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Enhancing the value of Valencian rural heritage for its economic dynamisation. The case of Beniatjar (Spain)

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ARTICLE SECTION

Enhancing the value of Valencian rural heritage for its economic dynamisation. The case of Beniatjar (Spain)

Abstract: The town of Beniatjar (Vall d'Albaida, Valencia), like others located in rural areas, is experiencing a loss of population. In fact, it is currently at high risk of depopulation. However, it has a valuable cultural and natural heritage in its mountain, la Serra del Benicadell. From an applied and practical approach, a project is developed to revitalize the local economy through the enhancement of the heritage resources of the municipality. The aim of this article is to promote the economy of a rural municipality, so that jobs linked to the environment can be created, the population can settle, and basic health and education services can be maintained. In order to develop some sections of the proposed project, we have worked with a multidisciplinary method and have counted on the participation of the population. Finally, other proposals are discussed with similar actions that have been successfully developed in neighboring municipalities and in other protected natural areas in Spain.

Key words: cultural heritage, depopulation, rural environment, Benicadell.

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IDEAS CLAVE / HIGHLIGHTS / IDEES CLAU

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| <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. El patrimonio cultural puede revitalizar y dinamizar la economía de municipios del medio rural.2. Su rehabilitación puede generar empleo con arraigo en el entorno local.3. Que un municipio esté poco poblado, no significa que no pueda recuperarse demográfica y económicamente. | <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Cultural heritage can revitalise and dynamise the economy of rural municipalities.2. Their rehabilitation can generate employment with roots in the local environment.3. The fact that a municipality is sparsely populated does not mean that it cannot recover demographically and economically. | <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. El patrimoni cultural pot revitalitzar i dinamitzar l'economia de municipis del medi rural.2. La seua rehabilitació pot generar ocupació amb arrelament en l'entorn local.3. Que un municipi estiga poc poblat, no significa que no puga recuperar-se demogràfica i econòmicament. |
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EXTENDED ABSTRACT¹

Beniatjar is a small town located in the region of la Vall d'Albaida (Valencia, Spain). Due to its unfavourable demographic evolution in recent decades, it is currently at high risk of depopulation. However, like many rural areas, it has a rich natural and cultural heritage.

In an attempt to boost the economy of the town and reverse the effects of depopulation, the aim is to implement proposals that, based on the enhancement of the cultural heritage of Beniatjar and its mountain (Sierra del Benicadell), generate jobs linked to the environment to fix and attract population, as well as maintain basic education and health services.

Thus, in the Ombria del Benicadell (Protected Landscape since 2006) there is an old forest guard house: la Casa dels Guardes (also known as la Casa de les Planisses). It is a civil building built in 1906 and hosted the former forest rangers who maintained and guarded the surroundings of the Benicadell. However, it has been closed since the end of the 20th century due to the construction of a new forest guard house at a higher altitude, making la Casa dels Guardes fall into disuse. Thus, this building is presented as a heritage element with a great potential to revitalise the economy of Beniatjar.

Therefore, it is intended to rehabilitate la Casa dels Guardes to use the building as a hostel (thus creating employment), so that the house provides a service to the visitors (like food, rest and even overnight stay). In addition, it is planned to set up a permanent forestry brigade, active throughout the year, to keep the mountain and its paths in an optimal state. The forestry brigade could store all its equipment and machinery in the second courtyard of the house. On the other hand, one of the functions of the protected natural areas is the education; hence, it is proposed to habilitate one of the rooms as an interpretation centre, with the aim of exhibiting miniatures of other heritage elements of the Benicadell, the original functioning of la Casa dels Guardes, educational videos, etc.

In this way, by means of a multidisciplinary and applied methodology (with the collaboration of an architect) precise plans (with AutoCAD) of la Casa dels Guardes have been drawn up in order to be able to calculate the exact cost of the rehabilitation. In this way, the proposal would not remain in the air, and these plans would help to materialise this proposition in the near future.

In addition, a survey has also been carried out in order to find out the opinion of the local population on the proposals. A sample of 203 people has been processed in SPSS software. The results of the survey questions relating to the rehabilitation of la Casa dels Guardes show a high level of support from the local population.

However, the easy access to la Casa dels Guardes means that the car park is sometimes overcrowded. This is a known fact by the local population, as almost half of those surveyed have had (at least once) difficulties parking in this space. In view of these situations of overcrowding, it is planned to regulate the parking area in order to maintain the environmental quality of the surroundings. In addition to the proposal to regulate parking, it is proposed to set up a minibus service with seventeen places and two more places for the disabled, thus promoting inclusion in natural spaces. Once again, those surveyed responded positively to these proposals. It should be noted that the regulation of the parking area entails a fee per private vehicle to access la Casa dels Guardes. Thus, the results of the survey show that both those who do not live in Beniatjar and those

¹ Traducción exclusiva de los autores / Authors' exclusive translation.

between 51 and 65 years of age would be willing to pay a slightly higher amount than the rest.

Initiatives to regulate parking areas in protected natural areas have recently increased as a result of the rise in visitors recently following the relaxation of restrictions against COVID-19. However, most measures to regulate parking areas are found in large protected natural areas, such as National Parks or Natural Parks. Nevertheless, natural areas with a lesser degree of protection (like the Protected Landscape of la Ombria del Benicadell) also suffer from these situations of overcrowding, without the implementation of measures as in other more important areas.

On the other hand, initiatives such as the one proposed for la Casa dels Guardes have been carried out in other protected natural areas, as in the case of the Font Roja Natural Park, restoring a 19th century bourgeois house and transforming it into a small bar/restaurant. This type of initiative is certainly sustainable due to the fact of using the existing heritage (old buildings) and not constructing new buildings in the natural environment.

In summary, Beniatjar shows a static and less dynamic development model than neighbouring municipalities such as Otos and Carrícola, which have been able to value their cultural heritage and promote it through rural tourism. In this case, it was necessary to put forward some proposals to enhance the value of Beniatjar's heritage in order to encourage the local population to take root in its surroundings, as well as to stimulate the local economy, maintain the population and the basic services of education and health.