

Article

Becoming a Developed and Sustainable Destination: La Siberia Biosphere Reserve in Spain

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Abstract: This paper reflects on the controversies to protect, and develop rural areas presenting the current situation, and the future, of the La Siberia Biosphere Reserve, located in the Extremadura region of Spain. Adopting a qualitative research design, we have gathered and examined the primary initiatives implemented for the Tourism Sustainability Plan of the reserve spanning from 2021 to 2023 and engaged in discussions regarding the potential of this region with the manager of the current Regional Development Centre, and a selection of key informants. In addition, opportunities and threats have been gathered from media. We employed the qualitative method and the content analysis, with ATLAS.ti software (ATLAS.ti.7). We have noticed that soon, this region will develop new proposals by fostering private-public collaboration. The findings indicate that the preservation of natural resources, that has emerged as a pivotal source of innovation, must deal with new entrepreneurial activities that can put the sustainability of the territory at risk. What sets this work apart is its portrayal of Extremadura as a benchmark for sustainable social and economic development fostered by regional public policies. It is our conclusion that both academia and society should establish collaborative spaces that facilitate the formation of entrepreneurial ecosystems, fostering the cultivation of talent and effectively addressing the new regional challenges in Europe.

Keywords: biosphere reserve; local development; place marketing; public policy; regional development; rural; sustainability



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1. Introduction

Biosphere reserves are prestigious designations bestowed by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) upon geographically significant areas of high value and conservation. There is not a single definition of what a biosphere reserve should be because flexibility is the magic key word for effective implementation [1,2]. However, and according to the Man and Biosphere Program (MAB), biosphere reserves have been defined as “learning places for sustainable development; sites for testing interdisciplinary approaches to understanding and managing changes and interactions between social and ecological systems, including conflict prevention and management of biodiversity” [3].

These reserves are characterized by the implementation of a development plan that ensures sustainability while promoting economic and social progress within the territory. The UNESCO Biosphere Program was launched in 1968, and by 2002, it had established 440 biosphere reserves in 97 countries, encompassing over 2.2 million square kilometers [4]. The number of protected areas has continued to grow, and today, there are 738 biosphere reserves in 134 countries, including 22 transboundary sites [5]. These designations are granted to regions of outstanding conservation significance, where a comprehensive development plan is proposed to ensure sustainability, as well as foster economic and social

advancement within the territory. Biosphere reserves must encompass diverse natural environments and strive to integrate the preservation of natural elements with social and economic development. They also aim to facilitate the safeguarding of traditional sustainable practices in the utilization of natural resources.

Extremadura, one of the seventeen Autonomous Communities of Spain situated in the South-West of the country, is currently home to three Biosphere Reserves: Monfragüe, Tejo-Tajo International, and La Siberia. These reserves have emerged as exemplars of sustainable social and economic development. La Siberia, the most recent addition to the Biosphere Reserves, received its UNESCO declaration on 19 June 2019, and was officially published in the Official State Gazette (BOE) on 9 January 2020. Spanning across 155,000 hectares, this reserve encompasses eleven villages and represents a comprehensive framework for experimentation and sustainability. Its core principles include the conservation of biodiversity and ecosystems, fostering the economic and social progress of the local communities, as well as providing support for research, training, and communication initiatives.

Nonetheless, it is noteworthy that while the concept and implementation of biosphere reserves have received extensive scholarly attention within the academic literature [2,6–9], there exists a conspicuous lacuna in research concerning the comprehensive analysis of how the fundamental tenets of biosphere reserves coalesce with the substantive advancement of the rural regions in question. This lacuna prompts the central query of the extent to which the attainment of this alignment is genuinely realized within each distinct case.

Furthermore, the rural development paradigm adopted within the framework of biosphere reserves, as delineated by Knickel and Renting [10] and expounded upon by Kratzer and Ammering [8], assumes a pivotal role in the amelioration of the local milieu. The conferment of biosphere reserve status upon a given area is anticipated to catalyze the cultivation of innovative diversity, advocate sustainability, and institute economic development strategies that place paramount importance on environmental conservation. This overarching ethos aligns harmoniously with the Green and Circular Strategic Plan for 2030 articulated by the region of Extremadura. The extent to which the economic development endeavors within the La Siberia Biosphere Reserve are progressing, and the priority accorded to environmental preservation within this context are matters of particular inquiry.

Moreover, to be designated as a Biosphere Reserve must facilitate collaboration between the parties involved, must encourage entrepreneurship, and enable the implementation of suitable and scalable technologies to modernize the entrepreneurial ecosystem, thereby mitigating depopulation and promoting the retention of the population within the region. This is particularly significant for Extremadura, as its population is widely dispersed across the territory, encompassing numerous small municipalities and rural regions. Addressing depopulation requires effective territorial planning strategies [11] while simultaneously fostering new economic models and sustainable social initiatives to create opportunities. We wonder about the effects of the designation of La Siberia as a biosphere reserve on the fixation of the population in the territory.

Finally, as emphasized by Murdoch [12], the network established to apply for, obtain, and develop a biosphere reserve designation must serve as a pivotal element in designing a prosperous and promising future for the area. Our work aims to contribute to seed light into this gap of research by analyzing the case study of La Siberia to reflect on the opportunities and threats of the territory and its future.

With the objective of comprehensively identifying the key features of this case study on sustainable destination marketing, and the controversies emerged by the potential economic development of the area, our research approach adopts a descriptive and qualitative design.

This study offers a contemplative examination of the intricate interplay between environmental and economic considerations. The study is of significance due to its contribution through the provision of primary and secondary data-driven analysis, enabling us to compare various perspectives. It underscores the non-trivial nature of the designation processes involved in classifying a region as a biosphere reserve. It emphasizes the necessity for these

processes to be effectively managed, given that they encompass substantial opportunities while concurrently posing potential threats.

After this introduction, we offer the theoretical framework supporting the study. Later, the biosphere reserve La Siberia is presented and characterized as a potential “placeful” tourism destination. The following sections show the method and results, and finish with conclusions.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1. Sustainable Development

Sustainable development is a multifaceted concept that counts on a robust theoretical framework for its defense and promotion. Complementary theoretical underpinnings provide a comprehensive framework for defending sustainable development as an imperative for addressing contemporary global challenges while safeguarding the well-being of future generations. At its core, this framework draws from the intersection of environmental, economic, and social dimensions [13]. One key theoretical pillar is ecological economics, which underscores the finite nature of natural resources and the need for their prudent management to ensure intergenerational equity [14,15]. Additionally, social theories of justice and equity provide normative guidance for addressing disparities and ensuring that the benefits of development are distributed equitably [16,17]. Furthermore, institutional theories emphasize the role of governance structures, policies, and regulations in facilitating sustainable practices [18]. Under this theoretical framework, the growing significance of firm sustainability orientation [19] and the global importance of the tourism sector have led to increased attention towards sustainable destination marketing.

It is undeniable that sustainable destinations have emerged as a competitive advantage within the tourism industry [20]. Moreover, sustainable destination marketing plays a pivotal role in the decision-making process of clients [21]. As a result, the conservation of natural resources has become a vital driver of innovation. The development of programs and initiatives capable of transforming production processes to enhance environmental performance can yield products and services aligned with a green and sustainable economy. In this context, innovation and entrepreneurship have become indispensable elements for promoting business models that prioritize optimizing production processes and resources, including materials and energy, while also minimizing waste generation and promoting reuse [22–24].

In 2017, the regional government of Extremadura in Spain initiated the Green and Circular Economy Strategy 2030 in line with a general trend around the world. At this respect, De Melo et al. [25] have identified an increase in initiatives to seek circularity through the formulation of public policies. This ambitious strategy in Extremadura aimed to foster innovation, entrepreneurship, the development of sustainable business initiatives, and the production of environmentally friendly goods and services, while leveraging the natural resources of the region. Presently, the region faces the challenge of transitioning from a linear economy to a circular economy that is low in carbon emissions and respects the conservation of heritage and environmental resources. This transition is being carried out with the active involvement of the territory and responsible municipalities that comprise it [26]. The objective is to ensure that cities and human settlements align with the principles of inclusivity, safety, resilience, and sustainability as outlined in the United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 11 [27]. Within this context, Biosphere Reserves represent areas that successfully satisfy these requirements [28–31].

However, merely attaining a designation as a biosphere reserve does not ensure the development of the area. Furthermore, there are instances of failure and geographical areas that lose their designation over time, as presented and discussed in the subsequent section.

2.2. Pros and Cons of Biosphere Reserves

While biosphere reserves are intended to balance conservation with sustainable development, there have been instances where they have faced challenges and potential failures. According to the work of Paül et al. [9] related to biosphere reserves in Spain, biosphere

reserves are mainly political products with clear economic objectives for the tourism sector, but unfortunately, not necessarily linked to sustainable development. While there have been challenges and failures in some biosphere reserves, there are also many success stories where these areas have effectively balanced conservation and development, demonstrating the potential for sustainable management practices [2,32–43].

Successful biosphere reserves often involve collaboration with local communities, governments, and various stakeholders. In cases where stakeholders are not adequately engaged or consulted, there is a higher likelihood of conflicts and insufficient support for conservation initiatives. For instance, the work of Lee [37] shows how the efforts to register the Baekdudaegan region in South Korea as a biosphere reserve failed due to opposition based on the distrust of residents related to the availability and benefits of resident support project, or the criteria for designating the transition areas and additional regulations.

Some biosphere reserves have struggled with inadequate resources and funding, which hinders their ability to effectively manage and protect the designated areas. This can lead to habitat degradation, biodiversity loss, and unsustainable land use practices. At this respect, Stoll-Kleemann and O’Riordan [35] remark that effective reserve management necessitates a favorable political climate marked by the allocation of sufficient human and financial resources capable of addressing the full spectrum of its responsibilities, alongside resolute political backing, particularly in relation to the influential agribusiness interest group. In certain cases, conflicts arise between conservation efforts and local development interests. Balancing the needs of the local community and conservation objectives can be a complex and delicate task, and failure to strike this balance can result in the deterioration of the reserve’s ecological integrity [36].

In fact, proper zoning and land-use planning are critical for biosphere reserves. Failures in these aspects can lead to uncontrolled urban sprawl, agricultural expansion, and infrastructure development within the reserve, which can have detrimental effects on the environment. A good example in Africa is the case of Yayu Biosphere Reserve in the Southwest Ethiopia. The officers responsible for overseeing the reserve identified several threats to biodiversity, including activities like illegal bushmeat hunting, large mammal poaching, and human–wildlife conflicts [33]. Meanwhile, Devine et al. [38], in their study conducted in Latin America and using the case study of Laguna del Tigre National Park as a basis, argued that narco-cattle ranching emerges as a significant catalyst for deforestation within the Maya Biosphere Reserve of Guatemala. In addition, poaching, illegal logging, and other illicit activities can pose a significant threat to biosphere reserves. When these activities persist, they can undermine conservation efforts and compromise the reserve’s ecological sustainability.

Finally, there have been cases where biosphere reserves have lost their UNESCO designation due to various reasons, including inadequate management, environmental degradation, or conflicts between stakeholders. Losing this designation is a clear indicator of failure in maintaining the reserve’s objectives [28].

Notwithstanding the myriad advantages associated with biosphere reserves, it is imperative to acknowledge the presence of drawbacks, underscoring the requisite imperatives of perpetual surveillance, adaptive governance, and active community engagement as indispensable elements in safeguarding the enduring viability of these ecological sanctuaries. In the following, we will delve into the La Siberia Biosphere Reserve as a case study.

3. Study Area: The Biosphere Reserve La Siberia

3.1. Location

The Biosphere Reserve La Siberia extends across 11 municipalities in the province of Badajoz in Extremadura including Castilblanco, Fuenlabrada de los Montes, Garbayuela, Helechosa de los Montes, Herrera del Duque, Puebla de Alcocer, Risco, Sancti-Spíritus, Tamurejo, Valdecaballeros, and Villarta de los Montes (Figure 1). It is interesting to note why this territory is called La Siberia, alluding to the Russian territory, with which it apparently has nothing to do. The first reason refers to its remoteness and poor communication.

However, this may have been true years ago, but nowadays it can be reached in just two hours from the capital of Spain, Madrid. The second reason is that it was used at some point in history as a place of exile. This can be true again today, but thinking of it as a voluntary exile, a refuge for those tired of the city, a place to reconnect with nature and the essence of being human. A high biodiversity index, enviable tranquility, and a freshwater coastline exceeding 1000 km define this extensive protected area.

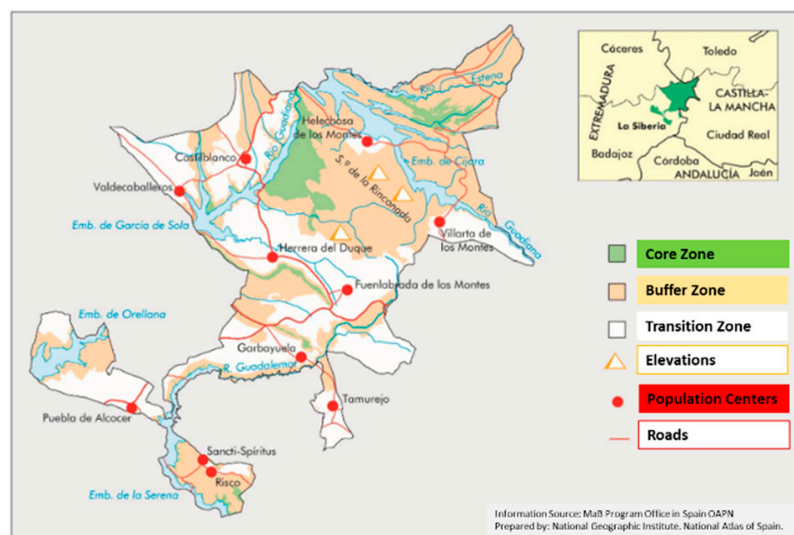


Figure 1. Map of La Siberia. Source: Spanish network of biosphere reserves (Available at: <http://rerb.oapn.es> (accessed on 17 May 2023)).

3.2. Steps Taken to Become as a Placeful Tourism Destination in Extremadura

Sustainability is not only a current trend but also a predominant factor shaping the future of tourism [44]. In this regard, Extremadura is recognized as a sustainable destination, with a strong commitment to eco-friendly tourism practices. The most recent data on tourism in Extremadura is sourced from the Tourism Observatory, under the purview of the Council of Culture, Tourism, and Sports of the Regional Government [45].

In 2023, the hotel segment recorded a total of 90,292 registered visitors, representing a 3.46% increase compared to 2022. Among these, there were 11,940 international visitors, which is a significant growth of 29.42% compared to the previous year. In the non-hotel sector, there were 26,790 registered visitors, marking a 12.16% increase from 2022. This sector also saw a rise in international visitors, with 3011 recorded, reflecting a notable 40% increase compared to the previous year. Overall, there were 117,052 visitors, out of which 14,951 were international, indicating an overall tourism increase of 5.33% and 31.51%, respectively, when compared to 2022.

Regarding the number of overnight stays in the hotel segment, a total of 158,336 stays were recorded, with 19,033 attributed to international visitors. This represents a significant increase of 6.25% and 26.37%, respectively, in comparison to 2022. In the non-hotel sector, there were 54,863 overnight stays registered, out of which 7332 were by international visitors. These figures indicate growth of 9.95% and 48.42%, respectively, when compared to the previous year. Overall, there were 213,199 overnight stays, with 26,365 attributed to international visitors, reflecting increases of 7.18% and 31.82%, respectively, compared to 2022.

Within Extremadura, the reserve of La Siberia could be considered as a “placeful” tourism destination. In place marketing, placefulness refers to the quality or characteristic of a place that evokes a sense of connection, belonging, and attachment. It is an important concept in place branding and destination management, as it highlights the value of creating places that are meaningful and appealing to both residents and tourists [46]. A destination will be considered as a placeful destination if shows to the potential tourist its unique attributes, atmosphere, and experiences that make the place distinct and mem-

orable. Placefulness encompasses the cultural, social, historical, and natural elements that contribute to the identity and character of the place. It is often associated with the authenticity, sense of community, and emotional resonance that people experience when they engage with a particular location [47]. Placefulness is developed and cultivated by the biosphere reserves managers through various means, such as preserving local traditions, promoting local businesses, enhancing the natural environment, and creating opportunities for meaningful interactions between residents and visitors.

In addition, some authors devoted to tourism and place branding have approached the concept of “placeful business” [48–52]. The concept refers to a type of tourism enterprise that places a strong emphasis on the unique characteristics and local distinctiveness of a destination. It seeks to create meaningful and authentic experiences for visitors by immersing them in the local culture, heritage, and natural environment. Rather than focusing solely on mass tourism and generic attractions, placeful tourism businesses aim to connect visitors with the essence of the place, its traditions, and its way of life. These businesses often collaborate closely with local communities, engaging them in the tourism development process and ensuring that their perspectives and interests are considered. They strive to minimize negative impacts on the environment, promote sustainable practices, and support local economies by working with local suppliers, artisans, and service providers. Placeful tourism businesses can take various forms, such as boutique hotels, eco-lodges, locally owned restaurants, community-based tour operators, or cultural immersion programs. They aim to create authentic and enriching experiences for tourists while respecting and preserving the uniqueness of the destination. By fostering a sense of connection and appreciation for the local environment and culture, placeful tourism businesses contribute to sustainable and responsible tourism development.

The touristic offerings in 2019 (last official available data) in the designated biosphere reserve area of La Siberia comprised a total of 44 establishments, with 27 dedicated to accommodation and 17 catering to restaurants. The overall accommodation capacity reached approximately 460 beds, with a considerable proportion (58%) attributed to rural houses. Tourist apartments and hostels accounted for the second most prevalent accommodation type, each representing approximately 16.7% of the total, followed by hotels with an 8.3% share. New data related to tourism from the reserve is not publicly available now, but we have gathered some fresh information as it is shown in the following sections.

4. Materials and Methods

In our study we employed a qualitative research method with the objective of comprehensively identifying the key features of this case study on sustainable destination marketing. We wanted also to detect the controversies that emerged from the potential economic development of the area.

We initially conducted an analysis of the Tourism Sustainability Plan implemented in the La Siberia Biosphere Reserve for the period 2021–2024, examining the primary initiatives undertaken to enhance the development of this unique region. The Tourism Sustainability Plan of La Siberia Biosphere Reserve, approved on 11 December 2020, in the BOE, outlines a four-year initiative with a budget of €2,437,500. The plan aims to promote sustainable development by preserving and enhancing the region’s cultural, natural, and scenic resources. Its overarching objective is to foster a new economic and social model within the Biosphere Reserve’s area. This entails the implementation of efficient infrastructure, the introduction of innovative business models, the creation of tourism products, and the enhancement of training and skill development opportunities for residents.

Additionally, we conducted an interview with the manager of the Rural Development Centre (CEDER) and we surveyed 6 selected key informants to gain insights and reflections on both the present and future of the reserve. Finally, we have collected the latest news related to the future and promised business ventures that are open to a debate about the controversy between sustainable versus economic development.

The validity of interviews was established using the technique of respondent validation. It involved testing the initial results with participants in order to see if the results still rang true. Related to the reliability of the research, we proceeded to organize the data formally and establish its authenticity by using ATLAS.ti software tool (<https://atlasti.com>, accessed on 20 October 2023) for the analysis. Specifically, we applied a thematic content analysis (TCA) as our primary data analysis technique. TCA consists of the analysis of written texts from the definition of various groups of categories based on selected criteria to collect the information systematically and assumes that frequency is a signal of the importance of the studied subject [53]. This method has provided valid results for research on other works focused on sustainability [54–56].

For coding we used a deductive-inductive approach. First, a deductive category application, based on the definition of what is a biosphere reserve [3], helped us to establish the main aspects of the analysis, bringing them in connection with the texts. Writing categories and codes is an important part of the analytical process, and collecting codes in a coding agenda is also the formative way for checking reliability [57]. Later, working through the texts new codes merged (induction), and it was necessary to integrate them in the coding agenda. In the next section, the results are provided step by step.

5. Results

5.1. Results Derived from the Analysis of the Current Tourism Sustainability Plan

To report the main results of the analysis carried out of The Tourism Sustainability Plan of La Siberia Biosphere Reserve (2021–2024), we have created one section for each specific objective included in the plan. Firstly, we present the specific objective set out, and secondly, we offer what we have found related to the attainment of the goal. Figure 2 shows the main policies displayed for becoming a placeful tourism destination.

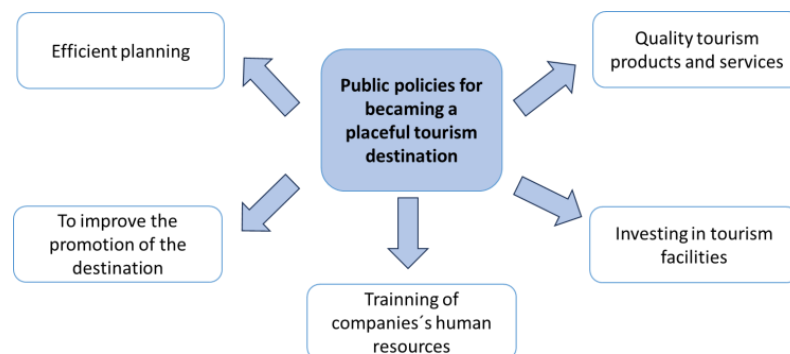


Figure 2. Public policies in La Siberia for becoming a placeful tourism destination. Source: Own from the Tourism Sustainability Plan of La Siberia (2021–2024).

- **Efficient Planning**

The first specific goal is to provide the tourist destination with efficient planning, consolidating public and private management, and exploring new forms of collaboration that increase business competitiveness through cooperation, entrepreneurship, competition, and social participation. Participation and partnership building in the tourism development of this Biosphere Reserve are guaranteed thanks to the new Participatory Local Development Strategy (2023–2027). During the process to develop the strategy, it has been highlighted to reinforce the local identity and the collaboration of stakeholders. The actions carried out, among others, are the following:

Day of the Region.

Gastronomic exhibition “Taste Siberia”.

La Siberia Amateur Theatre Show.

Assistance to enterprises in the area to international, national, and regional fairs.

Implantation of a Celestial Viewpoint.

- Quality

The second goal is to create quality tourism products and services, so that the La Siberia Biosphere Reserve was identified as a sustainable, experiential tourist destination, optimizing the diversity of the tourist offer, and thus improving the competitiveness of companies and organizations in the tourism sector.

The calendar of autumn activities in 2023 has consisted of a program of ecotourism proposals that combined the offer of small leisure and tourism enterprises in the area with activities promoted by the Town Halls, or by the CEDER. For instance, birding, bellowing, a popular painting contest in nature, mycology, cultural routes, music, and other activities have energized the Biosphere Reserve this autumn. One of the proposals was to be a shepherd for a day or learn to cook recipes with mushrooms that participants have previously been learned to identify and collect. “Mycosfera”, “Níscalo Fair” or “Transternancy Party” are some of the experiential activities in the area. A good example of public–private collaboration is the conjoint organization of Mycosfera by the Castilblanco City Hall and the private company Escenas Silvestres. The creation of “The Gastronomic Tourist Route” stands out, with the collaboration of private entities, specifically 12 enterprises, with other public ones, in the creation of gastronomic products.

It is remarkable that the plan includes four tourism products in its area of action: ecotourism, water reservoir tourism, gastronomic tourism, and tangible and intangible heritage.

- Promotion

The third goal is to improve the promotion of the destination and the associated tourist products, consolidating the development and promotion of the nature, heritage, landscape, gastronomy, and culture of the destination, creating a hallmark of its own identity that differentiates and positions the territory in the regional panorama, national and international.

As can be seen from the strategic axis 1 of the plan for management, monitoring and consolidation, the actions are not punctual but rather coordinated lines of action between the different levels of the administration and tourist agents. For instance, a big effort is being executed to promote the typical gastronomy of La Siberia, that takes advantage of the cinegenic richness of its natural landscapes for culinary elaborations such as stews of venison meat and wild boar, without neglecting livestock fauna like the pig. Each locality tends to attribute a dish of its own, and we find culinary elaborations spread throughout the reserve such as stews, varied soups, or pastry and cakes. It is important to highlight certain foods, such as honey, olive oil or cheese. The plan is also improving the promotion of traditions and customs that still prevail in La Siberia, being a mixture of religious and pagan festivities.

- Human capital

The fourth goal is to improve the training of companies’ human resources, incorporating sustainability into the destination’s value chain and tourism products, and integrating companies into quality systems. There is also a volunteer network activated in the La Siberia Biosphere Reserve that is currently participating in a training action on methodology, identification techniques, inventorying and monitoring of flora and fauna of La Siberia to later carry out actions related to this topic.

Related to quality distinctions, on the one hand CEDER La Siberia is currently collaborating with the companies of the territory in their adherence to the Comprehensive System of Spanish Tourist Quality in Destinations (SICTED is the acronym in Spanish), offering them advice and support in the process to be able to form a tourist destination of high quality in its services. The SICTED is a quality system, a project to improve the quality of tourist destinations promoted by the Secretary of State for Tourism (SETUR), with the support of the Spanish Federation of Municipalities and Provinces (FEMP), which works with tourist services of up to 36 different trades, with the goal of improving the tourist experience and satisfaction.

In addition, Pelоче Beach, belonging to the town of Herrera del Duque, has been classified as a Blue Flag. Blue Flag has become the symbol, most recognizable and recognized by the millions of users of beaches and ports, in almost fifty countries, as well as a world standard of tourist eco-quality, prior to and inspiring other certification initiatives. quality of beaches and ports.

- Facilities

The fifth and last specific goal is investing in a more efficient and accessible improvement and management of tourist facilities by creating or adapting tourist infrastructure in the area, and reorganizing the existing use and management, to extract its maximum potential for revitalization and sectoral and local economic development.

At present, the equipment of different tourist places is being improved, including floating platforms and jetties in different aquatic areas oriented to bathing and fishing areas. In addition, a tourist boat is being reformed and improved for river trips in the waters of the García de Sola reservoir.

The creation of new ecotourism activities companies should be highlighted as examples of entrepreneurship in the area, such as Siberocio Ecoturismo, dramatized tourist information services such as Siberiatur, or recreational farms such as Cijara Mágico. Probably the best example of tourist services in the La Siberia Biosphere Reserve is the first one, Siberocio Ecoturismo, a young company formed by a team of professionals whose main objective is to lead the ecotourism sector by offering services of sports activities and safe leisure alternatives in the environment. nature of La Siberia, such as Bee tourism, Astro tourism, hiking, water activities or cycling.

There is also an interesting agreement between the Badajoz Provincial Council, CEDER La Siberia, and the multinational Nestlé Aquarel for the conservation, research, and promotion of the La Siberia Biosphere Reserve.

To conclude this section, it is important to note that the tourist satisfaction data collected at the Herrera del Duque tourist office, the largest municipality within the reserve, are satisfactory.

5.2. Results Derived from the Interviews of the Manager of CEDER La Siberia and Selected Key Informants

Firstly, we have interviewed the manager of CEDER La Siberia, who holds a public position dedicated to the development of this territory. According to their own words “the expansion of this territory has only just begun”. The manager is concerned about the continuity of public policies that contribute to positioning this territory as a preferred destination for nature enthusiasts. Although there is still much to be done, the efforts made so far are already bearing positive results.

New data provided by the manager of CEDER La Siberia support the satisfactory results of the efforts made to reinforce tourism in the biosphere reserve. In 2023, the tourism offers in this sustainable territory has growth up. In May 2023, there are 50 tourist establishments, 34 of which are for accommodation, and 16 of which are restaurants. This represents almost 14% growth compared to 2019. Overall, in May 2023 the accommodation offer is around 491 beds, that is 6.7% higher than 2019. The importance of rural housing continues, with 52.1% of the total places but slightly less than in 2019, but tourist apartments and hostels have increased in the area and will continue to grow in the future.

Secondly, a selection of six key informants, all of them residents in the zone, have been interviewed: A member of the team promoting the designation as a biosphere reserve; the manager of the Siberia Consortium as a representative of Public Administrations; the General Director of Forest Policy in the region; a Director of a Secondary Education Institute in the area; a technician from the Badajoz Chamber of Commerce representing the business sector; an environmental conservation technician working in the reserve.

In general terms we can say that the key informants consider that the designation as a reserve has been a positive turning point in the development of the region. The territory, from its various aspects, has accepted being integrated into a sustainable geographical

environment under the UNESCO quality umbrella, and what that implies: preserving biological and cultural diversity, promoting sustainable development of the municipalities it comprises, as well as driving research, training, education, and outreach initiatives as support for the reserve.

However, they also express that “there should be more visibility given to the activities that are carried out and advertise them more”, “the population decline in the area and the aging of the population, as well as the dispersion among population centers, which affects the socio-economic development of the territory” and “there is limited economic diversification and a polarization of activity extending towards larger municipalities.”

5.3. Results Derived from the Triangulation of Previous Results with the Latest Economic News

The results obtained from the Tourism Plan, and from the interviews with the manager of the CEDER and the key informants, have been triangulated with the latest economic news appearing in the media. As a result, the opportunities, and threats for the territory soon, have been defined (Figure 3).

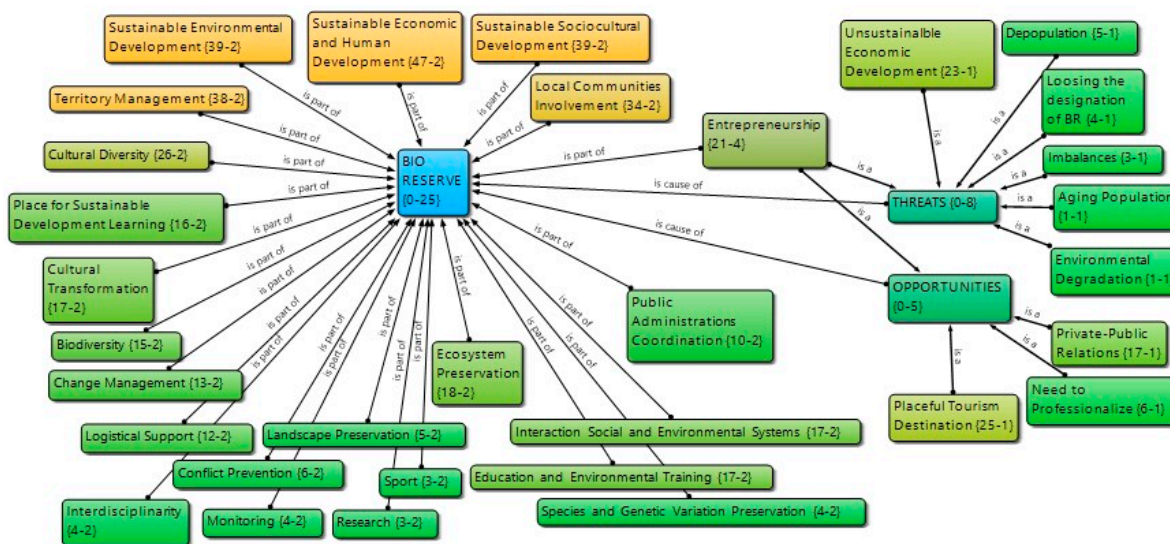


Figure 3. Characteristics, opportunities, and threats of the biosphere Reserve La Siberia.

According to the conversation with the manager, we have known that the biosphere reserve will benefit from the two latest programs in Extremadura that will contribute to the promotion of region as a tourist destination, the strengthening of the economy and the attraction of investment, with a total budget of 9.8 million Euros. The first one “Extremadura destination of experiences” and the second one “Extremadura blue tourism destination.”

Regarding the first line of action, destination of experiences, the initiative encompasses actions in the field of green and sustainable transition, including sustainable management interventions for public use in bathing areas across the municipalities in Extremadura, primarily those awarded the Blue Flag, located within the La Siberia Biosphere Reserve. To enhance the quality of the bathing areas, an investment of 100,000 euros will be made in each of the 11 municipalities. These funds will be used to interpret the natural and aquatic spaces, increase shaded areas to serve as climate shelters, improve the layout and design of these beach spaces, promote blue trails around wetlands and reservoirs, and create pleasant soundscapes. In terms of competitiveness, a call for grants for the competitiveness and quality of hospitality and tourism businesses has been established, with a budget of 2,500,000 euros. Lastly, within the competitiveness axis, the creation of the experiential tourism product of rural tourism and gastronomy has been approved for municipalities with fewer than 10,000 inhabitants, with a budget of 1,500,000 euros.

Regarding the second line of action, blue tourism, Extremadura is an inland Blue Destination, primarily through the Blue Flag distinction, along with others, and its connection

to priority tourism products. In 2023, from the National Plan, Extremadura will receive 21,522,000 euros for two Tourism Destination Sustainability Plans, and two Destination Cohesion Actions to care for water as a tourism resource, enhance and beautify spaces in bathing areas, improve the functioning of tourist services: parking, changing rooms, showers, toilets, security, maintenance, and cleanliness. In the field of improving energy efficiency, the aim is to improve comfort, create climate shelters, irrigation, and efficient lighting in blue tourism spaces.

Linked to the digital transition of the territory, it is planned to create an audiovisual guide to blue tourism in Extremadura. The App “Extremadura es agua/Extremadura is water” will also be developed with new functionalities. The idea is to allow the inclusion of more content about the tourist resources and services of the natural, cultural, and gastronomic heritage of the blue tourism spaces.

In addition, in the field of competitiveness, the creation of a large public–private Alliance for blue tourism in Extremadura, water routes, Extremadura Gourmet in blue tourism spaces, and an Iberian Observatory for Blue Tourism in the Interior are foreseen. This Observatory will allow monitoring the economic, environmental, and social impact of this type of tourism in Spain and Portugal. The observatory will promote workshops and conferences with the mission of contributing to current and emerging debates on the management of water resources applied to companies and tourist destinations in the Iberian Peninsula, at the same time it will promote actions to improve tourism policies related to water. The maximum execution time for these projects is three years, until 2026.

Moving to potential threats, new investment projects are arriving in the Extremadura region, and not all of them seem compatible. We specifically highlight here the project of a smart mega-city located remarkably close to the La Siberia Biosphere Reserve. With a total surface area close to 12 million square meters (1185 hectares), the residential and leisure mega-complex called “Elysium City” has begun its long journey to become a reality on the shores of the García Sola reservoir, in the municipality of Castilblanco, one of the municipalities of La Siberia, a small town with fewer than a thousand inhabitants.

At this respect, the national newspaper Expansion has echoed this apparent threat to the biosphere reserve. At the beginning of 2023, this newspaper stated that the set of legislations affecting this mega-complex, with a combined investment of €18.13 billion for its complete development according to company data, has not posed a barrier for the promoters. In fact, they consider it a “successful example” in terms of its processing, with an “integrative” vision of administrative processes and compliance with urban, environmental, infrastructure, and telecommunications requirements, among many others.

Administratively speaking, this “city”, as its promoters define it, is starting to take shape after the Extremadura government gave the green light to a decree approving the Territorial Impact and Execution Project Plan for Major Leisure Facilities, under Decree 78/2020, which classifies the initiative as a “Major leisure facility”.

Today, “Elysium City is an unstoppable reality”, according to the City Council of Castilblanco. The promoters claim that Elysium City will be “an intelligent city, a model of the 21st century, with new concepts of leisure, mobility, construction, architecture, and technology”. Out of the 11.8 million square meters, the total buildable area will be 5.8 million square meters (580 hectares). Specifically, the tertiary buildable area, referring to the services offered by this complex, will be 460 hectares, while the residential buildable area will reach approximately 267,000 square meters. In addition, there will be 200 hectares of green areas. According to the promoter’s data, which estimates the creation of 18,812 hotel rooms, the investment for the first phase amounts to around €4 billion. Employment forecasts indicate approximately 32,480 jobs during the eight-year construction of the complex, while the operational phase will create around 26,000 jobs. The complex, consisting of nine interconnected and non-compartmentalized districts, plans to include a wellness center, a hospital assistance facility, a transportation terminal, a sports complex, educational centers including a university-related one, hotels, residential areas, theme parks, shopping areas, an open-air auditorium, amphitheatres, and water activities.

Following the Supreme Court ruling ordering the complete demolition of the tourist complex “Marina Isla de Valdecañas” in the province of Cáceres, located on a 134.5-hectare island in the Valdecañas reservoir (there are still appeals before the Constitutional Court), some voices, especially from environmental groups, extrapolated the judicial decision to what could happen in the future with Elysium City. However, its promoters asserted days after said Supreme Court ruling that the project is conceived in a manner respectful of biodiversity and, in accordance with regulations and environmental planning instruments, “strictly complies with all requirements for the protection of the natural environment”. Furthermore, they claim that the complex unequivocally states that “under no circumstances is it built in a Special Protection Area (ZEPA)”, nor “does it involve any change of land use in areas designated as Natura 2000 network”, and there is “compatibility” with the fact that some of the land is located near the La Siberia Biosphere Reserve.

Figure 3 shows the network view obtained with ATLAS_{ti}, with 3 categories (bioreserve, opportunities, and threads) and 22 related codes. The numbers in each rectangle express the groundedness of the code (frequency of occurrence) and the saturation of the code (or number of links with other codes). Colors also express groundedness and saturation.

If we begin by analyzing the network from the left, and at the top, we can observe that the primary themes identified in the analysis are sustainable development in the economic and human dimensions, followed by the environmental and cultural dimensions, in that order. Following in importance are the aspects related to territorial management and the involvement of the local community. In addition, we have substantiated that the reserve is indeed regarded as a hub for sustainable development learning.

One of the prominent codes that has emerged is that of cultural transformation. It has been observed that there is a concern regarding the effective occurrence of this essential cultural shift to prevent the failure of the reserve project. The role assigned to entrepreneurial activities, the economy, tourism, and commerce in general, has revealed of particular relevance in the development of the area.

When examining the right side of the network, it becomes evident that the perceived opportunities are balanced by corresponding threats. In essence, the reserve is viewed as a promising hub for sustainable development; however, there are significant concerns regarding recent economic proposals that seem environmentally unsustainable and challenging to implement within this protected area.

6. Discussion

The key issue here is how to balance development, sustainability, and cultural preservation in line with previous research. The case study of La Siberia Biosphere Reserve demonstrates that the controversy is served. The discussion delves into the ongoing discourse surrounding regional development, with a particular focus on the delicate balance between economic growth and environmental and cultural preservation. The development of La Siberia sparks a contentious debate, reflecting the complex interplay of economic aspirations, new private initiatives, and concerns for sustainability. As highlighted in academic literature, flexibility is the best advice for managing the future [1,2].

Local public administrations are at the forefront of this multifaceted debate, tasked with the challenging responsibility of shaping the future of their territories [26]. They must navigate the fine line between facilitating economic development and ensuring the region’s long-term sustainability. This involves developing and implementing policies that encourage responsible business practices, sustainable land use, and environmental protection while simultaneously safeguarding cultural heritage.

We contend that the concept of placefulness, as advocated by Robertson [47] and further expounded upon by Madgin et al. [48], should serve as the overarching objective for informing the management of biosphere reserves moving forward. This proposition is intricately tied to the imperative cultural transformation of individuals and communities, with the aim of fostering a profound emotional connection with La Siberia. It must go beyond the physical and environmental attributes of the place, it must encompass the

sense of belonging, attachment, and identity that people, both inhabitants and tourists, derive from it. The biosphere reserve La Siberia should cultivate placefulness rooted in personal experiences, shared memories, cultural significance, and a sense of rootedness and familiarity.

Nowadays, the debate surrounding the development of La Siberia is multifaceted, encompassing economic, environmental, and cultural dimensions. While regional development driven by private enterprises holds promise for economic growth, it is obvious that it must be conducted in a manner that prioritizes all previous efforts completed in this biosphere reserve for sustainability and cultural preservation. In line with Taecharungroj and Prasertsakul [53], the economic and human sustainable development of the reserve needs placeful business, more than unsustainable entrepreneurship. Ultimately, the successful resolution of this dilemma will determine the course of the territory's development in the years to come.

7. Conclusions

Regional public policies have the potential to shape the future of localities [8]. It is evident that political impetus is required for a territory to be designated as a biosphere reserve. But once this achievement is attained, we defend that it becomes necessary to maintain a focus on public policies that establish the territory as a sustainable tourist destination.

We have analyzed the potential of the Tourism Plan in the Biosphere Reserve to transform the territory towards a social, economic, green, and circular model, based on sustainable, intelligent, and inclusive development. The work has the originality to have presented Extremadura as benchmark for sustainable social and economic development.

The findings show that the conservation of natural resources has become an essential source of innovation. The design of different actions has been capable of initiating a socioeconomic transformation, consistent with a green and sustainable economy. The description of the specific objectives set out in the Tourism Sustainability Plan of La Siberia, and the achievements, allow us to present this case study as a sustainable, experiential tourist destination, optimizing the diversity of the tourist offer, and thus improving the regional competitiveness.

However, and acknowledging that new entrepreneurial ventures from the private sector could play a pivotal role in fostering economic development within the area—because the initiatives described can create employment opportunities, stimulate innovation, and contribute to the overall economic well-being of the community—the allure of this promising economic development should not overshadow everything achieved so far to turn the place into a sustainable territory.

We cannot conclude without acknowledging the limitations of this case study. The study, of a qualitative nature, had a descriptive objective and sought answers through both primary and secondary data. However, the collected data could be expanded to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the perceptions of all the stakeholders involved.

For the near future, this territory will develop new proposals considering the collaboration between public and private institutions. In addition, academia and society must be able to form collaborative spaces that facilitate the construction of entrepreneurial ecosystems that generate talent and face the new challenges that arise in different domains—economic, social, political, territorial, environmental—to improve the quality of life of citizens. Future analysis should conduct interviews with tourists to verify their perceptions of the sustainable destination as well as interviews with a representative sample of citizens to monitor that the place is effectively becoming a place for sustainable development learning. Moreover, future research endeavors should systematically investigate the intricate challenges posed by depopulation. In conjunction with this, a comprehensive analysis is imperative to formulate strategies aimed at fostering an equitable dispersion of developmental initiatives among the diverse municipalities encompassed within the reserve. Such an approach will guarantee that smaller communities are presented with sustainable prospects, consequently fortifying the preservation of residents within the region.

The present of the biosphere reserve La Siberia has been analyzed here. The future of this promising project will need to rethink human–environment relations. The socio-economic development of the territory cannot be at odds with the conservation of natural spaces. A balance between economic development and social and environmental development is necessary. Biosphere reserves are destined to become placeful destinations. The image, the dream, and the future of the biosphere reserve La Siberia has to become a successful, vibrant and reputed placeful tourism destination in Extremadura.

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