2- Classification of the destination on the internet and/or in books/guides, 6-Landscape, 7-On the recommendation of others / Based on experiences of others, 4-Culture, 5-Gastronomy};
- Cluster 2: {1- Adventure related activities};
- Cluster 3: {3-Weather};
- Cluster 4: {8-Other}.

Figure 2 shows the dendrogram provided by Singe-Linkage method. It should be noted that the first cluster contains the five main aspects that lead tourists to choose the Azores to carry out their experience of Rural Tourism, and that the remaining three clusters are singletons. Thus, the preservation of the landscape, culture and gastronomy must be a strong bet,

as well as the updating, creating or / and maintaining high quality web sites and books / guides. On the other hand, the offer of Adventure related activities may also be a differential factor in terms of choosing the Azores for the more adventurous.



1- Adventure related activities; 2- Classification of the destination on the internet and/or in books/guides; 3- Weather; 4-Culture; 5-Gastronomy; 6-Landscape; 7- On the recommendation of others / Based on experiences of others; 8-Other

Figure 2. Dendrogram using Average-Linkage (Between groups) method

Table 7. Proximity matrix containing the values of the Ochiai coefficient between pairs of items

Items	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1	1.000	0.740	0.642	0.588	0.632	0.783	0.749	0.544
2	0.740	1.000	0.691	0.777	0.760	0.941	0.883	0.642
3	0.642	0.691	1.000	0.634	0.680	0.769	0.668	0.555
4	0.588	0.777	0.634	1.000	0.885	0.839	0.816	0.593
5	0.632	0.760	0.680	0.885	1.000	0.826	0.800	0.689
6	0.783	0.941	0.769	0.839	0.826	1.000	0.929	0.640
7	0.749	0.883	0.668	0.816	0.800	0.929	1.000	0.688
8	0.544	0.642	0.555	0.593	0.689	0.640	0.688	1.000

Table 8. The most relevant aspects for a Rural Tourism activity's success in the Azores Region

Aspects for a Rural Tourism activity's Success	Mode(s)	P25	P50	P75
a. Accommodation and certified activity, or related to a brand	3	3	3	4
b. Location or region well known for tourism	3	3	3	4
c. Nearby cultural attractions	3	2	3	3
d. Good location of the accommodation	3	3	3	4
e. Telephone and Internet coverage	3	3	3	4
f. Condition of Infrastructures	4	3	4	4
g. Frequency and quality of Events taking place in the area	3	2	2	3
h. Accessibility	3 and 4	3	3	4
i. Location and quiet and calm surroundings	4	3	4	4
j. Attractive Landscape	4	3.25	4	4
k. Easy, safe, and secure booking process - transparent	4	3	4	4
l. Proximity to sports infrastructures	2	2	2	2
m. Proximity to places of entertainment (Bars, discotheques, etc.)	2	2	2	2
n. Feedback from another tourists	3	3	3	4
o. Health services available nearby	3	3	3	3
p. Value	3	3	3	4
q. Other	1	1	2	3

Also, a question about which was the most relevant aspects for a Rural Tourism activity's success was asked (Table 8). In this regard, the aspects that respondents (Decision-makers and Public Administration) most values for the success of an activity related to Rural Tourism are the Attractive Landscape, the Condition of Infrastructures, Location and quiet and calm surroundings, and Easy, safe, and secure booking process - transparent. On the other hand, the aspects that they least value are the aspects included in the "Other" category, Proximity to sports infrastructures, Proximity to places of entertainment (Bars, discotheques, etc.), as well as the Frequency and quality of Events taking place in the area.

Contextually, and based on the critical factors identified by Castanho et al. [45] for territorial success in peripheral territories, the participants were asked to address their importance to each one of those factors for the success of the ultra-peripheral region of the Azores (Table 9). About the success of the Rural Tourism activity in the Azores, respondents (decision-makers and public administration) assign greater importance to the following factors, considered critical for success and territorial sustainability: "Protection and conservation of Nature" and "Greater commitment and political transparency." On the other hand, they attribute less importance to factors in the "Other" category.

Moreover, a question was made to the participants to understand which is in their perception the best channel to divulgate the Rural Tourism (Figure 3). The majority (55.6%) of respondents believe that the most crucial channel in

disseminating Rural Tourism activity is the one referring to booking pages/websites. In the perception of the decision-makers / Public Administration surveyed, the second most important channel is the one related to social networks (e.g., Facebook, Instagram, ...), as shown in Figure 3.

Besides, the interview has two questions regarding which factors could influence negatively (Table 10) and positively (Table 11) the activity of Rural Tourism in the Azores. In the perception of the respondents, the factors that can most negatively influence the activity of Rural Tourism in the Azores are Accessibility and transport (option marked by more than half of the respondents (53.3%); corresponds to 18.5% of the answers); Resistance to change by the population (28.9% of respondents); Regional policies (28.9%); Monopolization of the Rural Tourism activity (28.9%); and the economic power of the consumer (an option highlighted by almost ¼ of the respondents (24.4%).

In the perception of respondents, the factors that can most positively influence the activity of Rural Tourism in the Azores are Marketing (option marked by 66.7% of individuals), Skilled labor (60%), Accessibility and transport (53.3%), Regional policies (26.7%) and Local policies (22.2%). Also, it should be noted that the workforce qualification (low or high) can negatively or positively affect the activity of Rural Tourism in the Azores, as well as the accessibility and transport (bad or good), can negatively or positively affect the activity of Rural Tourism in the Azores.

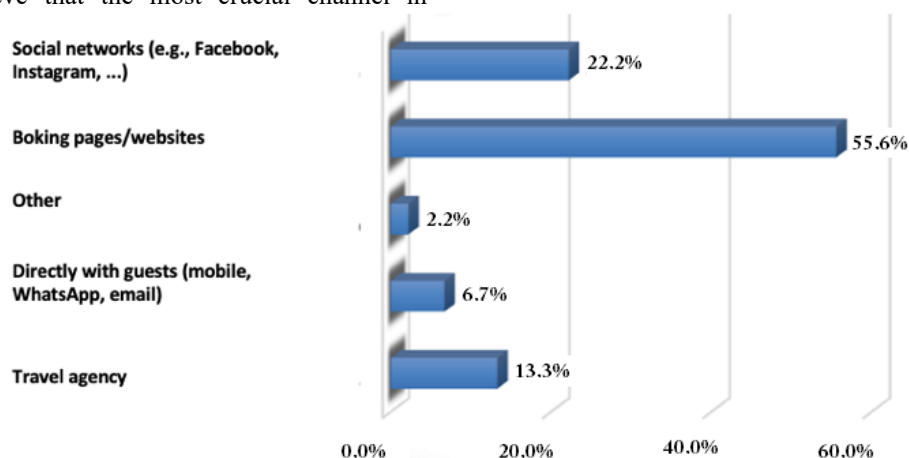


Figure 3. Distribution of respondents according to the Rural Tourism activity dissemination channel that they consider most important

Table 9. The critical factors for the success of the ultra-peripheral region of the Azores, in the perspective of the respondents

Factors for the Success of Rural Tourism in the Azores Region	Mode(s)	P25	P50	P75
i. Connectivity - Movement and displacements (between urban centers, islands, etc.)	3	3	3	4
ii. Strengthening of the Regional Territorial Strategy	3	3	3	4
iii. Avoid duplication of infrastructure in the Region	3	2,5	3	4
iv.. Sense of Belonging of the Residents	3	3	3	3,5
v. Offer Diversification	3	3	3	4
vi. Ease of Access to Regional Funds	3	3	3	4
vii Strengthening the Economy	3	3	3	4
viii. Standards of life quality	3	3	3	4
ix. Magnet for Young and Talented People	3	3	3	4
x. Definition of common objectives and strategies (between public administration-entrepreneurs-population)	3	3	3	4
xi. Greater political commitment and transparency	4	3	4	4
xii. Protection and conservation of Nature	4	4	4	4
xiii. Public participation	3	3	3	4
xiv. Marketing and advertisement	3	3	3	4
xv. Other	1	1	2	3

So, the study also analyzed which is the modality that contributes the most to the development of the Region Rural Tourism (Table 12). In the perception of 73.7% (approximately 74%) of the respondents, the modality of Tourism that most contributes to the development and socioeconomic strengthening of the Region is Rural Tourism.

Contextually, two questions were made regarding identifying the main benefits of this typology of tourism, from the participants' point of view, for the Region (Table 13) and the local communities (Table 14).

In the perception of the respondents (Decision-makers and Public Administration), the main benefits of this type of

tourism for the Region are, in order of importance, the "Job creation" (option marked by 60% of respondents; corresponds to 20% of the total of valid answers), the "Attraction of new tourists" (option marked by 44.4% of the respondents), the "Development of trade, services, and activities" (42.2%) and "Strengthening of the regional economy" (40%).

In the perception of respondents (Decision-makers and Public Administration), the main benefits of this type of tourism for local communities are Job creation (option marked by 68.9% of respondents), Strengthening the local economy (68.9%), To counter local desertification (42.2%) and the development of trade, services and activities (40%).

Table 10. The factors that could influence negatively the activity of Rural Tourism in the Azores, in the respondents perspective

		Responses		Percentage of Cases
		n	Percentage	
Monopolization of the activity of Rural Tourism^a	Financial capital	8	6.2%	17.8%
	Marketing	3	2.3%	6.7%
	Skilled labor	10	7.7%	22.2%
	Accessibility and transport	24	18.5%	53.3%
	Technology	2	1.5%	4.4%
	Support networks	8	6.2%	17.8%
	External dependency	19	14.6%	42.2%
	Resistance to change by the population	13	10.0%	28.9%
	Local policies	6	4.6%	13.3%
	Regional policies	13	10.0%	28.9%
	Monetary power of the consumer	11	8.5%	24.4%
Total		130	100.0%	288.9%

a. Group

Table 11. The factors that could influence positively the activity of Rural Tourism in the Azores, in the respondents perspective

		Responses		Percentage of Cases
		n	Percentage	
Monopolization of the activity of Rural Tourism^a	Financial capital	8	6.0%	17.8%
	Marketing	30	22.4%	66.7%
	Skilled labor	27	20.1%	60.0%
	Accessibility and transport	24	17.9%	53.3%
	Technology	6	4.5%	1303%
	Support networks	8	6.0%	1708%
	External dependency	1	0.7%	2.2%
	Local policies	10	7.5%	22.2%
	Regional policies	12	9.0%	26.7%
		Monetary power of the consumer	7	5.2%
	Monopolization of Rural Tourism activity	1	0.7%	2.2%
Total		134	100.0%	297.8%

a. Group

Table 12. The modality that contributes the most to the development of the Region Rural Tourism, in the participants' perspectives

		Frequency	Percentage	Valid Percentage
Valid	Scientific Tourism (e.g. conferences, congresses, seminars, etc.)	4	8.9	10.5
	Health Tourism	1	202	2.6
	Sports Tourism (e.g. surfing)	2	4.4	5.3
	Mass Tourism	3	6.7	7.9
	Rural Tourism	28	6202	73.7
	Total	38	84.4	100.0
Missing	99			
Total		45	100.0	-

a. Group

Table 13. The main benefits of rural tourism for the Azores Region from the participants' point of view

Linked answers ^a		Responses		Responses
		n	n	
	Attraction of new tourists	20	14.8%	44.4%
	Counteract the local desertification	12	8.9%	26.7%
	Job creation	27	20.0%	60.0%
	Development of trade, services and activities	19	14.1%	42.2%
	Location disclosure	14	10.4%	31.1%
	Strengthening the local economy	18	13.3%	40.0%
	Cultural exchange	1	0.7%	2.2%
	Preservation, conservation and enhancement of Culture (Crafts, Gastronomy, Architecture)	11	8.1%	24.4%
	Nature preservation, conservation and enhancement	13	9.6%	28.9%
	Total	135	100.0%	300.0%

a. Group

Table 14. The main benefits of rural tourism for the Azores Local Communities from the participants' point of view

Linked answers ^a		Responses		Responses
		n	n	
	Attraction of new tourists	5	3.7%	11.1%
	Counteract the local desertification	19	14.1%	42.2%
	Job creation	31	23.0%	68.9%
	Development of trade, services and activities	18	13.3%	40.0%
	Location disclosure	10	7.4%	22.2%
	Strengthening the local economy	31	23.0%	68.9%
	Cultural exchange	5	3.7%	11.1%
	Preservation, conservation and enhancement of Culture (Crafts, Gastronomy, Architecture)	8	5.9%	17.8%
	Nature preservation, conservation and enhancement	8	5.9%	17.8%
	Total	135	100.0%	300.0%

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

At the end of the 90s of the 20th century and the first decade of the 21st century, there was an effective convergence of the Azores' regional economy concerning Portugal and the European Union. The dynamics of growth in that period led the Azores to a close approximation to the values of creating national and community wealth. However, this momentum slowed down, and compared to Portugal, between 2010 and 2018, it did not show any evolution, even showing a setback compared to the European Union.

In the year 2000, the regional GDP only represented 1.9% of the country's wealth, while in 2018, this value reached 2.1%. The variation in GDP per capita is more expressive since this indicator in the Azores (9,979 €) corresponded to 80% of the national value (12,480 €) at the beginning of the century. Currently, it reaches 88% (17,514 €). If we go further back in time, it appears that in 1995 the GDP per capita in the Azores was only 6,894 euros compared to 8,880 euros at the national level (78%). Thus, there is a significant evolution in the capacity to create wealth, even in great economic instability - i.e., the period between 2007 and 2012, whose impact on small and fragile economies - such as the Azorean - is amplified. Due to this impact, there was a stagnation in the Region's evolution vis-à-vis national results.

Regarding the Purchasing Power Parity (PPP), the Autonomous Region of Azores GDP per capita has historically remained below 75% of the EU average of 28. This performance classifies the Region as one of the least developed regions in the Community space, configuring

criteria for allocating resources from the Structural and Investment Funds, which have proved to be a fundamental lever for the regional economy, as evidenced by the survey developed in this study.

The Region's economic dynamics naturally directly impact the labor market, both in terms of opportunities and the quality of the jobs created. Job creation in the Azores followed the trend of economic growth until 2009. As of 2010, there was a significant reduction in this indicator due to the substantial impacts of the regional economic and financial crisis, bringing the number of people employed closer to the values registered in 2000. Unemployment contributed to this reduction in the civil construction sector, which had a low schooling rate, making it difficult for many individuals who lost their jobs to new opportunities in the labor market.

Despite reaching the largest number of employed people in 2019, unemployment remains a significant challenge for the regional economy. Since 2003, there has been a growing trend. However, the shock waves that resulted from the international economic and financial crisis, with profound effects on the regional economy, have led to historically high unemployment rates in the Azores. In 2000, the unemployment rate was less than 4%. However, in the first quarter of 2014, it reached 18%, the country's highest. From that moment on, there were several decreases in this indicator, setting it, in the third quarter of 2020, at 6.7% (still higher than the values recorded before the crisis, due to the active population's growth).

One of the major structural problems of Azorean society and which directly influences combating unemployment is the level of qualification of the population, which the present

study reflects as one of the significant challenges to be overcome. The comparison between the data from the 2001 and 2011 Censuses reveals a clear evolution in this reality, but the qualification of human resources remains very low, with only 8.2% of the population having completed higher education. The number of individuals with qualifications from secondary education is less than 20% (19.1%). This situation makes it difficult to identify qualified labor for companies, especially considering the new trends in activities developed in rural tourism.

Tourism thus appears as a sector with great potential, given the installed capacity and the existing natural potential. However, it will be necessary to reinforce the focus on qualifying the destination, which includes preparing the population and professionals in the sector.

In fact, tourism is an important strategic sector for the Azores and can make a crucial contribution to the region's development and growth. Fundamental changes have recently been made to the sector's operating structure, paving the way for historical growth and opening new doors to the world [38].

Contextually, the projection of the economic development of the Azores defines tourism as one of its strategic pillars. As an example, there is the regional Smart Specialization Strategy. The islands' natural characteristics, the existing comparative gains, and the growing tertiarization of the economy made this decision an easily understandable option. The evolution recorded shows the great potential for creating value in this sector and leveraging the regional economy, especially concerning rural tourism.

This article is the first to explore public administration and decision-makers' perceptions about the potential of rural tourism development in the Azores Region from an academic perspective. Through the analysis, it is possible to understand that the vast majority believe that rural tourism has increased in the Azores Region's last decade. Regional development has been positive and has positively impacted the local population.

In the perception of the respondents (Decision-makers and Public Administration), the main benefits of this type of tourism for the Region are, in order of importance, the "Job creation," the "Attraction of new tourists," the "Development of trade, services, and activities" and "Strengthening of the regional economy."

Furthermore, nature tourism, ecotourism, and adventure tourism, imbued with the principles of sustainability, can be critical products in this paradigm. These are key ideals that underlie PEMTA, which has chosen nature tourism as the priority product for the destination, in addition to reiterating the importance of sustain- ability for the continuous improvement and valuation thereof. Also, bearing in mind the need to protect the region's competitive advantages - i.e., natural assets and high levels of sustainability; it is essential that a suitable model is followed and new products that increase the value of experiences in the region and boost the destination's position continue to be developed [6, 24, 38].

Thereby, the design of future regional plans that aim at sustainable development must definitely consider the factors identified in the present study concerning rural tourism.

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