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Theme 3

***MEANINGS AND REPRESENTATIONS OF THE RURAL HELD BY
RESIDENTS AND TOURISTS***

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Tourism is a socio-psychological experience (Castaño, 2005; Ross & Iso-Ahola, 1991; Rubio, 2003), whose quality is determined by place meanings and representations. Places, on the other hand, are social and cultural constructions more than simply physical areas (Pritchard & Morgan, 2001) and strongly marked by the imaginary (Rojek, 1993, Silva, Kastenholtz & Abrantes, 2011). Rural spaces have, indeed, become a tourist attraction also due their social meanings and representations. Socially constructed ‘rural’ spaces provide new leisure spaces, and positive associations with attributes that are very attractive particularly to urban tourists like nature, tradition, relaxation, health, safety and simplicity (Halfacree, 1995; Kastenholtz, 2013; Smith & Philips, 2001).

Due to their natural and social characteristics rural spaces are generally viewed as associated to nature, natural products, natural ways of doing things and natural ways of life (Halfacree, 1995; Smith & Philips, 2001). Also regarded as repositories of ancient ways of life and traditional cultural values that respond to the postmodern need for an antidote to the anomie of urban living (Hohl & Tisdell 1995; Urry, 2002), becoming a refuge from modern urban life (Cloke 2003; Groote, Huigen & Haartsen, 2000; Short, 1991). An idyllic place, with a less hurried and complex lifestyle, sought when aspiring a simpler and healthier life (Halfacree, 1995, Kastenholtz, 2013; Kneafsey, 2001).

Within the context of alternative tourism models, namely the “3 L’s” (Landscape, Lore, Leisure) or/and the “4 L’s” model (Landscape, Leisure, Learning, and Limit), describing a form of tourism attentive to landscape and natural resources, and interested in discovering the culture and traditions of the destination (Franch, Martini, Buffa & Parisi, 2008), rural places represent most appealing alternative tourism experience opportunities. Moreover the appeal of rural areas for tourism lies primarily in their intrinsic rural characteristics (Kastenholz, Davis, & Paul, 1999; Sharpley & Sharpley, 1997).

In this context, it is important to understand the meanings and representations tourists associate to rural spaces as leisure and tourism spaces. On the other hand, local populations must be recognized as key stakeholders of rural territories, whose interests must be considered when developing tourism, while they are additionally actively involved in co-creating the tourist experience (Kastenholz, Carneiro, Marques. & Lima, 2012; Kastenholz, 2013). It is in this context that this paper, a work in progress study, intends to analyse, in a systematic manner, the meanings and representations of the rural, aiming at additionally understanding the differences between local residents and tourists in respect to these representations. To this end, first distinct dimensions of “the rural” are identified, and discussed, based on an extensive literature review focusing on the concept of “rural destination image” and on social and cultural meanings and representations of the rural. This review integrates literature from diverse scientific fields such as Sociology, Environmental Psychology, Landscape Planning, Tourism Studies, Geography and Cultural Studies. The literature review in course allows the development of a conceptual framework with 13 dimensions of representations of the rural, namely: (1) Natural, (2) Authenticity, (3) Rurality, (4) Landscape, (5) Idyllic, (6) Sacred, (7) Tradition, (8) Identity, (9) Leisure, (10) Simplicity, (11) Familiar, (12) Healthiness and (13) Nostalgia (Cloke 2003; Daugstad, 2008; Figueiredo *et al*, 2013; Groote, Huigen & Haartsen, 2000; Halfacree, 1995; Kastenholz, 2013; Kastenholz *et al*, 2012; Smith & Philips, 2001).

In a second phase, both qualitative and quantitative survey techniques will be used, so as to 1) validate the previously identified dimensions, which are also operationalized through a scale battery trying to assess each dimension in a consistent manner; 2) eventually identify additional facets of the defined dimensions or even a previously not considered dimension. For the quantitative research instrument to be used in the survey, items will also be chosen based on the before mentioned literature review, considering particularly pre-established scales suggested for the study of destination images and perceptions of the rural. The original

scales will be adjusted to the reality of both tourists and local residents. Respondents will be asked to rate the rural place on each of the suggested items on a five-point Likert-type scale, permitting the validation of the dimensional structure through PCA, as well as the dimensions' internal consistency.

Additionally, in a qualitative approach, respondents will be asked to answer open-ended questions and suggest three associations related to their subjective perceptions of the rural. Resulting words will be first categorized and then analysed within broader categories, which will be treated as dimensions of the rural representations construct, with frequencies of occurrence revealing the importance of each dimension. This approach intends to identify additional holistic or unique features associated with the rural spaces.

Besides the probable (more or less consistent) sharing of these dimensions of the rural amongst respondents, it is expected that tourists and residents regard the rural places differently (Figueiredo *et al*, 2013), based on their different motivations associated to, experiences lived and activities undertaken in the rural space, as well as values held and even emotional bounding with the rural space. The assessment of these distinct representations and of the differences between residents and tourists regarding the rural space is of utmost importance for a) understanding each stakeholder groups' view and b) taking better informed destination planning and marketing decisions, yielding sustainable tourism development in rural areas, that may correspond to the most highly valued and distinctive features of "the rural" amongst the market chosen as a target while simultaneously not neglecting the communities' self-image and identity, which should additionally depend on each territory's and community's specificities. A reflexion on the tensions between the eventually homogeneous representations of "the rural", also reinforced through today's countryside promotion (Figueiredo & Raschi, 2012), and the need of distinctiveness within the global, competitive tourism destination context, will conclude the paper.

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