

# Cross-border tourism: a residents' perspective of the Iberian Meseta Reserve

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**Abstract.** Tourism destinations depend deeply on the contribution of residents, who play a crucial role as stakeholders. Obtaining insight into their perspectives is crucial for the success of the tourism industry. Hence, this study aimed to understand how residents in the cross-border region of the Iberian Meseta Reserve perceive tourism in their land. From April to May 2023, a questionnaire was administered to residents aged 18 and above, selected from various locations such as shops, parks, restaurants, streets, and residences. A total of 470 valid questionnaires were collected and analysed descriptively, focusing on the means and standard deviations of the effects. An inferential analysis was conducted to determine the differences between the dependence on tourism, gender and the tourism effects. The findings revealed that residents generally hold a positive perspective on tourism in cross-border areas. The economic effects ranked highest in mean perception, followed by the sociocultural effects, and lastly, the environmental effects. However, it's important to acknowledge a limitation of this study, namely the uneven sample size between residents from Portugal and Spain.

**Keywords:** Tourism effects, Residents' perceptions, Cross-border tourism.

## 1 Introduction

In tourism research, residents' opinions hold great significance as they are crucial stakeholders in the development of tourist destinations [1,2]. Investigating the relationship between residents and tourism is focused on the positive and negative effects of tourism both positive and negative and is imperative, as negative perceptions can lead to re-

sistance and opposition towards tourism in the affected regions [3,4]. However, research has revealed that residents often acknowledge the advantages of tourism, particularly the economic and sociocultural contributions it brings [1].

Cross-country tourism is particularly interesting, where visitors explore places that reside on the boundaries of different territories [5]. This form of tourism can substantially impact residents' lives and traditions [6]. In this sense, the present study focuses on localities in a cross-border region between Portugal and Spain, namely *Atenor*, *Bemposta*, *Bragança*, *Miranda do Douro*, and *Rio de Onor* (Portugal) and *Puebla de Sanabria*, *San Martín de Castañeda* and *Riomanzanas* (Spain). The strategy map for this low-density population region's protection was previously elaborated under the *Paisaje Ibérico* Project [7]. This region boasts several natural tourist attractions, including the *Douro River*, *Montesinho Natural Park*, *Vinhais Biological Park*, and *Arribes del Duero* [8]. Although the *Paisaje Ibérico* project has analysed the region's tourism offer, no study has focused on understanding residents' opinions about tourism, which is a justification for conducting this research. In this sense, this study aims to investigate the residents' perspectives in this cross-border area towards tourism, expanding the literature on the subject of residents' perceptions, which has already been studied in different tourist destinations around the world, and contributing to the understanding of residents in cross-border areas, where a gap was identified in the literature relating the two subjects.

To achieve this aim, the paper has been divided into five sections: introduction, theoretical framework, methodology, results, discussions, and concluding remarks. The theoretical framework centres on resident perceptions and cross-border tourism, while the methodology elucidates the study's approach. The results and discussions section presents the findings, while the concluding remarks provide a reflection on the study's limitations and recommendations for future research.

## 2 Theoretical Framework

The studies of resident perceptions concerning the impacts of tourism, encompassing economic, sociocultural, and environmental dimensions, have been a subject of considerable interest in tourism research. Such studies adopt various approaches, often investigating the influence of demographic factors such as age, gender, educational level, and length of residency in the researched location. These studies are conducted in diverse contexts, including events, destinations, and tourist attractions [1].

Initially, tourism studies predominantly focused on tourists and territorial aspects related to tourism [9]. However, since the 1970s, a noticeable shift has occurred, with increasing attention being directed towards understanding residents' perceptions of tourism development in global destinations. Other authors have shown that social and economic factors, residence place and economic dependence on tourism significantly influence their perception [10]. Similarly, there is a study in which it was observed that residents residing closer to areas experiencing high tourist flows tend to hold more negative perceptions of tourism activities [11].

Another analysis highlights the role of direct economic dependence on tourism in shaping residents' perceptions. People who are economically dependent on tourism are more likely to have a more positive perception of tourism [2, 10, 12].

The involvement of residents emerges as a critical factor in the success of a tourist destination [12–17]. Positive residents' perceptions can minimize conflicts and negative sentiments. While residents generally acknowledge the benefits of tourism, they are highly sensitive to its negative impacts. Residents who perceive substantial benefits tend to support tourism development, whereas those who identify few or no benefits may oppose it [18].

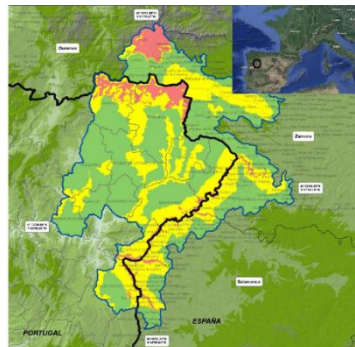
These analyses can also be conducted in cross-border areas. Several studies have been dedicated to understanding border tourism, a segment involving visits to places located on the borders of different territories [19]. Such destinations offer visitors the opportunity to explore the cultural, historical, and landscape differences and similarities between the bordering territories.

Cross-border tourism has the potential to bring economic, social, and cultural benefits to the destinations involved, such as generating employment, fostering trade and cooperation, enriching diversity, local identity, and promoting integration and peace among communities. However, it also presents challenges and issues, including unfair competition, exploitation, smuggling, trafficking, violence, pollution, and loss of authenticity [5,20]. Ensuring that tourism benefits both residents and visitors, supporting sustainable development and preserving cultural traditions is of paramount importance. Therefore, understanding residents' perceptions becomes a crucial aspect of tourism planning [19].

### 3 Methods

#### 3.1 Study site

The research was carried out within the cross-border region that spans Portugal and Spain, specifically focusing on the *Trás-os-Montes* region in Portugal (Northeast Portugal) and the *Castilla y León* region in Spain (Fig. 1).



**Fig. 1.** Cross-border biosphere reserve Meseta Ibérica location [7].

The cross-border area is distinguished by the presence of the Douro River and natural parks, which predominantly categorises it as a nature-oriented tourism destination. Comprising 87 municipalities on both sides of the border and encompassing five protected areas, this region boasts remarkable rural, monumental, and culturally significant heritage intimately intertwined with its ecological and natural attributes. Consequently, it attracts tourists across various domains, potentially yielding both positive and negative effects on the residents.

### 3.2 Data collection and analysis

This study constitutes an integral part of the DuraDOURO project, a collaborative initiative involving a multidisciplinary team from both Portugal and Spain. The primary objective of this research was to collect data from eight distinct locations within the cross-border region, comprising five locations in Portugal and three in Spain (as illustrated in Table I). A stratified sampling methodology was employed to ensure a comprehensive representation of the diverse characteristics inherent to each locality.

This approach considered each area's single attributes and peculiarities, enhancing the study's accuracy and reliability in capturing a holistic perspective of the cross-border region under research.

**Table 1.** Questionnaires applications per local

<b>Local</b>	<b>Country</b>	<b>n</b>	<b>%</b>
Atenor	Portugal	17	3.6
Bemposta	Portugal	25	5.3
Bragança	Portugal	203	43.2
Miranda do Douro	Portugal	61	13.0
Rio de Onor	Portugal	25	5.3
Puebla de Sanabria	Spain	106	22.6
San Martín de Castañeda	Spain	23	4.9
Riomanzanas	Spain	10	2.1
<b>Total</b>		<b>470</b>	<b>100</b>

Source: Own elaboration.

In the period from April to May 2023, a questionnaire was administered to residents aged 18 years old and above, employing a random approach to gather data from various locations, namely shops, parks, restaurants, streets, and residences. The study accrued a total of 470 valid questionnaires, which were subjected to subsequent analysis. With a confidence level of 95% and a margin of error of 4.0%, the sample size was deemed appropriate to represent the population under research. It is noteworthy that the sample aligns with previous international studies on the subject, particularly in line with Sharpley's (2014) research.

Descriptive statistics were used to characterise the participants' demographic features for the sociodemographic analysis. Furthermore, the mean and standard deviation

of each statement were computed to assess the perceptions of the effects and their respective rankings. To ensure the reliability and validity of the measurement scale, Cronbach's Alpha was applied. The internal consistency of the overall effects (0.878), economic effects (0.724), sociocultural effects (0.820), and environmental effects (0.630) was established, with all values exceeding the threshold of 0.6 [21]. This verification lends further credibility to the study's measurement instruments and reinforces the robustness of its findings.

Considering previous studies that demonstrate that gender and tourism dependence are discriminators of the effects [22], this study formulated hypotheses to validate whether this reality also occurs in the analysed cross-border region. Thus, given that the statistical assumptions were met, the following six hypotheses were tested using the t-Student test.

H<sub>1</sub>: There are differences concerning tourism dependence and the perception of economic effects.

H<sub>2</sub>: There are differences concerning tourism dependence and the perception of sociocultural effects.

H<sub>3</sub>: There are differences concerning tourism dependence and the perception of environmental effects.

H<sub>4</sub>: There are differences concerning gender and the perception of economic effects.

H<sub>5</sub>: There are differences concerning the gender and the perception of sociocultural effects.

H<sub>6</sub>: There are differences concerning gender and the perception of environmental effects.

## **4 Results**

### **4.1 Sociodemographic and professional profile**

Concerning the participants' sociodemographic characteristics, a significant majority (61.1%) indicated that they were born in the municipality under study, suggesting a strong sense of rootedness among the residents in the region. The average duration of residency was calculated at 29 years, with a standard deviation of  $\pm 23.731$ , further supporting the notion of long-term attachment to the area.

In terms of gender distribution, the sample comprised a higher representation of women, accounting for 56.4% of the respondents. The average age of the participants was 46 years, with a standard deviation of  $\pm 18.241$ . Furthermore, a substantial proportion of the sample (71.2%) reported having attained secondary or higher education,

meaning a relatively well-formed population. Additionally, most of the participants were married, constituting 51.3% of the sample.

As for the economic aspects, the average monthly income of the participants fell within the range of 760€ to 2,160€ for 81.8% of the respondents. This data provides insights into the income distribution within the sample population.

## 4.2 Tourism effects perspectives

The mean score obtained for each effect statement (Table 2) demonstrates the highest overall mean to the economic effects (3.62 points  $\pm$  0.653), followed by sociocultural effects (3.49 points  $\pm$  0.422), and environmental effects (3.36 points  $\pm$  0.745). Notably, no effect means exceeded 4 points, like previous studies [23–25].

Analysing the individual mean scores for the effects, the statement with the highest mean score (4.34 points  $\pm$  0.875) refers to "gives more visibility to the municipality and can attract more tourists," reflecting an economic effect. This finding aligns with prior research [26,27]. Regarding sociocultural effects, the highest mean score was "promotes contact with different cultures" (4.18 points  $\pm$  0.911).

Similar to economic effect, the environmental ones are more noticeable to residents, as pollution and waste are evident daily. This finding is supported by a study conducted in Faro, Portugal [26], which highlighted negative economic and environmental effects as having the highest averages. In contrast, the cross-border region under study demonstrated lower average environmental effect scores than the other two categories. Nonetheless, it is essential to draw attention to the statement "increase in rubbish" (3.14  $\pm$  1.302), which emerges as a concern among the residents in the analysed area.

**Table 2.** Effects' means

Effects	n	$\bar{X}$	s	<i>Cronbach's Alpha</i>
<b>Economic</b>		<b>3.63</b>	<b>0.654</b>	<b>0.724</b>
Create jobs for residents	470	4.02	1.112	
Increase in prices of goods and services*	470	3.19	1.292	
Gives more visibility to the destination, attracting more tourists	468	4.34	0.875	
Job vacancies are occupied by people who did not previously reside in the destination	468	3.10	1.295	
Opportunities for local businesses	469	3.83	1.148	
Increases the residents' income	466	3.65	1.182	

**Table 2.** Effects' means (cont.)

<b>Effects</b>	<b>n</b>	<b><math>\bar{X}</math></b>	<b>s</b>	<b><i>Cronbach's Alpha</i></b>
<b>Sociocultural</b>		<b>3.49</b>	<b>0.421</b>	<b>0.820</b>
Increase crime rates*	469	2.11	1.041	
Encourages residents to be more culturally active	470	3.80	0.990	
Promotes contact with different cultures	466	4.18	0.911	
Limits residents' access to leisure sites*	468	2.48	1.211	
Encourages local culture and handicrafts	465	4.05	0.971	
The quality of services is better	468	3.73	1.099	
Local people change their behaviour to mimic the tourists	468	2.43	1.186	
Increase the stress*	468	2.93	1.308	
More public investment in the cultural sector	467	3.64	1.127	
Increases traffic*	465	3.87	1.142	
Parking is difficult*	466	3.49	1.374	
Increase cultural offers	467	3.88	1.030	
Improve infrastructure and local facilities	465	3.71	1.072	
Increases public security *	466	3.19	1.139	
Increases the number of people circulating through shops, restaurants, hotels, and services	466	4.23	0.946	
Increases the sense of pride of the residents	466	3.98	1.032	
It is more difficult to preserve local values, customs, and traditions*	466	2.53	1.197	
Conflicts between tourists and residents*	464	2.23	1.129	
<b>Environmental</b>		<b>3.36</b>	<b>0.735</b>	<b>0.630</b>
Generates excessive noise*	468	2.68	1.218	
Increase in air and water pollution*	467	2.67	1.261	
Provides consciousness for the preservation of natural areas	466	3.55	1.089	
Increase in rubbish*	468	3.14	1.302	
Decreased water supply *	464	2.69	1.253	
Infrastructure and visits to natural areas are improved	465	3.77	1.050	

Note: \*, Inversion of the items for calculating the global averages, by effect. n=sample;  $\bar{X}$  = mean; s = standard deviation.

Source: Own Elaboration.

### 4.3 Hypotheses validation

To determine if there is a significant difference between the effects means (Table 3) and the variables related to tourism employment and gender, the t-Student test was applied. As mentioned above, the statistical assumptions for applying the t-Student test were fulfilled. The null hypothesis was rejected when the p-value was less than the significance level ( $p\text{-value} < 0.05$ ).

**Table 3.** Effects means per variable.

		<b>Effects</b>			
		<b>n</b>	<b>Economic</b> <b>(<math>\bar{X} \pm s</math>)</b>	<b>Sociocultural</b> <b>(<math>\bar{X} \pm s</math>)</b>	<b>Environmental</b> <b>(<math>\bar{X} \pm s</math>)</b>
<b>Tourism Employment</b>	Yes	146	3.82 ( $\pm 0.652$ )	3.47 ( $\pm 0.460$ )	3.16 ( $\pm 0.832$ )
	No	324	3.54 ( $\pm 0.636$ )	3.50 ( $\pm 0.403$ )	3.44 ( $\pm 0.670$ )
<b>Gender</b>	Female	265	3.63 ( $\pm 0.602$ )	3.47 ( $\pm 0.418$ )	3.29 ( $\pm 0.747$ )
	Male	201	3.62 ( $\pm 0.712$ )	3.51 ( $\pm 0.429$ )	3.43 ( $\pm 0.703$ )

Source: Own Elaboration.

The hypothesis test supported  $H_1$ , indicating differences in means concerning the tourism employment and economic effects, signifying that residents that work/worked in tourism tend to be a higher perception of economic effects (3.82 points  $\pm 0.652$ ). The hypotheses related to tourism employment and sociocultural and environmental effects were not supported ( $H_2$ ,  $H_3$ ). Related to gender, the economic and sociocultural effects did not show significant differences ( $H_4$ ,  $H_5$ ). However, the hypothesis relating gender and environmental effects was supported, suggesting that men tend to have a higher perception of these effects in the studied region (3.43 points  $\pm 0.703$ ).

**Table 4.** Inferential Statistics

<b>Hypotheses</b>	<b>p-value</b>	<b>Result</b>
$H_1$ : There are differences concerning tourism dependence and the perception of economic effects.	$< 0.05$	Supported
$H_2$ : There are differences concerning tourism dependence and the perception of sociocultural effects.	$> 0.05$	Not Supported
$H_3$ : There are differences concerning tourism dependence and the perception of environmental effects.	$> 0.05$	Not Supported
$H_4$ : There are differences concerning gender and the perception of economic effects.	$> 0.05$	Not Supported
$H_5$ : There are differences concerning the gender and the perception of sociocultural effects.	$> 0.05$	Not Supported
$H_6$ : There are differences concerning gender and the perception of environmental effects.	$< 0.05$	Supported

Source: Own Elaboration.

## 5 Discussion and Conclusions

### 5.1 Main findings

This study examined the residents' perspectives towards cross-border tourism in Northern Portugal., namely in the regions of Terras de *Trás-os-Montes* (Portugal) and *Castilla y León* (Spain). It is worth noting that various locations around the world have already researched to gather the thoughts and perspectives of their residents. Nonetheless, this is the first study conducted in this cross-border region and provides insights into the residents' perspectives towards tourism activity. It should be mentioned the characteristics of low population density and economically fragile regions where tourism is vital.

The results from the research showed that residents tend to perceive tourism positively in the cross-border area. In the literature, it is a common trend that economic effects are more prominently perceived [26,27], given their tangible nature and ease of measurement by residents. Moreover, it becomes evident that in the border region under research, the mean score for economic effects (3.63 points  $\pm$  0.654) surpasses that of sociocultural and environmental effects. One of the key reasons behind this observation in the region is its geographical attributes, which make tourism a significant economic activity, leading to increased job opportunities and enhanced income for the residents.

Cultural aspects play a vital role in studies on residents' perceptions, a tendency corroborated in the context of Brazil [25]. Notably, it should be acknowledged that, according to the literature, the statement "increases the number of people circulating in the destination" could be considered a negative aspect. However, given the characteristics of the cross-border region, residents perceive the influx of more tourists positively, indicating the growth of tourism in an area with limited prior exposure to tourism activities and relatively low effect from overtourism. Furthermore, the perception of the statement "increases crime" as the least significant sociocultural effect is likely linked to the region's current state of security. Finally, the results related to the economic effects are similar to the studies conducted in other regions, where these are the statements with lower mean [26].

Concluding, the hypothesis test validated what has already been highlighted in the literature, demonstrating that residents who have an economic relationship with tourism tend to have a higher perception of the economic effects of tourism [22].

### 5.2 Theoretical implications

Some theoretical implications can be presented with this study, once exploring the factors that influence positive or negative attitudes can provide valuable insights into community acceptance of tourism and its potential effects on residents' quality of life. Residents' perspectives play a crucial role in shaping the destination's image and identity. The study can shed light on how tourism development influences residents' perceptions of their community and how they perceive their cultural heritage and natural resources in the context of the cross-border tourism, an area still under-explored in the literature.

This knowledge can be vital for managing tourism in a way that aligns with the destination's identity and fosters a sense of pride among residents.

Related to the cross-border tourism studies, understanding residents' perspectives on both sides of the border can shed light on the complexities of cross-border interactions and highlight the potential for cross-border collaboration and cooperation in tourism development.

### **5.3 Practical implications**

Some practical implications of this research are related to stakeholder engagement, tourism planning and management, marketing and promotion, community capacity building and sustainable tourism development. In other words, this study provides invaluable direction for creating a sustainable and mutually beneficial relationship between tourism and the local community. It allows for an inclusive and participatory approach to tourism development, ensuring that residents' opinions are gotten and considered in decision-making processes. In other words, bearing in mind the residents' opinions is crucial in the planning process.

### **5.4 Limitations and future studies**

One potential limitation of this study examining residents' perspectives on tourism concerns the sampling method. While the researchers employed a random selection process across a variety of venues, including shops, parks, restaurants, streets, and residences, there exists the possibility that the sample group may exhibit certain biases based on geographic or socioeconomic factors. Furthermore, the study's restricted focus on a specific time, such as April and May of 2023, may not provide a comprehensive understanding of how tourism patterns vary seasonally or due to other relevant factors.

Another limitation of the study is the subjectivity of residents' responses when answering the questionnaire. Residents' perceptions may be influenced by response bias or memory, leading to potential inaccuracies or biases in evaluating their perceptions of the effects of tourism. Additionally, relying on self-reported responses could result in limitations in the representativeness of the sample and the generalizability of the findings to the entire resident population, as non-response is a possibility in questionnaire-based studies.

Furthermore, the results of the study may lack objectivity due to the dependence on self-reported data and the lack of external validation. Future research could complement the existing study by using additional methods such as conducting in-depth interviews or analyzing secondary data to address these limitations. This would strengthen and confirm the residents' perceptions of tourism in the study area, thereby enhancing the overall validity and reliability of the study's findings.

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