

Towards the Development of an Innovative Sustainable Sports Tourism Management Framework for Portugal

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Abstract: Sport tourism assumes an increasingly important role in the world tourism panorama, being seen by several nations as a strategic catalyst for the individual and collective emancipation of territories and their communities. The growing synergy between sports and the tourism sector and its potential as a strategic tourism product for the sustainable development of destinations has long been acknowledged; so much so that it has given rise to the positioning of a highly competitive and complex sector, transcending far beyond the organization of sporting events. In Portugal, Sports Tourism has experienced profound growth over the last decade, now estimated to be worth between 10% and 25% of total international travel and tourism revenues (PwC, 2021). While sports tourism presents valuable opportunities for further destination development and growth driving many positive outcomes in local economies, it can also be viewed as an important factor for the promotion and international recognition of these same territories. As a result, Destination Management Organizations (DMO) and other key stakeholder have begun to place an increased focus on the use of sports to promote and improve Portugal's positioning as a sports tourism destination. This research, while in its early stages, recognises a current gap in knowledge in relation to the development of existing frameworks or strategies implemented and applied by DMO's or policy makers within destinations to effectively develop and manage a sustainable and competitive sport tourism offering. However, in light of the challenges faced by destinations during the COVID-19 pandemic, it is a necessity that destinations look to develop and plan for sports tourism in a sustainable manner. This research therefore sets forth to contribute to new knowledge in relation to the development of an innovative Sustainable Sports Tourism Management Framework for Portugal with the aim to propose a new comprehensive conceptual framework for the effective sustainable development and management of sports tourism in Portugal.

Keywords: sports tourism, sustainable tourism development, management framework, Destination Management Organization (DMO), Portugal

1. Introduction and problem definition

The growing popularity of physical exercise, whether in the form of leisure or competition sports has contributed to a growing diversification and development of the tourism industry (Hsieh et al., 2021). Sport tourism is today a multifaceted and complex sector (Bouchet & Sobry, 2019), currently positioning itself as one of the segments with the highest growth rate in the tourism industry (Hritz & Ross, 2010). This growing importance in the world tourism scene has led several nations to view this type of tourism product as a low-cost and highly visible resource for the development and promotion of their territories and cultures (Gammon & Robison, 2003; Herebold, 2020). In fact, the widespread recognition of the opportunities that sports tourism can bring to the improvement of the positioning of tourism destinations has led to the emergence of fierce competition between destinations (Haap, 2021). As a result, DMO's and other key stakeholders have begun to place focus on the use of sports and in particular, high performance sports to promote and improve Portugal's positioning as a sports tourism destination (Sports Foundation & Training Partners, 2018). In light of the need to strategically enhance and improve the sports tourism offering at national, regional and local level, some destinations in Portugal have seen an increase in the investments that has been awarded to create high quality professional sport facilities with high-end equipment and services to better support sports tourism activity (Sports Foundation & Training Partners, 2018). However, studies conducted to evaluate its internationalization potential identified gaps at various levels, highlighting the management dimension as one of its main weaknesses (Sports Foundation & Training Partners, 2018). With this background, this research is built upon three interdependent variables related to sports tourism: *tourism, sport and stakeholders relationship*, focusing in the analysis of the management frameworks applied by the DMO's in Portugal with the aim to identify critical issues and combine findings to the development of an innovative Sustainable Sports Tourism Management Framework for Portugal.

2. Competitiveness in sports tourism destinations

Given the great breadth and complexity associated with the field of sports tourism, it is essential to delineate appropriate strategies for the establishment of sustainable tourism development (Weed, 2006; Hinch & Higham, 2011). Thus, the combination of the principles that define the competitiveness of a sports tourism destination with the concept of sustainable development is now recognized as one of the main challenges for the DMO's

worldwide (Herebold, 2020; Haap, 2021). Unlike in other industries, tourism destination competitiveness do not refer to a single well-defined product or service but to an overall experience (Haap, 2021). According to Crouch (2011) this competitiveness is produced by a variety of destination stakeholders, who contribute to the visitor experience, including tourism enterprises, other supporting industries, DMO's, the public sector and residents. On the other hand, the current COVID-19 pandemic and the related social and physical distancing have disrupted many aspects of the dynamic of sports tourism (Herbold, 2020). These new constraints caused by this global pandemic have revealed the sensitivity of various sports tourism destinations in the face of new scenarios of immense transformation, proving to jeopardize key stakeholders in the sector (Herbold, 2020), therefore, urging the need to develop new studies and frameworks adjusted to the new necessities and trends of the sector (Haap, 2021).

3. High performance sports tourism in Portugal

Research into the broader role of high performance sports tourism in destination development strategies is still very limited (Turco et al., 2010; Heuwinkel & Bressan, 2016). High performance sports can be defined as the practices developed by athletes, seeking to achieve the best performance levels, with the aim to obtain good results individually or collectively (Böhlke & Robinson, 2009). This typology of sporting activity becomes understood as a tourism phenomenon when athletes and their entourages seek training destinations and/or to participate in sporting competitions outside their usual place of residence (Heuwinkel & Bressan, 2016). The specific needs of elite athletes differ from the needs of sports spectators and other people who travel to places to experience a sport (Vasconcelos et al., 2017). In high performance sport tourism there is a major concern of sports organizations, managers, support staff, funding agencies and sports officials with the experience of elite athletes in training venues, namely, High Performance Sports Centres (HPSC) (Green & Oakley, 2001), but also with places of leisure, rest and pressure relief, as important elements for the preparation of future competitive performance (Heuwinkel & Bressan, 2016). Portugal has 14 classified HPSC, with various sports disciplines, developed with the main objective of improving its national sports system and consequently enhancing the sporting results of Portuguese athletes in international competitions (Sports Foundation & Training Partners, 2018). However, the lack of economic sustainability associated with the management of these infrastructures led to the delineation of new strategies with the aim to increase the profitability of the HPSC (Sports Foundation & Training Partners, 2018). It is in this context that, in recent years, high performance sports tourism has emerged as a strategic market segment for the development of a number of regions in Portugal and as a possible solution to securing the economic sustainability of destinations (Carvalho et al., 2017). However, there is currently a profound heterogeneity presented regarding the maturation states and disparity between the individual management frameworks in the HPSC network of Portugal, that being currently assumed as one of the main difficulties in achieving long-term sustainability and consequently internationally competitiveness (Sports Foundation & Training Partners, 2018).

In this sense, given the search for sustainable sports tourism development phenomena in Portugal (Baganha, 2012; Sports Foundation, 2018), there are a set of dimensions identified at the level of strategic management of the sector that must be improved in order to sustain and develop the competitive potential of Portugal's offerings in the high-performance sports tourism sector. Thus, there is a need to improve the infrastructures to support high performance sports tourism, to homogenize the socio-economic framework of HPSC's in Portugal and to create and standardize formal structures for technical coordination and management of the high performance sports centres (Bahanha, 2021; Sports Foundation, 2018). The strategic focus on these dimensions is assumed to be fundamental to overcome the low profitability and occupancy rates currently evident in HPSC's in Portugal, as well as to guarantee the collection of alternative revenues, from other sources, that exceed the financial values granted by the Public Administration and by the Local Administration (Baganha, 2012).

The knowledge present in the literature highlights the complexity associated with the development of sports tourism and, in particular, high-performance sports tourism in Portugal and the need to develop management frameworks with focus on the competitiveness and sustainability of destinations. Therefore, this research aims to critically evaluate the management frameworks currently applied by the HPSC in Portugal with the aim to propose a new comprehensive conceptual framework for the effective sustainable development and management of high performance sports tourism in Portugal.

4. Methodology

Given the great complexity associated with the sports tourism sector, this research will use a Mixed Methods methodological approach, with the adoption of an explanatory sequential design, through the implementation of a quantitative content analysis of plans policy documents and guidelines, identification and evaluation of strategic management measures implemented in the HPSC's of Portugal, of the which will then be supported through qualitative in depth interviews with entities connected with the management and offerings of the HPSC's, such as DMO'S, HPSC's management departments, sports federations, sports clubs, sports tourism travel agencies and other related tourism companies. The choice of this methodological approach aims, by the interaction between quantitative and qualitative methods, to obtain deeper insights into the research problems and to provide better understanding to the complex social issues associated to the tourism sector (Truong et al., 2019).

5. Conclusion

In recent decades, Portugal has invested significantly in the development of HPSC's. However, the inability of these organizations to achieve financial sustainability led to the delineation of strategies with the aim to increase their profitability, through the development of offerings aimed for international high-performance sports markets. Thus, given the gaps identified in the implementation and applicability of management frameworks in the national HPSC, this investigation will set forth to contribute to new knowledge in relation to the development of an innovative and comprehensive Sustainable High Performance Sports Tourism Management Framework for Portugal.

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