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CULTURAL PERSPECTIVES ON TOURISM PROMOTION: A CASE STUDY OF RIA FORMOSA LAGOON

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Abstract: Ria Formosa, a prominent lagoon ecosystem along the central and eastern coast of the Algarve region, comprises five islands and two peninsulas, serving as a crucial focal point with significant societal, economic, and environmental implications. This lagoon area, stretching 60 kilometers in length, covers approximately 18,400 hectares, while the barrier island separating it from the sea spans around 2,000 hectares. Dynamic forces such as strong winds and high tides contribute to constant alterations in the configuration of islands and inlets, posing potential flood risks. Ria Formosa holds international recognition as a unique wetland. In 1978, it earned the designation of a "nature reserve," followed by a "natural park" status in 1987, solidifying its integral role in the Natura 2000 Network due to its rich faunal and floristic diversity. Notably, it serves as a critical habitat for endangered bird species, particularly for nesting. The Ramsar Convention of 1992 explicitly acknowledges Ria Formosa as a "complex of coastal saltwater lagoons and barrier islands" characterized by extensive mudflats, sand banks, dune systems, saltmarshes, and substantial *Zostera* beds. This ecosystem is complemented by diverse elements such as *Pinus* plantations, urban areas, agricultural land, industrial sites, and facilities for fish and mollusk rearing. Its importance transcends birdlife, encompassing various species engaged in breeding, wintering, and staging, with a special focus on egrets and ibises. Furthermore, Ria Formosa is botanically significant, hosting numerous endemic plant species.

Keywords: Ria Formosa, Lagoon Ecosystem, Ramsar Convention, Biodiversity, Environmental Conservation.

1. Introduction

Ria Formosa which forms a physiographic unit of the central and eastern coast of the Algarve region, is an important lagoon ecosystem consisting of five islands –BarretaorDeserta, Culatra, Armona, Tavira and Cabanas – and the Ancão and Cacela Peninsulas, with particular impact in terms of social, economic and environmental portrayal. The area of the lagoon, with a length of 60 km, is around 18 400 ha and the barrier island that separates it from the sea is about 2000 ha. Strong winds and high tides, in turn, cause a frequent fluctuation in the proportions of islands and inlets and even the risk of flooding (Ceia, 2009). It is an interesting wetland, internationally recognized as such. In 1978, it was given the status of “nature reserve” and, in 1987, of “natural park”, being an integral part of the Natura 2000 Network due to its faunal and floristic diversity, being especially a decisive space for the nesting of endangered birds. The Ramsar convention (1992) explicitly recognized that this is “a complex of coastal saltwater lagoons and barrier

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islands, with extensive mudflats, sand banks, dune systems, saltmarshes, and substantial *Zostera* beds”, in addition to “Pinus plantations, urban areas, agricultural land, industrial sites, and nurseries for fish and mollusk rearing”, being the area important “for numerous species of breeding, wintering and staging water birds, including egrets and ibis” and “of botanical importance, supporting several endemic plants”.

This park is also important for its dunes and marshes. However, together with an identification of its potentialities, there is an apparent contrast with its vulnerability precisely as a complex and multidimensional ecosystem, a situation that becomes clear with the development of tourism in the 1960’s and its most recent growth. In 2018, there were around 47000 visitors, having reached its peak in 2017 with around 56000 visitors. The inherent increase in human occupation is accompanied by the growth of many infrastructures, as well as an intensive use of means of transport, with emphasis on cars, which end up compromising the stability of the most vulnerable and most-at-risk areas, like the barrier of islands itself, with significant damage to the natural habitat, and with negative consequences for the inhabitants who live on the resources it provides, in particular in terms of fishing, bivalve harvesting and salt extraction (Ceia, 2009). According to the Electric Mobility Plan of Ria Formosa Natural Park (2020), the park had already been visited by 46,662 visitors, of which 37% came to contact with nature, 32% to observe birds, 15% to walk and 13% for cultural motivations. 88% were of foreign nationality. 81% travelled in their own vehicle, 13% by bike or on foot, and 73% with the assumed purpose of visiting the Park.

The predominance of road transport will have contributed 80% to the fact that the five municipalities that are part of the Park have been responsible for the consumption of about 12,500 tons of fossil fuels.

Hence the introduction of a set of measures to protect the environment with regard to transport, which include the implementation of electric bicycles and scooters, as well as a buggy and a bus, both electric.

The intention to reconcile the sustainability of the Park with the social and economic importance of tourism is a concern to Amaral (2009, 9), which proposes the practice of Bird watching as a nautical component inserted in a context of sustainable nature tourism because it is “a tourist activity recently and strongly linked to the environment and with a deep educational component, being precisely one of its characteristics to be governed by the principle of sustainable use of resources and the involvement of local communities”.

In the same sense, Polis Litoral (2016), in a more comprehensive way, sets the priorities of its action in the hydrodynamic enhancement and risk mitigation on the barrier islands by significantly improving access conditions, enhancing road use, reordering motorized traffic, reorganizing and regularizing the area, controlling impacts on the ecosystem by upgrading and increasing the space used by the public, correcting erosion phenomena and diminishing risks to people and property, creating new infrastructures for sanitation, water supply and public lighting, planting highly-adapted native species of vegetation, re-restoring the natural conditions of the ecosystem and minimizing situations of risk to people and property. One of the main goals of Polis Ria Formosa has been, from the beginning, the creation of conditions to overcome the strict limits of a “sun and sea” tourism in favour of the development of tourism projects within the scope of nature, scientific and sports tourism.

The local population is around seven and a half thousand people, even tripling in the summer season, so vigilance and protection are essential in order to keep this ecosystem alive. Therefore, in 2017, because of the problems caused by the disorderly construction of thousands of illegal houses on Culatra island, 200 houses were

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demolished. Currently there are still around 100 on the Ancão Peninsula and 189 on the islands. Meanwhile, some small villages that traditionally supported small fishing fleets today tend to use the boats for tourist trade.

Although with contradictions in their relations in terms of sustainability, the main attractions of Ria Formosa natural park defended by tourism marketing continue to be the natural scenery, abundant wildlife, the beaches, the silence and the lack of air pollution. On the other hand, several studies and projects on hydrodynamic, microbiological, climatic, transports, economic and social issues in this territory are already available or ongoing. As far as we are concerned, it seemed important to complement some of the data provided by these studies with an anthropological and epistemological conceptual network capable of laying the foundations for a necessary and disciplinarily fruitful dialogue with the social sciences. Necessary because it will allow to deepen the collective awareness of a critical conflict implicit in the multiple challenges that are at stake; fruitful as it induces the structuring of conceptual networks that are more comprehensive, flexible and appropriate to the complexity of the phenomena in question.

In this context, Ria Formosa will have a privileged focus on five aspects:

- Its hybridity and multi-referentiality as a natural entity between insularity and continentality;
- The fact of living the risks of an intensive use of its resources;
- Because of being the focus of environmental concerns and innovative environmental projects;
- The fact of being one of the most important tourist destinations in the country;
- Because it is object of many and intensive marketing campaigns.

2. Literature review

The uniqueness of an idea of “nissomarketing” predominates in island tourism marketing, which stems from the granting of a “real or supposed isolation of the islands” that supports “a social, cultural, even political construction of the insularity” that Bernardie-Tahir names the 4 “i”: “Isolation, Imagination, Immobility, Identity” (Redon, 2019, 83). Meanwhile, from the outset, the criticism of traditional marketing messages “to withstand online attitudinal challenges” instead of favouring “the ability of inoculation messages to protect destination image attitudes” against attacks finally destroy the positive image of the destination in question. The adoption of these inoculation messages is suggested by Ivanov (2018, 32-33) following McGuire's (1964) inoculation theory who suggested using this biological metaphor to identify the attitudes that can be inoculated against persuasive attacks such as an immune system can be inoculated against viral attacks.

In fact, “A strong positive destination image attitude is vulnerable” in the face of information from competing entities and because consumers themselves, who have become co-designers and co-marketers of tourism products, have free access to information disseminated by television, newspapers and social networks, in addition to the testimonies and experiences of other tourists.

On the other hand, since “authenticity” has been the value that most often motivates the interest of visitors with regard to island destinations, it is essential to keep in mind that in fact, it is often a “staged authenticity” (MacCannell, 1976), particularly when it is specially created to satisfy tourists. This authenticity thus seeks to respond to the beliefs, expectations and feelings that people have about a particular community.

Urry (2002, 2) brought us the concept of “tourist gaze” that expresses the tendency of tourists to value certain aspects of the reality of tourist destinations “because they are taken to be in some sense out of the ordinary”. In

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this way, the tourist and his viewpoints are manipulated “so that the gaze falls upon what the gazer expects to see” (Turner et al., 2005,11).

There are also ideas close to the geography of tourism, which, being used by island tourism marketing, are essential attractions for tourists. Among these, the notions of “coastal tourism” and “maritime tourism” stand out, both defined by the European Commission (2021). The first, covering “beach-based tourism and recreation activities” and “other activities for which the proximity of the sea is an advantage”. The second, “covers predominantly water-based activities (...) (often carried out in coastal waters) and cruising”. “Littorality” is the third notion that, derived from geography, encompasses the previous ones and expresses the set of relationships between populations, permanent and temporary, which live in the coastal area and the underlying practices, conflicts and methods of managing its resources and the activities that take place there. “Littorality finally appears as a good start to think the action within the tourist island territories” (Furt&Tafani, 2014).

There are finally some anthropological concepts, like “robinsonade”, “heterotopy” and “desert island” which are implicit directly or indirectly in the representations of the potential customers and in the tourist marketing strategies.

Robinsonade is frequently used as a tourist-marketing tool. We propose to question all the epistemological and strategic assumptions of that use by starting to analyze the notion of “desert island” presented by Deleuze (2002) as the dream of the man by being himself the consciousness of the island and where, rather than the island, man is also who is truly separated from the world, recreating an exotic world.

The notion of “robinsonade” (Kinane, I., 2019) is related to Michel Foucault’s (1994, 752-762) notion of “heterotopy” as a connection of spaces breaking with real space and, as “heterochrony”, breaking with real time. However, Foucault adds that today worry is fundamentally about space, probably much more than time. It will no longer be a matter of medieval conception of space as a location within a hierarchical set of places, nor of the Galilean space where extension replaces the localization, but from the location defined by relations of proximity between points or elements. On the basis of these assumptions, we will especially consider the third, fifth and sixth principles that characterize these “different spaces”, respectively, as “the power to juxtapose in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible”, which always assumes an opening and closing system and, finally, that either have “the role to create a space of illusion that exposes every real space as still more illusory” (...) “or, else, on the contrary, to create another space, another real space, as perfect, as meticulous, as well organized, as ours is disordered”.

3. Methodology

Conceptual research and content analysis are the research methodologies implemented because before any other research - theoretical or practical - it is urgent to proceed to the critical mobilization of notions of reference, which, due to their nature, are polysemic besides tending to be shared by common sense with all the confusions resulting there from. Therefore, as Xin et al. (2013, 70), “we position conceptual research as a particular research strategy that sits mainly in the subjectivist/interpretivist paradigms (with possibilities for critical engagement)”.

The simple content analysis is provided through the mobilization of documents that lend to this exposition the vivacity and authenticity of some of the most important positions at stake about the analyzed problematic. It is privileged a phenomenological methodology, considering the contributions of Soica (2016), which assumes that tourism is “as a meaning-making practice”. This emphasizes an appreciation of the subjective dimension, which

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includes, in particular, the experience, understanding and knowledge that make possible to see tourism as a practice of personalization and interaction with the world in which tourists and tour promoters convey, first of all, senses that are likely to create expectations regarding places that become tourist destinations.

Relying on Fiske's concept of vertical intertextuality, Soica (2016) highlights the circulation of the senses that evolve the concerned place itself, through promotional websites, with processes of connotation and denotation of meanings, up to the considerations that tourists do have based on representations inherent to their experiences. Thus, there is a construction of meaning in the scope of the process between the created expectation and the performed experience, which together form an experience, or more precisely an “embodied experience”.

In fact, Fiske (1987, 108), from the perspective of the conception of intertextuality as a postmodern sensibility shared by audiences, proposes “anyone text is necessarily read in relationship to others and that a range of textual knowledge is brought to bear upon it. These relations do not take the form of specific allusions from one text to another and there is no need for readers to be familiar with specific texts to read intertextually”. Thus, to Ottand Walter (2000, 432), “Fiske appears to be consistent with the perspectives articulated by Barthes and Kristeva arguing that “because of their incompleteness, all popular texts have leaky boundaries; they flow into everyday life. Distinctions among texts are as invalid as the distinctions between text and life.”

The content analysis was used to carry out in an intensive, albeit exploratory way, highlighting the meanings of the documents’ reports, declarations and other instruments including those of tourist dissemination. In this regard, it is important to highlight again the reflections of Xin et al. (2013) for whom, if subjectivist and qualitative perspectives lack confirmation to be obtained by quantitative and also empirical data, that does not mean a strict subordination to the evidence using empirical data. The internal logic, the plausibility and the suitability to clarify what is problematic, together with self-reflection are fundamental to allow a critique of existing concepts and because they drive the development of new concepts.

The research design used in this study is clearly hermeneutic, avoiding to depend on the constraints inherent to the investigations underpinning the application model and the requirements of scheduling tourist activities and refusing the domain of commonplaces, namely with regard to concepts such as “authenticity” and “exoticism”. With this concern in mind, triangulation reasoning are used to explore the connections of meaning between neighboring concepts in their relation to the considered problems.

4. Results and discussion

The expressions of citizenship gain public dimension and emerge as one of the origins of the dissemination of news related to environmental issues, in this case, in 2019 through the social networks, by complaint of the correlation between actions taken in the context of the continental coast and their consequences in the islands spaces, for example sharing photos and videos that showed Deserta island as a beach full of debris.

It is in this context that Ria Formosa Litoral Polis Society, managed by the state and various municipalities, in its 2014 report, sets out several actions as having been part of its activity to solve problems inherent to the Ria Formosa ecosystem.

It is a set of directives, some directly related to the concern for the preservation of natural conditions, namely with regard to the “protection of coastal areas particularly threatened by sea level rise, ensuring the maintenance of different uses of the territory”, the “maintenance and replacement of the natural conditions of the coastal

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ecosystem that will ensure its biophysical stability”, the “reorganization and enhancement of sea fronts”, and the “rehabilitation and recovery of damaged lagoon areas”, in order to ensure sustainability of the territory.

For this reason, the Polis Litoral Ria Formosa’s Territorial Marketing Plan (2020) “proposes to carry out projects and actions that lead to the development associated with the preservation of the natural and landscape heritage, which include actions to protect and requalify the coastal zone aiming at risk prevention, promoting nature conservation and biodiversity within the scope of sustainable management, the enhancement of fishing centers and the qualification and ordering of mobility in the estuary, and its enhancement for public enjoyment and the promotion of the natural and cultural heritage associated with it”.

Other proposals are added that aim to provide conditions for a tourist dynamisation that combines the maintenance of sustainability with the creative and attractive use of the natural conditions of Ria Formosa. These included the “environmental enhancement actions in natural areas near bathing areas, creating leisure areas, pedestrian paths of nature interpretation, with complementary spaces to sun-sea tourism”, the “valorisation of bathing spaces, allowing the public to enjoy the beaches and taking advantage of the infrastructures”, “the promotion of environmentally sustainable forms of coastal enjoyment, namely by the conception of a network of cycling and pedestrian circuits”, the “requalification of riverfronts, giving them living and enjoyment conditions for population and visitors, allowing a good sea-land connection”, the “creation of infrastructures to support sports and leisure activities, boosting these activities and involving users with sensitivity and appreciation for the natural environment”, and the “creation of motorhomes parking spaces environmentally favourable but also attractive”.

At the same time, the preservation of cultural and tangible patrimony is valued clearly in association of its social representation with the authenticity of nature as environmental and added values in terms of promotion among potential visitors in line with the interests of the resident community.

Hence the proposal of “recovery of the built heritage through its rehabilitation and development” and “preservation of traditions and the maintenance of traditional basic economic activities linked to the primary sector”.

The concern with the modernization of the means at the service of scientific and technically monitored sustainability, even more than just with its preservation, emerges the idea of “creation of reference equipment, a fundamental anchor of a new relationship between the community and the Natural Park which, in addition to being able to host administrative or research facilities associated with the Natural Park/ICNF, will include a center for interpretation and monitoring of ecosystems”.

Meanwhile, many criticisms have been made on the results of the Polis Program’s studies and interventions. These are mainly based on an alleged ineffectiveness about the protection of water quality contaminated by the discharge of effluents from coastal and island populations, as well as by the absence of dredging, claimed by fishermen in order to renew these waters, together with demolitions that will not always respect the rights of local communities. It is also criticized the constructions on the coast and barrier islands, the overfishing and the excess of shellfish hatcheries, the waste disposal in saltmarshes and saltpans, the silting up of the lagoon and, despite what was predicted, the destruction of dunes and heritage degradation.

Nonetheless, in the field of the purposes of its internal and external promotion, Polis Litoral Ria Formosa, in the same document previously mentioned, proposes to consider that the territorial marketing plan: “should enhance the projection of Ria Formosa’s image to assure new economic activities and to create a different and unique

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tourism product, with the capacity to attract new segments, such as nature, scientific and sports tourism, in addition to „sun and sea“ tourism”(https://www.polislitoralriaformosa.pt).

With regard to the promotion of Ria Formosa as a tourist product, we highlight the following promotional sites and dissemination of strategic plans:

- [Planos - P9 - Polis Litoral Ria Formosa \(Plans - P-9-Polis litoral Ria Formosa\) \(www.polislitoralriaformosa.pt\)](#)

[Planos](#)

Territorial marketing plan: creation of a territorial image / brand for the promotion of Ria Formosa products associated with nature and landscape, offer of accommodation and gastronomy, among others through communication and promotion actions in regional and national communication media, such as tourist guides, itineraries, cultural agendas, signposting, tourist office, municipal publications, etc.

- [Planos - P10 - Polis Litoral Ria Formosa \(Plans-P-10- Polis Litoral Ria Formosa \(www.polislitoralriaformosa.pt\) Planos](#)

Communication and dissemination plan: information, training and communication actions addressed to target audiences; installation of informative signposting and adequate and homogeneous dissemination; publication of promotional material; actions to promote traditional products and with reference to the Ria; creation of information and dissemination offices; organization of event schedules; content for websites.

- [Informação turística - Visitar o Algarve - Passeios Ria Formosa \(Tourist Information - Visiting the Algarve- Ria Formosa Tours\) www.passeios-ria-formosa.com > algarve-regiao-sul-po...](#)

Tourist Information- Visiting the Algarve- Ria Formosa Tours, highlights the great scientific, cultural, economic and social value of the environment and the landscape which, alongside other activities, such as fishing, aquaculture, agriculture and tourism, are directly and indirectly associated with each other, taking always into account the need not to threaten the balance of the ecosystem.

-[Passeio de Barco na Ria Formosa desde Faro, Algarve|Lands \(Boat trip on the Ria Formosa from Faro, Algarvelands.pt > tour > passeio-barco-ria-formosa-faro-algarve](#)

Promotion of ecological boat tours which powered by solar energy allow to appreciate the silence of a nature and the wildlife of the lagoon without disturbing it, therefore without negative impacts on the environment.

- [Campanha de marketing digital Heads up, Hands on – Plastic \(Digital marketing campaign Heads up, hands on- Plastica-eco.org > 2020/03/23 > campanha-de-marketing-digit](#)

AECO – Associação para o Estudo e Desenvolvimento dos Oceanos (Association for the Study and Development of the Oceans): within the scope of the Heads up, Hands on - Plastic free ria Formosa campaign, co-financed by the European Outdoor Conservation Association, implementation of a set of videos with suggestions to minimize the use of plastic in daily activities.

- [Confraria da Ria Formosa lança 1º Concurso Gastronómico \(Ria Formosa Brotherhoodlaunchesthe 1st GastronomicContextregiao-sul.pt > Sociedade](#)

ConfrariaMarinha da Ria Formosa which, within the scope of territorial and gastronomic marketing, aims to contribute to the survey, protection, promotion and dissemination of the cultural, environmental, historical and gastronomic heritage of Ria Formosa and namely of its history, tradition and ancient techniques of manufacturing.

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- [Plano de Marketing Estrategico para o Turismo do Algarve...\(Strategic Marketing Plan for Tourism of the Algarve...www.turismodeportugal.pt >estrategia > Plano-Mar...](http://www.turismodeportugal.pt/estrategia/Plano-Mar...)

Turismo de Portugal, Strategic Marketing Plan for Tourism in the Algarve 2015-2018, including Ria Formosa intends to promote tourism products such as “sun and sea”, golf, residential tourism, gastronomy and wines, touring, health tourism, tourism business, nature tourism and nautical tourism.

In other words, the messages are divided between the linear exaltation of a natural, patrimonial and human paradise accessible to visitors and the emphasis on the need to defend the balance of the ecosystem, which turns out to be an aspect valued among tourists increasingly aware of the major demands of ecology and sustainability. All this exalting its undeniable beauty of Ria Formosa without, however, identifying its concrete environmental problems.

In 2019, Culatra, one of six pilot islands, gets funding from the Clean Energy for EU Islands Secretariat, through the project “Culatra 2030 - Sustainable Energy Community”, coordinated by the University of Algarve, in partnership with Culatra Residents Association. The creation of an Energy Transition Agenda on this Ria Formosa Island, according to the announced purposes, will make this territory an excellence center in terms of interaction between the local community, renewable energies research and companies promoting environmental sustainability and adapting the island to climate change.

The association that advocates the “Campaign for a Plastic Free Ria Formosa” (2019) considers that the appointment by the European Outdoor Conservation Association (EOCA) that praises the relevance of this project in biodiversity area “is already a victory in itself, because it brings great visibility to the Ria Formosa, to Algarve and to the country”, particularly in the context of tourism.

It is in this context and based on the example of Ria Formosa that we believe it is essential to frame tourism issues and particularly island and coastal tourism with an anthropological and epistemological conceptualization that raises the assumptions and strategies of touristic marketing to a more demanding critical level. Not only on behalf of ethical references, namely by reference to visitors and host communities, but also for reasons of effectiveness of promotional campaigns. Given the access to extensive information that the potential visitor has and due to the demands on the quality of tourism products and services, it is difficult for a visitor to accept to be disappointed during the stay or through the previous perception of less accurate information.

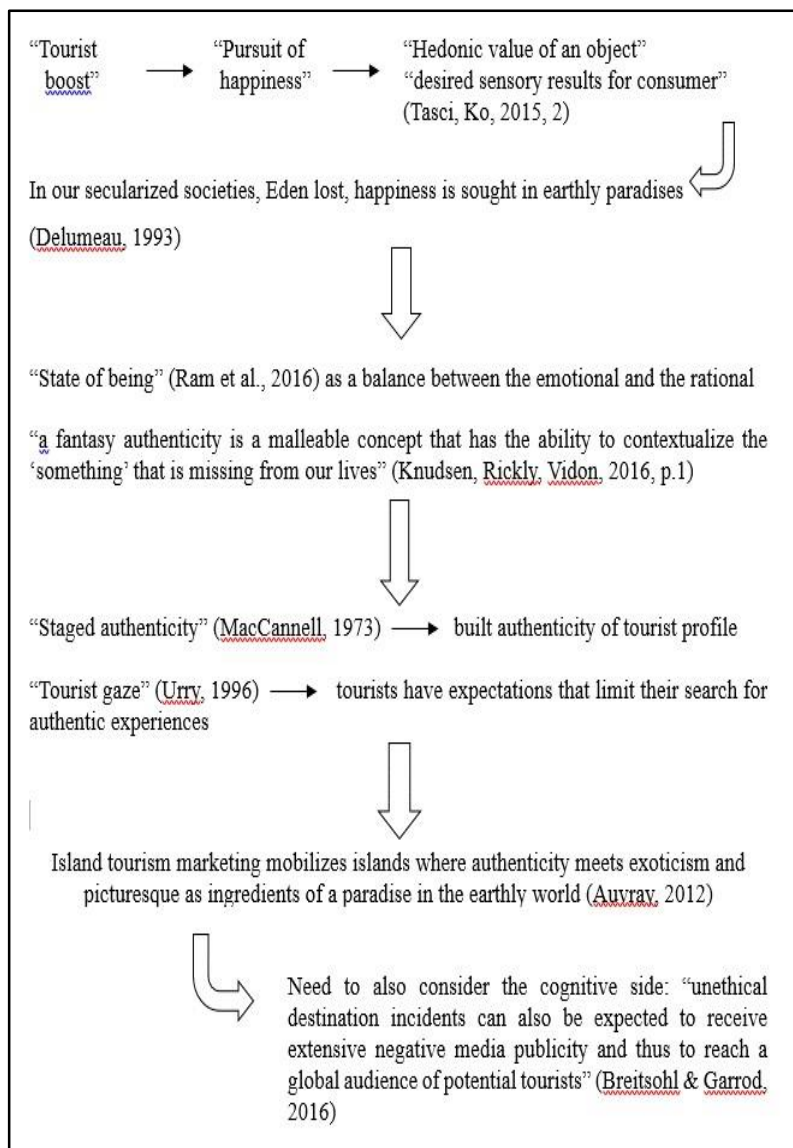
With a set of schemes that we present below, we intend to highlight the critical connections between the authenticity of the destinations and the expectations of tourists in search of what can complete their curiosity and the desire for well-being and happiness.

In regards to islands, the aesthetic imagery of the “desert island” that cultivated the representation of its exotic immobility, although still important, is no longer a self-sufficient fantasy; in turn, traditional marketing, focused on the assumption of robinsonade, has become inadequate by persisting in the dissemination of enchanting messages that end up not resisting the erosion caused by the reports that call them into question and because tourists often become, by themselves, “codesigners of the tourist product” (Sigala, Christou, Gretzel, 2012).

Moreover, when the tourist is manipulated, “the gaze falls upon what the gazer expects to see” (Turner et al., 2005). Finally, it is important to bear in mind the concept of heterotopy “as a connection of spaces breaking with real time” which at the same time, as Foucault (1994) identified, highlighting the relevance of space, means above all “the power to juxtapose in a single place several spaces that are in themselves incompatible”.

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In the case of Formosaisland, being a symbiosis between coastal and maritime tourism, the need for an approach that contemplates a corresponding conceptual constellation is reinforced, due to its objective complexity. Regarding the use of concepts that allow an adequate critical reading of the anthropological assumptions inherent to some of the main aspects of the strategies used to promote RiaFormosa as a tourist destination, we propose the following conceptual framework:



5. Conclusions

Combining the connections suggested by the conceptual framework hereby presented, what conclusions can we draw from the analysis of some of the data we have gathered about the problems facing Ria Formosa and the main topics on which its tourism marketing is or must be based?

□ Promotion of Ria Formosa as a territory in which an interface between maritime and coastal tourism, mainland and island coast stands out;

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- Valorization of features related to beauty, isolation, peace and contact with nature with reference to the respect for the preservation of the environment (Pacheco, Gorbeña, Plomaritis&Garel, 2019);
- Avoidance of the systematic camouflage of ecosystem disturbances and threats due to unregulated actions with regard, for example, to pollution and land use (Pacheco, Gorbeña& Sequeira, 2019);
- Valorization of Tourist Projects by reference to the use of ecological gains;
- Need for the anthropological framework of the issues raised by tourism in a territory with a high potential for attracting visitors but also with special vulnerabilities in its ecological balance in natural, patrimonial and human dimensions;
- Importance of valuing interactions involving the search for authenticity and the desire for happiness in their relationship with representations and expectations created, even in relation to the design of heterotopias, in this case by reference to Ria Formosa as a tourist destination.

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