Landscape and Tourism as Tools for Local Development in Mid-Mountain Rural Areas in the Southeast of Spain (Castilla-La Mancha)

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Abstract: The modernization of economic activities in mountain areas is conditioned by the physical characteristics of the territory, the weight of activities related to the primary sector, infrastructure deficits, low population density, as well as the declining and ageing population. The response to this situation has involved implementing a certain degree of functional diversification. One of the aspects that has assisted in the expansion of the tertiary sector is leisure and recreational activities. Rural tourism in European mid-mountain regions has emerged as a key element, supported by local development strategies and changing preferences in demand. In the tourism industry, the resources are the raw material, in which landscape plays a leading role. The aim of this prospective study is to evaluate the landscape as a heritage and a tourism resource, focusing on its capacity to reactivate depressed rural areas of inland Spain (mid-mountain areas in the southeast of the autonomous region of Castilla-La Mancha). The study is based on opinions provided by tourists and uses a directed survey as an analytical tool. The results highlight the key role of landscape, especially natural landscape, in the use of such areas for tourism. This, in turn, underlines the need for a greater focus on organizing how the landscape is utilized.

Keywords: landscape; multifunctionality; rural tourism; local development

1. Introduction

Understanding the rapid transformation of landscapes resulting from their adaptation to varying economic and social processes is currently a topic of considerable interest. Mountain areas in Europe are undergoing socioeconomic changes, and particularly those that promote the multifunctionality of rural regions. These changes impact the characteristics and uses of the landscape. The present study aims to contribute to the debate on the role of landscape, which is considered one of the resources with the greatest impact on the tourism system in mid-mountain areas, identifying the reasons for and characteristics of the recreational use made of such areas. The study analyzes the experience and opinions of the landscape of visitors to a rural area of inland Spain. The area in question is a Mediterranean mid-mountain region affected by the structural problems of traditional agricultural models, with marked demographic decline, problems of accessibility and a shortage of services. Over the last three decades, a large number of tourist establishments have been created, and rural tourism has become a notable focus of development. We specifically focus on excursionists and day-trippers' perceptions of the area, justifying their choice of destination and the increased supply of rural tourism accommodation.

As suggested by Lefebvre, there are three dimensions to the analysis of space: spatial practice, associated with daily life and the perception of common sense, centered on the action of people, which is often neglected in social research; space, as conceptualized and intellectually conceived by the world of academia; and the representational space of art and literature [1]. Space is in a process of continuous reconfiguration, whereby some regions

lose out, but are then retrieved and used by society through fluid, sociomaterial networks, based on the actor–network theory [2].

Since the second half of the 20th century, rural areas in Europe have undergone intense processes of economic, social and environmental change [3], affected by the global forces generated by the increase in activities not related to the primary sector [4]. The change in the direction of agricultural policies in the 1980s [5] drove a search for alternative activities to diversify the economic functions of agricultural areas, with the aim of improving their future prospects. Since then, rural tourism has been considered one of the leading options for rural development, a priority in new policy guidelines. LEADER, the European Community initiative (launched in 1991), has been viewed as the largest program for the promotion of tourism in Europe, and, although the number of tourism-related projects has gradually decreased, the role of community policy in converting rural areas into tourist locations has been crucial.

The European Community institutions have encouraged multifuncionality built on respect for the environment, promotion of the local culture, greater integration of rural and urban worlds and the capacity to provide ecosystem resources [6–10]. Diversifying local economies helps reduce conflicts and optimizes benefits, making both space and time more efficient [11]. The principle of multifunctionality aims to change the traditional productive orientation of these areas devoted to the primary sector and thus encourage sustainable development and resilient landscapes [12]. Nonetheless, some authors have questioned the lack of such policies focused on highly rural areas [13]. It is true, however, that the current objectives seek to consolidate the new role of rural areas based on principles that are critical to the process of globalization, and that are oriented towards local development and build on strategies such as territorial marketing or new forms of governance.

In the so-called highly rural mountain areas of inland Spain, there is currently an evident, complex series of problems and multicausal weaknesses (low population density, poor accessibility, lack of infrastructures, excessive reliance on the primary sector, inadequate production conditions, etc.), which leave them in a highly disadvantaged position due to their growing economic and social impoverishment [14]. This situation is a manifestation of what is known as "territorial transition", a term that refers to the transformation of Spain since the second half of the 20th century. The country has completely transformed; what was originally a pattern of settlements characteristic of an agricultural and rural society is now a regionally polarized country, the result of its conversion into a typically 21st century urban service-based economy. The rural exodus and subsequent neglect of rural areas has marked this development. The primary characteristic of the current social crisis in these areas is typified by the declining demographic structures, the most visible consequences of which are the problems of ageing populations, the lack of generational turnover and dramatic depopulation [15], the same weaknesses found in other parts of Europe. In response to these failings, regional planning strategies of various scales have been undertaken, especially in highly rural areas.

In Spain, Article 10 of the *Law for the Sustainable Development of Rural Areas* defines "rural areas to be revitalised" as those with scant population, low levels of income, a significant presence of the agricultural sector, and geographic isolation [16]. Strategies to bolster rural tourism have targeted these areas, respecting the principles of local and sustainable development. This is designed to improve the management of resources to resolve social and economic needs while safeguarding the preservation of the culture, biodiversity, ecological processes and basic conditions of the local population. Indeed, the World Tourism Organisation highlights the need to protect the environment and enhance opportunities for the future in the relationships between tourism and tourist-receiving regions. In this scenario, regional and local tourism resources take on an increasingly leading role, with landscape being a particularly significant element.

The aim of the present study is to evaluate the potential of the landscape in mountain-area tourism, using the opinions of visitors collected through a field survey. When the role of landscape in tourism is analyzed, the questions arises of whether it actually is a resource

and, above all, what role it plays within the local touristic offers and products of a territory. A further question concerns whether the different administrations treat landscapes in a way that responds to the social uses made of them.

The work is organized into four parts. The first section addresses the relationships between tourism and local development in highly rural areas, and their associations with landscape. To this end, a review of the literature related to the sociocultural context of this study was conducted, with a focus on works published in the European Community, and specifically the case of Spain. The second section describes the methodology used to analyze these relationships, which was principally built on a survey of visitors and tourists in the area under study, namely a rural mid-mountain region of inland Spain. The third section discusses landscape as a dominant tourism asset, while the fourth presents our conclusions.

1.1. Tourism as a Tool for Development in Highly Rural Areas

Touristic activity, with its territorial, economic and environmental consequences [17–19], fosters multidimensional relationships between resources, consumers, companies and administrations [20], and has the capacity to adapt to the new circumstances and scenarios of postmodern society. Today, the importance of enjoying free time for leisure activities, and tourists' changing preferences, which necessitate alternatives to the well-worn destinations of mass tourism, are elements that have led to rural areas becoming the target of an influx of visitors interested in discovering the natural and cultural values of rural locations. Such values were once considered symbols of tradition and economic backwardness [21–24].

Rural tourism has thus emerged as a strategic element for local and sustainable development. It is widely regarded as a tool for socioeconomic revitalization, which can help counter or even reverse some of the previously mentioned problems [25,26]. Conceptually, however, there is no unanimous consensus on the definition of rural tourism in the scientific literature [27]. It can be broadly defined as the implementation of tourism activities in rural areas (including a diversity of formats: agrotourism, green tourism, eco-tourism, hunting tourism, wellness tourism, sport and adventure tourism, etc.). Despite the ambiguity of the concept, it has certain distinguishing characteristics, such as respect for environmental resources, appreciation of the authenticity of local communities, and interest in the preservation of local values, heritage, and resources [28] (pp. 9–11). It is primarily motivated by activities that bring individuals into contact with the rural environment and with its culture or local heritage. In addition, rural tourism is based on a micro model, from the perspectives both of products, namely micro-destinations (as opposed to the overcrowded locations of other mass tourism alternatives), and the enterprises involved (which are typically small businesses) [29] (p. 21).

The European initiative, LEADER, and the Spanish strategy, PRODER, have implemented measures in this line, designed to reactivate local economies, preserve the environment and promote tourism as an economic and social alternative [30] (pp. 407–411). This is also the direction taken by Spanish planning in the sector [31,32].

Consequently, the sector has grown significantly in mid-mountain areas, although there remain aspects requiring attention and improvement. Various weaknesses were underlined by the economic crisis in 2008 [33] as a result of the expansionary policy of setting up new establishments in rural areas without a parallel increase in specific, high-quality differentiated products [34]. The process of tourism development is highly dependent on the presence of territorial resources, which are strategic elements in this process of change.

1.2. Landscape as a Tourism Resource

The European Landscape Convention [35] led to a broader concept of the term and the promotion of policies related to landscape [36]. The theoretical groundings of the Convention provide a holistic vision of landscape, which goes beyond the previous selective and protective understanding (directed exclusively at areas of special environmental

interest), focusing on managing and planning landscape as a part of territory. It includes the temporal management of the concept [37] and considers the diversity and abundance of ecosystem services [38]. Above all, however, there is an insistence on citizen concern and participation, based on the view of landscape as "any part" of a territory perceived as such by the population [39–41].

Since 2008, when the Convention came into effect in Spain, there has been growing institutional interest in landscape in response to social concern and unease. Most of the laws concerning the natural heritage, the rural world or planning in Spain (at all levels and areas of action) include the concept of landscape as an element of priority attention, given the "increasing incorporation of natural landscapes in strategies of tourism and territorial development, together with the complexity of managing landscape and its vulnerability and the threats to which some landscapes are submitted", [42] (p. 6). The *Spanish Cultural Landscape Plan* was created to lay the foundations for the safeguarding of significant landscapes. Additionally, in the second decade of the 21st century, the *2011-17 Strategic Plan for the Natural Heritage and Biodiversity*, in its second goal (which refers to protecting, conserving and restoring the natural world in Spain and reducing the main threats it suffers), includes the aim of promoting ecological restoration, the environmental connectivity of territory, and landscape protection. Most of Spain's autonomous communities have enacted their own landscape laws or have included this element within other regulatory frameworks. Castilla-La Mancha, in this regard, is lagging behind [43], although at the time of writing, the *draft law on the protection, management, planning and promotion of the landscape of Castilla-La Mancha* has been made public, and will help fill the present vacuum in the region.

This change is largely due to the growing interest in landscape, wherein tourism is of undeniable significance. The environmental values and productive capacities of a territory have been recognized, while a territory is also seen as a support for activities, infrastructures, and tourist facilities. It is home to groups of human individuals with all their potential, and is underpinned by different landscapes [44] (p. 53). Landscape also constitutes an element of tourist consumption, having emerged as one of the key reasons for visiting rural areas in different parts of Europe [45]. Rural tourism appropriates and consumes territory [46], which becomes the source of non-relocatable assets and is then a resource itself, in the form of the sector's raw material.

The landscapes most widely used for tourism purposes are primary, and especially the intermediate ones, where the human footprint is limited and whose attraction lies precisely in the preservation of traditional features. Intermediate landscapes are undergoing changes in their functions, morphology, and character; new uses are being incorporated, associated with nostalgia, uniqueness, and environmental quality, as result of their utilization for leisure and tourism. Tourism micro-destinations have emerged, which boast the intangible values of their territories and their ability to generate sensations and emotions [47], which in turn become factors associated with the location [48] (p. 19). Rural landscapes have a twofold quality: they are the home and workplace of the local population, while also being a place of leisure and enjoyment for tourists. As such, the literature has underlined their role as a tool for the analysis of tourism, as a nexus of the global and the local, and as an example of the use value and exchange value of a location [49] (p. 183). Furthermore, promoting a region as a center of tourism has a significant repercussion on its population's quality of life, which is also related to the image projected of the destination [50,51].

Consequently, we can speak of a close relationship between rural tourism, the use of territory for this activity, and landscape. This link is more evident when landscape resources come together simultaneously with large numbers of attractions, accessibility, and opportunities for sustainable development [52]. It is also worth noting the coexistence of different models of aesthetic experience, namely, biological, personal, and cultural [53], in a context wherein time and space are increasingly limited and free time is on the rise [54].

Many traditional landscapes are being subjected to intense changes because of functional transformations, which, in turn, affect their morphology and character. It is precisely

these modifications that lead to new uses, associated with leisure and tourism, generally in settings that have a special appeal and serve as a base for outdoor activities. These are changes to a sustainable productive process built on post-material values. Landscape has entered the world of marketing and consumption in its dimension of leisure and entertainment [55] (p. 19). Despite its importance now being recognized, there are still gaps in the understanding of the role of landscape in the configuration of a tourist product. Drawing on the hypothesis that landscape, in mountainous and highly rural areas, has become the primary element of attraction and consumption, the present work analyzes a specific case in Spain, to determine how this relationship between landscape and rural tourism is established in inland mid-mountain regions.

2. Materials and Methods

This research used two complementary methodologies in order to focus on two key elements of the tourism system, namely, resources and tourists. We combined the elaboration and analysis of maps with a study of the perception of the landscape, for which a survey was conducted. On the one hand, we used a geographic information system (GIS), into which we introduced a series of characteristics, related to landscape as a resource, which help explain the territory under study. These were landscape units, the protected areas, the rural tourism establishments, and the predominant routes used across the landscape, associated with hiking trails. Both the rural tourism establishments and the hiking trails (obtained through fieldwork and by consultations with associations) are primary sources expressly generated for the present research. Both are related to the supply of other complementary services and are conditioned by the quality of the landscape in the area. The tool used to this end was ArcGis software, with which we designed layers, wherein the locations of the establishments and the trails are represented by dots and lines, respectively. Polygons were used to show the protected areas and landscape units. The aim was to integrate essential information to understand how the landscape is used for tourism, which helps explain the configuration of small hubs and micro-destinations. On the other hand, we also administered a survey to visitors to obtain the users' qualitative and perceptive evaluation of the landscape. The quality of agricultural landscapes has been assessed using different methodologies, such as the interpretation of photographs or other visual stimuli and direct surveys [56] (p. 45). Studies have also used quantitative techniques, such as preference and multivariate analysis models, for data treatment. Qualitative techniques, such as interviewing the actors concerned, have also proven valid [57,58]. In our case, a survey formed the main focus of this work, which was conducted in coordination with, and supported by, the regional administration.

Visitor Survey

Numerous works in the academic literature (from the fields of geography, agricultural economy, sociology, ecology and environmental studies) conducted in different sociocultural contexts analyze the perception of European rural spaces and the assessment of visitors' appreciation of such areas [59–64]. In some cases, the authors focus on the attitudes of people towards historic landscape transformation [65,66]. Traditional agricultural systems provide an image of authenticity and distinctiveness that is highly appreciated in tourist experiences.

The review of the literature confirms that each type of landscape may be attractive for particular groups of visitors, and that the variety in its elements has an influence on the positive assessment of the landscape. Elements that visitors find most satisfying include wildland areas, the presence of water and vegetation, attractive buildings and the color contrast associated with variety in cultivated crops, as has been reported for Andalusia (Spain) [60]. Attention has also been paid to the importance of the components of natural landscape in the tourist experience, with vegetation, slopes, and the presence of water (rivers, lakes, etc.) being some of the most appreciated parameters. In contrast,

abandoned fields and the uniformity of modern farmlands impair the perceived beauty of a landscape [67].

We opted for a field survey, aimed at individuals who, for reasons of leisure, had traveled to the area, using it as the setting for their tourism experience. The research draws on the premises of the European Landscape Convention. Given that the perceived quality of a landscape is a key variable in the design of sustainable and competitive tourism products, two basic premises formed our starting point. The first was the recognition of landscape as a holistic, integrated entity, which goes beyond its purely visual or aesthetic value. The second was the consideration of landscape as a regional asset, as a heritage, whose use for tourism is key for local communities. We decided to use questions that focused on all the components of the landscape, both human and natural, since their interaction determines the character of the landscape.

A direct survey of tourists is a costly procedure in terms of both time and resources, but it enables a significant amount of information to be collected about their characteristics, behavior and preferences. The survey was structured so as to enable the characterization of the tourists, and the type of trip, as well as to obtain their impression and perception of the landscape, and its potential for tourist use. It comprises various blocks, the last of which contains the most questions and focuses on landscape as a tourism resource. The questionnaire has thirty closed response questions, divided into five blocks, aimed at determining: (a) the profile of the tourist and day-tripper; (b) the characteristics of the trip and stay; (c) their opinion of the information available; (d) their reasons for choosing the destination; and (e) as the core aspect, their assessment of the tourist attractions and landscape. The data were collected between June and September 2016 (with the support of, and in coordination with, the Directorate General for Trade, Tourism and Crafts of the Regional Government of Castilla-La Mancha). The data collection procedure used was twofold. The interviewers gathered data directly from a sample of visitors to the territory, while surveys were also completed by visitors to tourist offices in the most important municipalities in the area. These offices are run directly by town councils and associations in coordination with Directorate General for Trade, Tourism and Crafts of the Regional Government of Castilla-La Mancha. The domain of analysis comprised all the visitors, of both sexes and aged over 18 years, that visited the tourist offices in 2015 and 2016 (87,475 individuals of both sexes in the entire province, of whom 39,899 were tourist in the area under study). Random probability sampling was used with 582 surveys being administered. All the information was entered into a database and was processed using the *Statistical Package for the Social Sciences* (SPSS). The error margin was 4.03% with a confidence interval of 95%, which ensured the results could help understand tourists' evaluation of the landscape (Table 1).

Table 1. Technical data sheet for the survey on visitors to the Albacete mountains.

Survey Data Sheet	
Sphere	Albacete mountain ranges (Regions of SACAM and the *Sierra del Segura*)
Universe	39,899 tourists of both sexes, aged 18 years or over, that visited the mountains in the province of Albacete in 2015 and 2016
Type of sampling	Simple random probability
Sample size	582 visitor respondents
Confidence level	95%
Margin of error	Very heterogeneous population (pq 0.5) = 4.03% Very homogenous population (pq 0.9) = 2.4%
Fieldwork date	June 2015 to September 2016

Source: Own preparation.

3. Results: Perception and Evaluation of Landscapes for Rural Tourism in the Selected Mid-Mountain Areas

The tourists and day-trippers surveyed presented a specific profile, characterized by adults in an intermediate age category (48% between 31 and 50 years, and 22% between 51 and 64 years); a substantial proportion of women (58%); high educational level (43% with university studies and 41% with secondary school studies); and being of domestic origin, given that 95% are Spanish, either from the same province as the study, or from other nearby ones, such as Alicante (16%), Valencia (15%), Murcia (13%) and Madrid (6%).

The visitors chose the destination for short stays, generally more than a day (68% of respondents). A little less than a third of the respondents were on day trips. The most common type of visit was weekend or public holidays (33%), followed by week-long stays (25%), and mostly with family (42%) or a partner (26%). The tourists' own car was the most common method of transport used (89%), with the activity being organized independently or as a personalized option (89%). It is significant that many of the tourists were already familiar with the region and were loyal to the destination (two thirds of respondents had previously visited the area). The primary channels of information were family and friends (mentioned by 47% of respondents), their own experience (39%) and the internet (20%).

The image of a destination shapes the expectations that form the basis of the travel decision. Thus, we asked respondents (who were allowed to choose more than one answer) about the attractions that most featured in the information they had consulted before the trip. The characteristics of the territory scored highest, with 88% of respondents indicating the natural landscape, followed by cultural heritage (59%), while special events, festivals and outdoor sports activities were also regarded as complementary options. The updated information available on the internet scored highest (3.9), while the information provided at the destination did not score especially high (around 3.5 out of 5).

In explaining their reasons for choosing the destination, more than half the respondents (53%) indicated "to visit natural and/or protected areas" as the main motive; a lower percentage (41%) mentioned "to visit small rural towns, museums, monuments . . . "; while a third said their stay was due to "visiting family or friends or staying in their own property" (34%). The second home function explains the significance of this last group (temporary residents). Different types of trip were identified (nature, culture, or family visit), depending on the main reason.

To determine the assessment of the landscape, we first asked about the attractiveness of six aspects (which respondents scored from 0 to 5). The area was generally perceived as one of undoubted resources and tourist potential, given that the scores are high. Ranked first was natural resources (mean of 4.5), followed by the tranquility and conservation of the location (4.4), the heritage (4.2), outdoor activities (4.1), and, finally, the festivals and the combination of natural and human elements (which both scored 4.0). When the responses were analyzed by group, according to the reason for the trip, the differences were found to be insignificant and the ranking of attractions remained the same.

The question on the components that shape the character of the Albacete mountain landscape allowed us to identify the features that give the area its distinctive, personal nature. The possibility of giving more than one answer led most of the respondents to choose a mean of 3.8 features from a list of 9 variables (with a total of 2241 answers). The list included elements of the natural environment (relief, water, climate, vegetation, wildlife), the human environment (habitat, rural landscape), and others of a more integrated nature, such as environmental quality and the combined natural and human elements. The ranking of these components reflects the importance given to relief, water and natural vegetation (Figure 1).
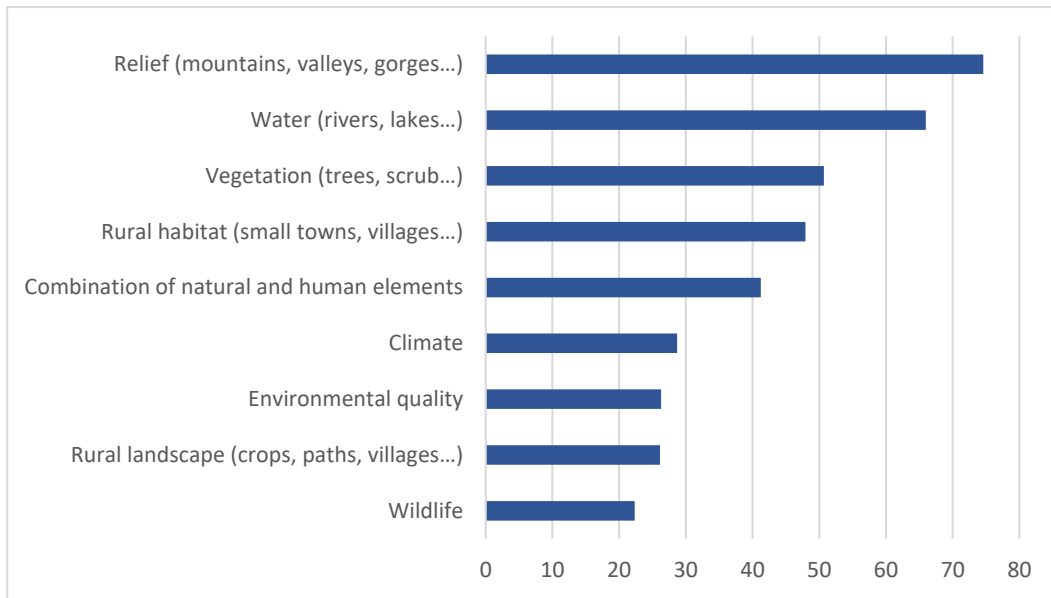
Figure 1. Elements that mark the character of the landscape in the Albacete mountains (% of respondents). (Source: Own preparation).

The three types of trip (for family reasons, to enjoy nature or cultural heritage) generated very few differences in the elements that shape the personality of the landscape. Broadly speaking, the predominance of the natural components is clear. First is the relief (mountains, valleys, gorges, etc.), accounting for more than 19% of answers, and the water landscapes (17%). At the second level, we find the vegetation cover (13%), the rural habitat (12%) and the integration of the environment and human activity (11%). The other elements scored considerably lower: climatic characteristics and heritage generated by agricultural activities (paths, plots of land, crop fields) (less than 7%), and wildlife, which is not considered a significant element (Figure 2).
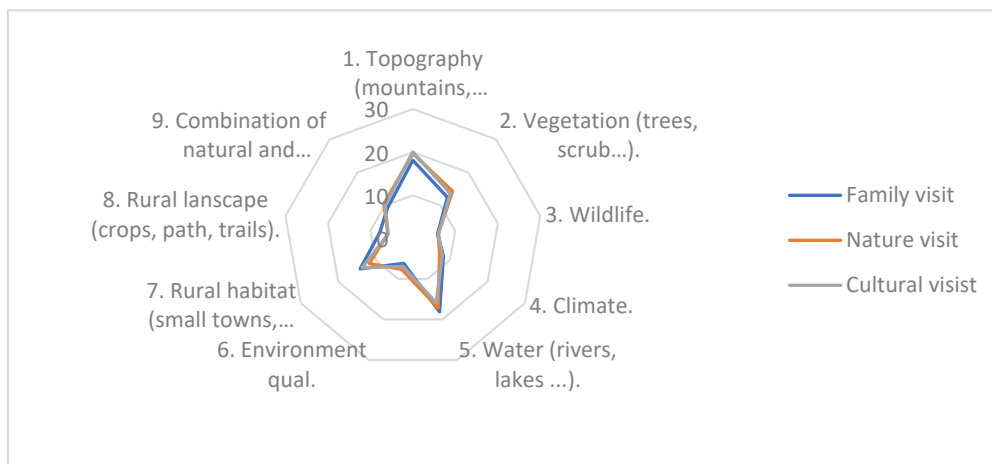
Figure 2. Elements that give personality to a landscape, according to the type of visit (% survey). (Source: Own preparation).

Another aspect to be noted is the quality of the environment visited, which determines sensory stimuli (key requirements in developing a tourist product). The assessment of the parameters affecting the quality of the landscape allows us to identify some of the threats it faces. When asked about the conservation of the environment, the visitors replied positively, especially regarding pollution and noise (70% and 54% of the respondents had not perceived these problems, respectively). The number of visitors and the distances between attractions means the area does not suffer, or only occasionally suffers, problems

of congestion (50% perceived no excess of visitors, although 22% reported having suffered congestion on occasions). Visual pollution in the form of aerials, power lines and quarries appears to be a bigger problem (30% of visitors had perceived such pollution occasionally and 9% considered it a common problem). Land pollution due to uncontrolled dumping (rubbish, livestock waste, etc.) was significant for 24% of visitors, although 46% had never noticed it. Visitors also noted aspects that might make the landscape lose its identity or authenticity, such as the disappearance of traditional elements or the appearance of imported ones. However, they recognized having insufficient knowledge of the problem, which means the percentage of blank answers was high (36%) (Figure 3).
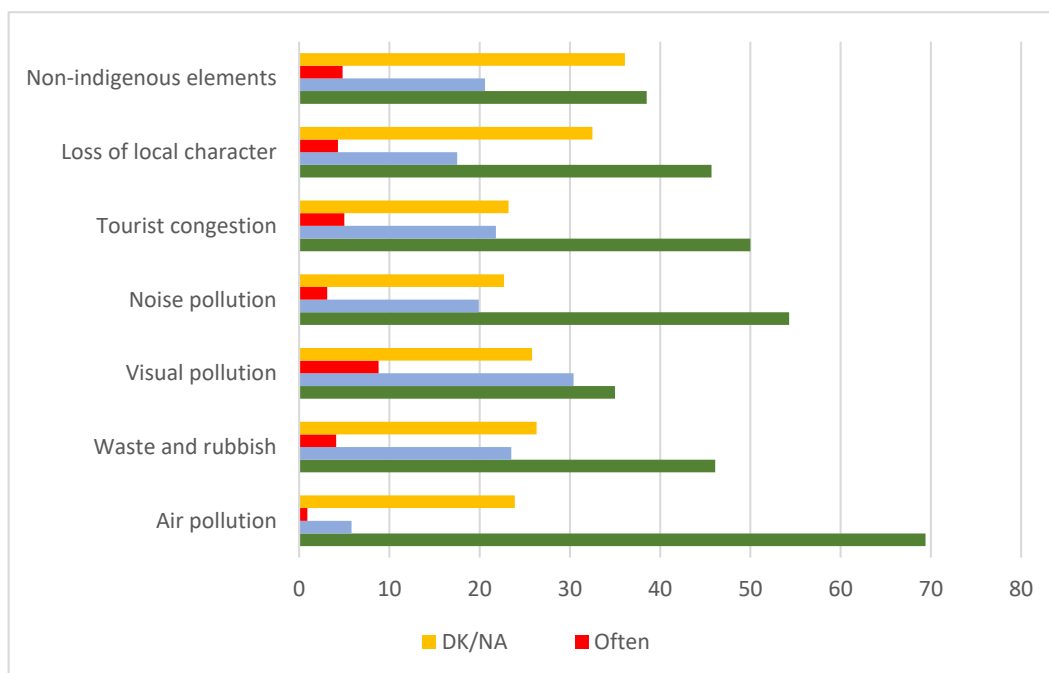
Figure 3. Landscape quality parameters detected (% survey) (Source: Own preparation).

The final overall assessment reveals that the natural landscape is the most appreciated (4.4 out of 5), followed by the inhabited landscape (villages, small towns and monuments) and the landscape generated by agricultural activity (cultivated fields, parcels of land, paths, etc.), both with a mean score of 4.1. It is striking that respondents who visit the mountains with their family because they have acquaintances or relatives in the area, or a second home, is the group that gave the lowest scores to all the aspects mentioned, especially the natural landscape and the rural habitat.

4. Discussion: The Use of Landscape for Tourism as a Core Element of the Multifunctionality and Revitalization of Inland Mid-Mountain Areas

The province of Albacete is situated in an underdeveloped region of Europe, where the per capita GDP is below 75% of the EU average (EUR 22,300 in 2018, compared to EUR 30,800 in the EU) [68]. The data for the province show an even more unfavorable situation (per capita GDP of EUR 20,900 in 2015). The mountain areas, still deeply rooted in the traditional economy and affected by problems of accessibility and depopulation, are among the most depressed areas of the entire region, and among the least developed parts of Europe.

4.1. The Territory under Analysis: Peripheral Mountain Districts Created to Drive Local Development in the Southeast of the Autonomous Community of Castilla-La Mancha

This work focused on the evaluation of the landscape in two groups created to promote local development: *The Local Action Group of Sierra de Alcaraz and Campo de Montiel* (SACAM),

launched in the middle of the 1990s, which permitted the implementation of development projects under the LEADER II initiative; and *the Local Action Group Association of Sierra del Segura*, which was founded in 2001 and has been managed by the LEADER+ initiative since 2002. The fact that these groups have been in place for 20 and 15 years, respectively, means they are experienced in rural development and have been able to implement actions to promote tourism on a relatively continuous basis. The outcome is an increase in the visible presence of tourism across the different elements of the local tourism system.

The two districts extend to the west and south of the province of Albacete and cover a significant part of its surface area (42%). However, there is a notable contrast between their spatial and populational importance, given that they only account for 10% of the total population of the province (Table 2). The *Sierra de Alcaraz and Campo de Montiel* comprises 25 municipalities (which together make up about a quarter of the province). The *Sierra de Segura* is a less extensive territory formed by 12 municipalities, covering about 18% of the whole area of the province. Different units can be identified, forming a mosaic with a certain diversity of geomorphology and landscape [69]. As regards physical characteristics, the two areas are home to the three types of natural units existing in the region, namely mountains, plains and foothills. These districts extend from the Baetic mountains of the Sierras de Segura and Alcaraz, through the areas of Paleozoic basement in the foothills of Sierra Morena, to the plateau of Campo de Montiel and the transition to the plains of La Mancha (towards the north and east) (Figure 4).

Table 2. Population and territory of the study area (Source: Inebase, 2020). Own preparation.

	Population		Surface Area		Pop. Density (2019)	Municipalities
	2019	**%**	**km^2**	**%**	**Inhab/km^2**	
SACAM	24,070	6.2	3668.9	24.6	6.6	25
Sierra de Segura	15,947	4.1	2665.1	17.9	6.0	12
All Albacete mountain areas	40,017	10.3	6334.0	42.4	6.3	37
Total Province	388,167	100.0	14,925.8	100.0	26.0	87

From a physical perspective, the mountains, formed predominantly by limestone rocks, reach altitudes of between 1000 and 2000 MASL. They give rise to a rugged terrain marked by folded and fractured rock, covered by shrub and tree vegetation, lending it a distinctly mountainous character. The watercourse of four river basins also enriches the variety of the landscape.

Among the many areas of geological and biogeographic interest in the district, there are two important natural parks: the Calar del Mundo in the Sierra del Segura and the Lagunas de Ruidera. These two natural areas have undergone little transformation. Owing to the beauty of their landscapes and the unique characteristics of their flora, fauna and topography, they are of notable ecological, aesthetic, educational and scientific value that deserves to be preserved. The former is a notable karst complex that is home to the source of the River Mundo, a tributary of the Segura River, while the Lagunas de Ruidera are included in the list of wetlands declared of international importance by the Ramsar Convention. In this case, the beauty of the landscape, together with the opportunity for water sports, has triggered the development of tourism. There also exist other protected areas, nature reserves or micro-reserves, scattered across the territory, which are representative of the significant interest of the physical and biogeographic components of its landscapes (Figure 5).
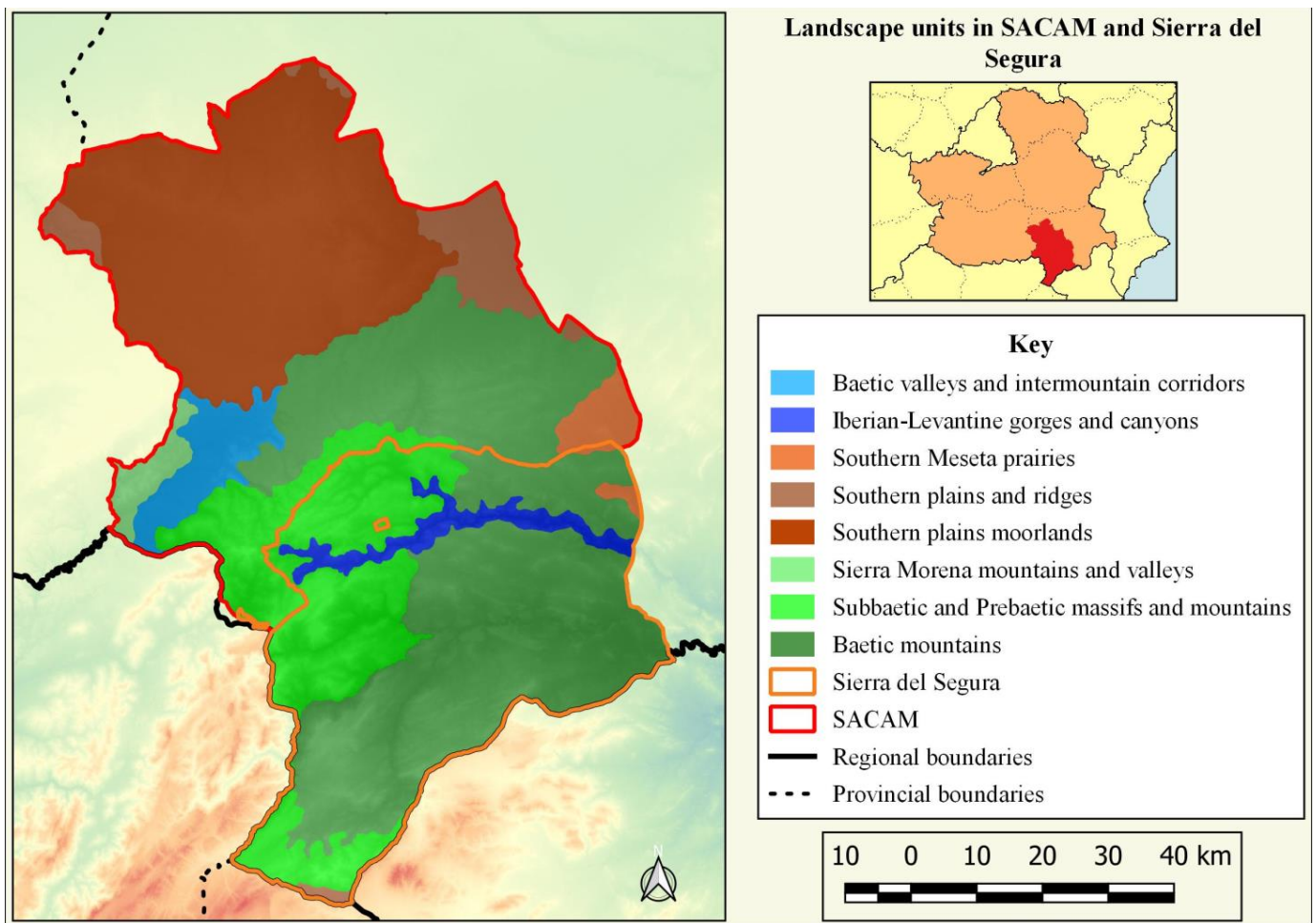
Figure 4. Landscape units (Source: Own preparation).

The variety of natural units has been the subject of analysis as a potential resource for tourism purposes [70,71]. Together with the mountains and "water landscapes", the territory includes distinctly agricultural areas, modeled on traditional farming practices. These are now beginning to be considered potential resources, apart from their value as productive areas. Initiatives, such as the Baeza Charter, have promoted the recognition as heritage of the mark left over time by agricultural activity, which manifests in the form of agrarian landscapes [72].

The area's natural diversity is completed by the cultural differences that are the result of historical events and socioeconomic activity. The two districts are characterized by their declining populations. Similar to other territories of inland Spain, since the 1950s, emigration has generated an area affected by increasing depopulation and ageing. This decreasing population trend persists in the 21st century, given the scant demographic vitality of these declining populations. The number of inhabitants is half what it was at the beginning of the 20th century. The result is an extensive territory, inhabited by some 40,000 people, representing a mean density of 6.5 inhab/km^2, with a very low birth rate (between 6 and 8 per 1000, since 2003) and a rising mortality rate (between 11 and 15 per 1000), due to the ageing population. Consequently, natural growth has been negative in all cases since the start of the 21st century, and, in most municipalities, the demographic structure does not guarantee generational turnover, which is a serious drawback as regards the possibilities for future development. The network of settlements is also typical of depressed rural areas, with 90% of the municipalities having a population of under 2000. Currently, however, and despite the evident process of regression, which has condemned

many inhabited areas from the last century to oblivion, the dynamic effect of tourism has given rise to a positive population balance in some small towns [73].
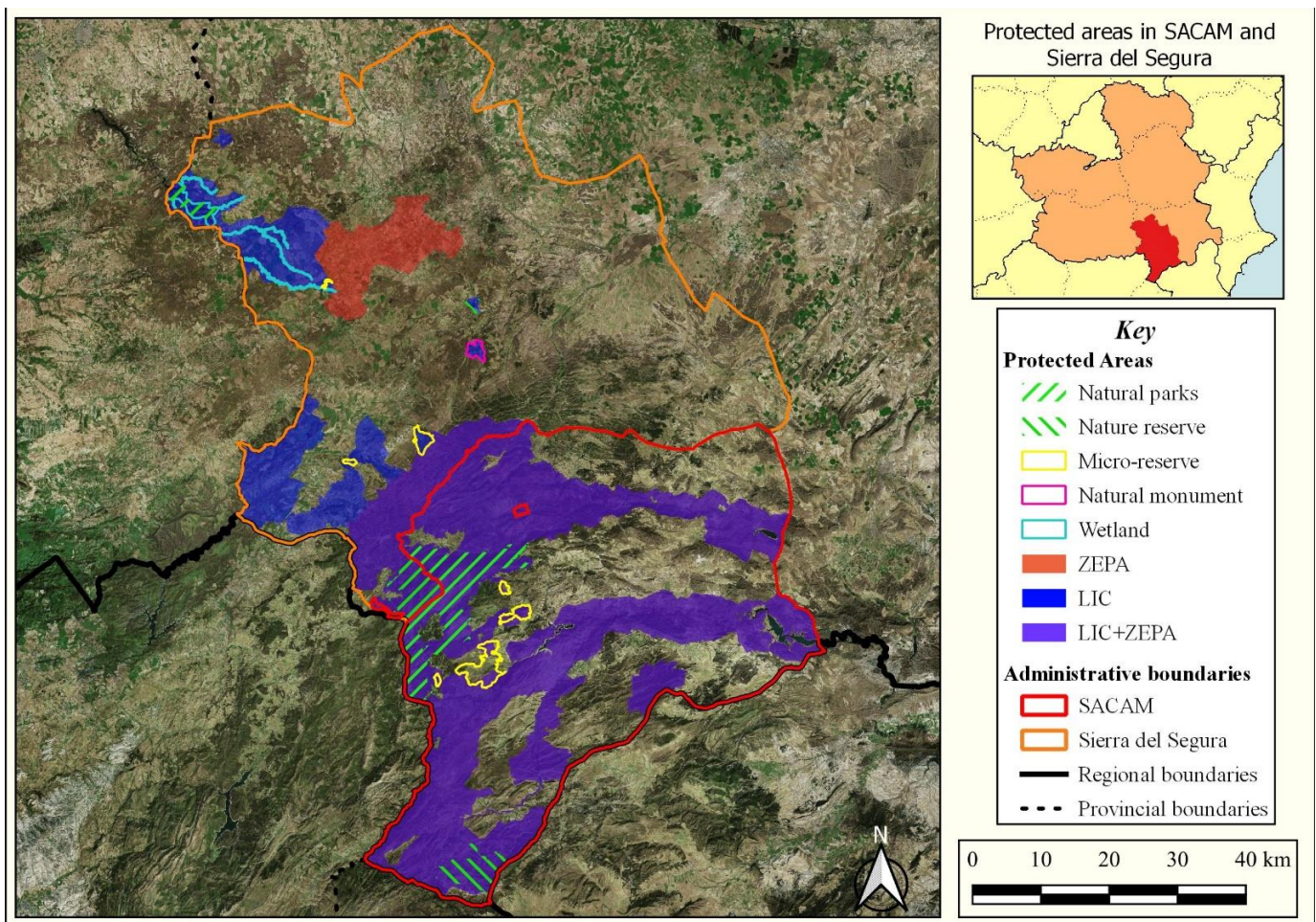
Figure 5. Protected areas (Source: Own preparation).

4.2. The Rapid Growth of Rural Tourism

In these depressed areas of inland Spain, the need to seek alternatives and the growing awareness of their natural and cultural attractions has led local actors, with the support of European Community grants, to promote the development of rural tourism. Since the end of the 20th century, this activity has grown in significance. The simplest way to visualize this process is arguably through the growth in rural tourism establishments. The province of Albacete has been a pioneer in the region of Castilla-La Mancha, with the southern mountain areas being leading players in the process, with the support of rural development programs and the efforts of local entrepreneurs and institutions [74].

In 2020, the region was home to 2346 rural tourism establishments (of various types, from country houses to rural tourism complexes and agrotourism enterprises, among others). Of these, 2202 (that is, 95% of the total) were rural houses, with accommodation for 19,669 guests (Table 3). However, apart from the absolute numbers, it is more important to look at how the supply has grown over time and across the territory, especially if we note that in 1996 there was only one. The province of Albacete, with 888 country houses in 2020 (950 rural accommodations including all categories), has been the undisputed leader in this process of creating tourist installations, with 40% of the regional total. The Segura and Alcaraz mountains, in the south and west of the province, have been the priority locations for rural accommodations. The substantial increases in the numbers of accommodations and tourists are far from homogenous, with the supply concentrated in

certain areas. Nonetheless, developments in recent years seem to suggest the possibility of a new trend derived from changes in the economic model, or as a result of the sector having been weakly structured, leading to questions about the future and a need for renewal [75]. However, tourism establishments have been the target of most of the public subsidies and institutional interest [70], with a much more limited focus being placed on the engines of the sector, which are the regional tourism resources.

Table 3. Growth in rural accommodations in Castilla-La Mancha (2000–2020).

	2000	2010	2013	2014	2015	2016	2020
Albacete (province)	152	662	793	809	775	784	950
Castilla-La Mancha	337	1621	1898	1950	1966	1969	2202

Source: Regional Government of Castilla-La Mancha. Data for several years. Data for 2020 as of October. Own preparation.

A key element is the role of the resources/products in this atypical growth, which is contributing to the expansion of the tertiary sector across the economy and local society. It is precisely here that landscape emerges as a resource. The natural attractions of the mountain areas (topography, vegetation and river basins) were the first to be leveraged for their potential to create tourism. However, as mentioned, other components of these rural territories, such as the traditional habitat, the elements of cultural heritage left by history over the years, or the agricultural landscapes, are, in the eyes of contemporary urban society, sights worth seeing and visiting. Mid-mountain areas are particularly attractive as places for outdoor activities, such as hiking, or sports and leisure pursuits typically associated with the rivers, lakes, and reservoirs in the region. Tourists' sensitivity to the rural setting leads them to visit places rich in history and tradition, and awakens their interest in knowledge about the local culture or the production processes used in the agricultural activities of the area. Nonetheless, the incorporation of landscape into the tourism system has been marked by improvisation, and a lack of strategy and determination among the different administrations. Indeed, lines for action are practically non-existent, despite the considerable increase in outdoor activities, as shown by the disorderly proliferation of unregulated hiking trails in the areas under study (Figure 6). The use of the survey allowed us to determine the perception and assessment of the quintessential tourism resources of the landscape.

The direct surveying of visitors is an appropriate method to understand their priorities when using the different elements of the tourist product in mid-mountain areas. The results show that landscape is a core aspect, which receives insufficient attention from the actors involved in revitalizing the tourism sector. The institutions responsible for its protection fail to view tourism as a dominant economic activity, and if they do, it is only tangentially. Including a variety of sensory parameters in the survey allows tourists' evaluations to be collected and the strengths and weaknesses of the territory to be identified.

As a tourist destination, the study area was found to be the recipient of moderate flows of Spanish tourists, of an intermediate age category and with a good level of education. Their prior expectations and the images available in various media play an important role in their assessment of the destination. The information visitors gather before their visit as part of their preparations, highlighting the importance and quality of the natural environment (mountains, valleys, water and forest), plays a decisive role in the identification of the character and singularity of the landscape in the area. The agro-ecosystems are not similarly evaluated, although the preservation of traditional systems (cultivation terraces, olive groves, crop variety) has been recognized in similar studies as a good indicator of visual quality. The visitors to the study area assessed these elements as a secondary attraction, which is a clear wake-up call regarding their neglect and, in some cases, their deterioration (Figure 7). It is necessary to invest in this aspect from the perspectives of both landscape education and maintenance.
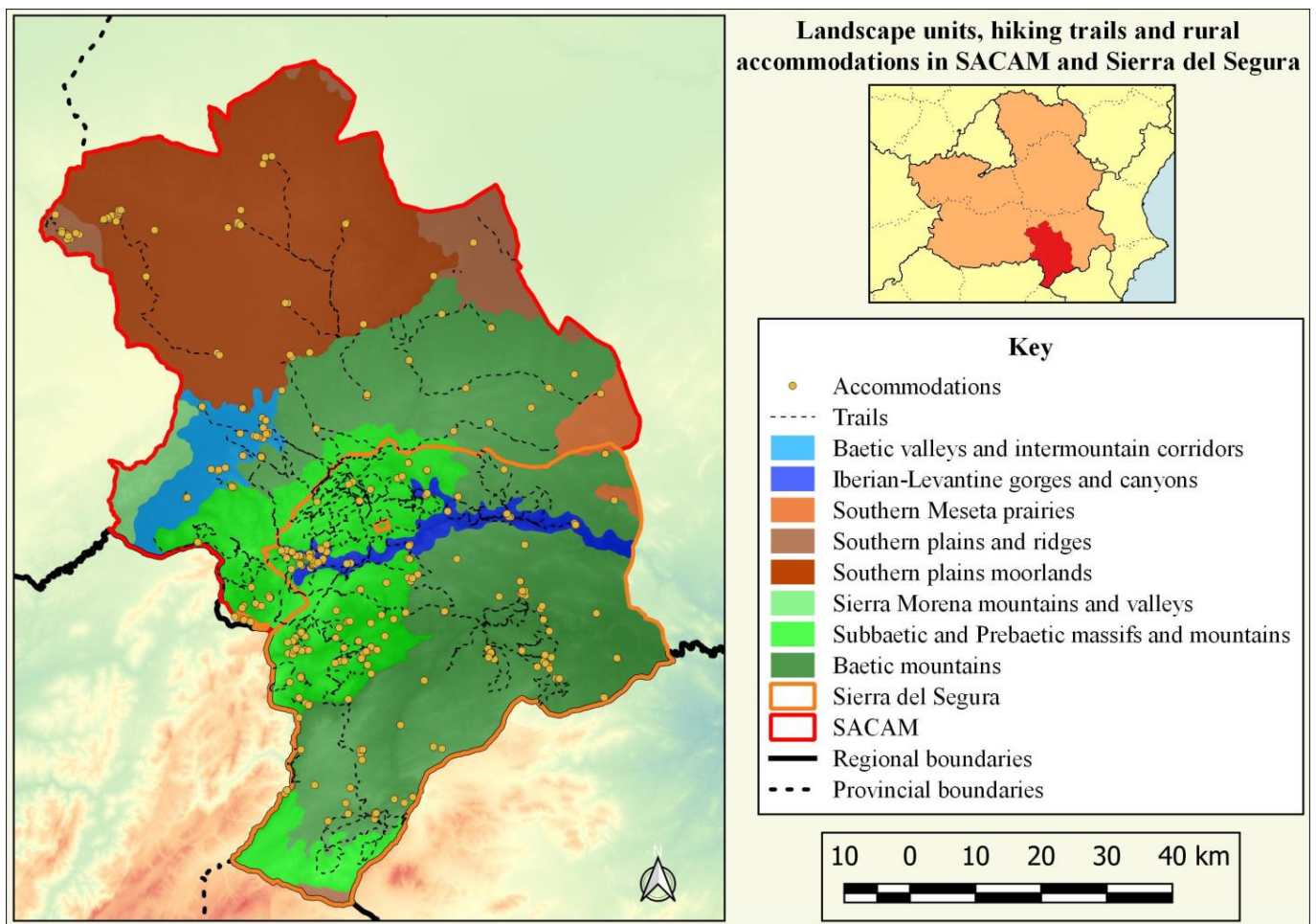
Figure 6. Rural accommodations, landscape units and hiking trails. Source: Own preparation.

Figure 7. Components of the rural landscape in the study area (abandoned cultivation terraces in Ayna and the source of the River Mundo in Riópar). Source: Own preparation.

5. Conclusions

Rural tourism and landscape have become inseparable and interdependent. On the one hand, rural tourism has grown as a result of policies designed to develop depressed

areas, although changes in tourist preferences in post-industrial society have also had an impact. On the other, hand landscape has gained prominence as a concept and a fact, as institutions have begun to recognize its value and, above all, the need for its conservation in light of increasing awareness and social use. The present work has identified some of the processes of socio-territorial transformation in a traditionally agricultural area (the southern mountains in the province of Albacete), which, in recent decades, has seen the expansion of the tertiary sector due to the rise in tourism. This activity is closely related to the characteristics of the territory, its landscape and the ecosystem resources, which are its primary attractions as a tourist destination. The use of a survey has proven to be a useful tool to understand the position of landscape within the elements of the tourism system. It is necessary, nonetheless, to conduct a more in-depth analysis, focusing with more detail on the evaluations and the impacts of specific territories. Surveys, but also other complementary methodologies, such as structured interviews or SIG tools, could help enhance the knowledge of the social use of landscape for tourism purposes. Comparative studies could also assist in understanding the behavior of tourism in mid-mountain regions.

Tourism is currently the most significant channel for the knowledge and consumption of landscape, which highlights these natural areas that are unspoiled by the everyday actions of humans, and especially their agricultural activities, over time. The landscape and its elements are also the primary tourist attraction in mountain areas, to which we can add other cultural elements, which are also present. These are the clear exponents of the identity of the area. Nonetheless, despite the growing use of landscape, the actions of public and private actors (administrations, local development groups and entrepreneurs) do not include it as an item of reference, or when they do so, it is merely part of a conceptual or propositional debate, with a lack of concrete actions being implemented. However, considering our findings, landscape is a key element of the tourism system from a resource perspective. It is the non-relocatable raw material associated with the territory, and the leading driver of tourist activity. It is necessary to encourage actions to raise awareness and to regulate, but also to recognize the value of landscape, using different optics and multidisciplinary interpretations. It is essential to incorporate landscape into the heart of the tourism process, and this should be done in coordination with local actors following the tenets of local and sustainable development.

The lack of consideration of landscape as heritage is one of the weaknesses of the development of tourism in many sectors. It is necessary to include landscape quality indicators in planning processes, and to encourage actions of participatory governance to incentivize the involvement of the local population in conserving and promoting the components of the landscape in their territory. Our research suggests that, in rural areas, landscapes are one of the most valued aspects, especially those least transformed [66], which highlights the need for landscape education programs aimed at preserving the elements of these resources. Multifunctional rural landscapes, the definition of which includes not only the natural environment but also the cultural heritage, are an example to be followed in designing tourism strategies and seeking solutions for the sustainable development of many depressed areas, especially in mountain regions.

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