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SUSTAINABLE TOURISM AND ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION IN MONTESINHO AND INTERNATIONAL DOURO NATURAL PARKS: A CASE STUDY

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It is rather frequent to find references in scientific literature to the functions that Protected Natural Areas exert on local populations, especially in rural areas. Economic and social benefits to these areas are also another focus of attention.

The International Douro and Montesinho Natural Parks are located in the district of Bragança, Northern Portugal. These protected natural areas are part of a strongly rural region which over recent decades has faced several types of problems, namely human desertification, abandonment of farming and poor investment in the economic sector.

One aspect that we believe is pertinent to highlight is the possible use of tourism in these protected natural areas as a factor to boost sustainable development. It is therefore an important element to consider because these natural areas are a surplus value for rural areas which are weak in terms of economic and social development.

The main purpose of our research carried out in those areas is to present proposals for the development of sustainable tourism and environmental education. Our methodology in order to collect the data comprises a survey questionnaire given to the visitors and tourists, tourism enterprises and local associations, but also an interview with different mayors.

In this paper we will present the results obtained from the questionnaire given to the managers of tourism businesses located in the area of these two parks. It describes the type of tourism enterprises, organizational structure, tourist activities available and the degree of importance they attribute to the existence of the International Douro and Montesinho Natural Parks as well as to the development of sustainable tourism and environmental education in these protected areas.

This questionnaire aimed at obtaining information of the tourism dynamics in the parks and is based on the analysis of global data, to present and discuss proposals for the development of sustainable tourism and environmental education. The views expressed by respondents can be considered of valuable support for the research we are carrying out.

Keywords: Douro International Natural Park, Montesinho Natural Park, Sustainable tourism