Sports Recreation in Tourist Context: Alentejo Coasts Resorts Case Study

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Abstract

The new sporting era in which we are living has new forms, new contexts and values, and a growing demand for evasion, wellbeing and health, and new experiences. In this leisure environment, favorable to sports practice, there has been an increase in the number of resorts in Portugal offering a range of sport services to its customers in accordance with their wishes. In this context, the main goal of this research is centered on the general characterization of the sports animation services offered by resorts in the Alentejo Coast. A qualitative research approach was used, in which content analysis was the chosen data analysis method; a semi-structured interview was the tool for data collection. The results show that the services of sporting activities in resorts located in this region are still underdeveloped. The majority of such resorts has a small amount of services, equipment and human resources. The search for these services is meager, despite their gratuitousness nature. In spite of the reduced offer of the sports animation services, the resorts' managers state that in a recent future there won't be new investments in the area, since the offer now satisfies the actual level of demand.

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Introduction

Tourism is one of the greatest economic activities in the world and so far, it is still growing; as stated by Phillips and Moutinho (2014), tourism remains an important export

earner and main originator of foreign exchange earnings and employment. As highlighted by the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO, 2014), international tourism is the fourth largest export sector in the world, after

the categories of fuels, chemicals and food, accounting for 30% of the world's exports of services; moreover, compared to the category that ranks first in export industries worldwide - fuel - international tourism not only benefits a larger number of exporters but also tends to have the ability to generate a greater number of jobs.

According to the annual report of the UNWTO (2014), international tourism hit a new record number in 2014 - a total of 1.153 million overnight visitors - which represents an increase of 4.4% over the previous year - amounting to over 48 million overnight visitors than in 2013; along the same source, after the global economic crisis of 2009, international tourism experienced an above-average growth for a period of five consecutive years (2010-2014), against the sector's growth expectations (3.8% for the period 2010 to 2020), which reveals a consistency of good performance despite the slow progress in terms of recovery of the world economy. As regards to the results obtained by region, it was also observed that Europe remains the most visited continent, accounting for more than half (51%) of international tourist flow (a total of 584 million arrivals in 2014).

The excellent results of the tourism sector have been constituted as the biggest lever for economic recovery in Europe. And Portugal is no exception. According to the Portugal Tourism Board (PTB, 2015), 2014 was established as the best year ever for Portuguese tourism. In fact, never such a large amount from tourism had benefited so significantly the Portuguese trade balance and consequently the respective economy (PTB, 2015): over 16 million tourists injected daily in Portugal about euro 29 million throughout the year 2014 (a revenue tourism growth of 12.4% over the year 2013).

Since 2012, the tourism demand in Portugal has had an upward path, having obtained a 12% increase during the year 2014 (compared to 2013) with the following distribution (PTB, 2015): while being mostly foreign (58%), the weight of the Portuguese is far from negligible (42%); the United Kingdom continues to be the leading source of foreign tourism for Portugal

(representing 17% of the total foreign market issuer); other European countries maintain the following three positions (Spain, Germany and France, with an increase compared to 2013 of 14.7%, 9% and 19.8%, respectively); among source markets outside Europe with higher growth, Brazil is the most prominent (over 10.6% in 2014 compared to 2013).

The report on the results of the Portuguese tourism for 2014 (PTB, 2015) also announced a widespread growth in all tourism regions - both in terms of number of tourists and overnight stays. In absolute terms, the Alentejo was the touristic region that grew the most (about 15% more than in 2013).

In Portugal, according to the Portugal Tourism Board (PTB, 2014), the number of companies providing services in the segment of tourist animation has grown significantly in recent years: 2012 to 2013 was increased by 27% and 2013 to 2014 this growth reached 75%; it is yet noted that 7% of total tourist animation businesses are located in the tourist region of Alentejo. The same report (PTB, 2014) also indicates that in 2014, 80% of the universe of these companies had website as a means of promoting their business: a) 37% of which was presented in at least two languages; and b) around 57% of these websites have over 1001 visitors/year. Regarding to social networks, the same official source states that most of the tourist animation companies (79%) is present in at least one social network (especially on Facebook). Concerning to partnerships developed with other entities, the report mentions that it is noticed a slight increase in the relative weight of these companies: a) from 50% in 2012 to 55% in 2013; and b) the most revealed partnership model is established with accommodation units. In relation to tourist entertainment companies located in the Alentejo, the report highlights that 72% uses such partnerships for formatting marketable products.

In terms of demand of the available activities (PTB, 2014), 70% of tourist entertainment companies indicates that outdoor activities and nature/adventure tourism have higher levels of demand than both the landscape and cultural tourism as the operation of fixed installations;

and in terms of average length, the majority (66%) of the offered tourist animation activities is scheduled for the average period of less than one day. Another important fact mentioned in the Portuguese report (PTB, 2014) is that, in all tourist regions, there are more companies who claim that demand has increased (42% in 2013 versus 32% in 2012).

As for customers who purchase the tourist animation services, there are several points highlighted about their profile (PTB, 2014): a) a majority of 51% is aged between 25 and 44 years; b) the months of August, June and May are pointed out as the months of peak demand by 69% of Portuguese companies providing tourist animation services, except for the tourist region of Alentejo where June is replaced by April; c) although domestic demand is prevalent in tourist animation services (relative share of 51% in 2013), foreign demand has slightly increased (49% in 2013 compared to 45% in 2012); d) still with regard to demand but differentiating the tourist regions, the Alentejo appears to be an exception, being a predominantly domestic destination, to the extent that the demand is mostly provided by the Portuguese market (67%); and e) finally, concerning to the relative weight of the various countries in international demand, the United Kingdom (47%) and Spain (42%) are the countries that get more services of tourist animation companies in Portugal, followed by France (31%), Germany (30%) and Brazil (16%).

A sport tourism research on the characterization of the sporting offer in hotel units developed by Pereira (1999) in a major tourist region in Portugal - Algarve - concluded that Germany and United Kingdom (UK) were the priority markets: (1) in high season, the largest representation belongs to the family segment (Germany: 28%; UK: 26%); and (2) in low season, the senior segment is the largest contributor to the local tourism (UK: 30%; Germany: 25%). The results showed that the directors of the accommodation units perceived the increasing motivation of the tourists for active holidays namely, golf and sport services related to nature and health. The results also indicated that the existence of sport facilities was a strong point (2.6 sport spaces by unit);

however, their occupancy rate average was low (20%) and a deficit of nautical sport facilities was detected. Although the majority of the directors (75%) viewed the integration of sports services in the holiday package as a competitive advantage, 69% of them didn't promote any innovation in their sport services offering between 1997 and 1999.

In this leisure environment, favorable to sports practice in Portugal, as a consequence of the climate and geography of the country, tour operators often promote active tourism to complement the typical "sun & beach" tourism product, and even promote it as the core attraction of the trip. As a result, there has been an increase in the number of resorts in Portugal offering a range of sport services – such as golf, water sports, etc. - to its customers in accordance with their wishes and needs.

In this context, the core issue of the present research was centered on the study of sports animation services offered by the resorts of the Alentejo Coast, located in one of the classified tourist regions of Portugal (Alentejo), aiming to provide their general characterization. In order to achieve the overall objective, a set of specific objectives was defined, namely: (a) the characterization of source markets and main motivations of tourists; (b) description of the sports facilities and equipment and their utilization; (c) managers' opinion of sports services' present offer; (d) panorama of the financial and human resources; (e) managers' perception of the strengths and weaknesses of the sports services; and (f) managers' main strategic ideas to use sport as a tool to promote Alentejo Coast's tourism.

This paper is organized into five parts: the first part corresponds to the introduction; the second part presents the literature review, scoping the theme under studied; the third part defines the methodology, describing the used method, the sampling, and the elected methods for data collection and analysis; the fourth part presents the results and their discussion in accordance with the specific objectives set out above; and finally, in the fifth part, the main conclusions of the study are exposed, as well as the key limitations and recommendations for future research.

Literature Review

The individual growth of Sport and Tourism, as well as the respective parallels, gave rise, in the late twentieth century, to Sports Tourism area (Gibson, 1998; Standeven & De Knop, 1999; Weed, 2009). Although the linkage between sport and tourism can be glimpsed since the ancient Rome and Greece, at a time when sport had already driven large flows of people traveling to take part in major sporting events, according to Pigeassou, Bui-Xuan and Gleyse (2003), the term “sports tourism” came up in the 70s, for the first time, in France. And in what concerns to sports tourism research, as referred by Weed (2009), it seems that the first publication focusing this binomial goes back to 1966, an initial exploration of the performance that sport could have on vacation tourism.

In recent times, sports tourism has been a booming sector: the tourism generation potential of mega-sport events (Getz, 1991; Hall, 1992; Williams, Hainsworth & Dossa, 1995) such as the Olympic Games has highlighted the sports and tourism industries’ mutual interdependency, which could not be organized without the collaboration of the tourism services offered by travel agents, accommodation facilities, and other agents. For some time, Higham and Hinch (2002) have emphasized that tourism and sport are two of the largest and fastest growing industries in the worldwide economy and often participation in sport and tourism happens concurrently; undoubtedly, as stressed by Standeven and De Knop (1999), the sharing of resources and infrastructure for sports and tourism occurs with high frequency – including natural environments, constructed facilities, transport, services and hospitality (Higham and Hinch, 2002). In turn, as it has been pointed out by Jakolev, Koteski, Bardarova, Serafimova and Dzambazoski (2014), even though tourism is not a sport subdivision, it embraces so many of sports activities nowadays – recreational animation sports, sports events, etc. – that tourism and sport shall be asserted as a phenomena wherein individual concepts are mutually interrelated.

Quite recently, as the vast majority of economic sectors, tourism has faced a major worldwide economic crisis. Suddenly, during the year of

2009, international arrivals recorded a sharp drop of 4% and revenue from tourist flow decreased by more than 9% (Sekulovic, 2015). Among the most affected due to the great recession were the Europe and Middle East regions (Adeboye, 2012). However, as it has been expounded in the introductory part, global tourism statistics (UNWTO, 2014) have revealed a strong sector growth for an uninterrupted period of 5 years (2010-2014) at rates that exceed the best forecasts for the time horizon of 2010-2020. Thus, having to face such adversity of the global economic downturn, as supported by Sekulovic (2015), the tourism sector had the ability to prove its resilience, “with emerging markets playing a key role in its recovery” (p. 1628), thanks to the efficiency, flexibility and innovation of those tourism stakeholders who have demonstrated a fast adaptability to changes in market conditions that have taken place at the level of tourist demand which, essentially, were guided by the imposition of travel costs reduction in vacation time.

In modern tourism, sport constitutes a fundamental content of the tourist stay, which induces a substantial increase in the practice of different sports by tourists and simultaneously stimulates traveling towards a certain tourist destination (Jakovlev *et al.*, 2014); these authors defend that in this singular category of tourism – sports-recreational tourism – sports animation appears as a mean to an active participation of the tourists, stating that “the sports recreation enters tourism when the residents from a certain place will take part in the tourist flows” (p. 2); in their article they conclude that sports-recreational tourism constitutes a relevant factor for the tourism development. The concept of sports-recreational tourism has been addressed by several authors (De Knop, 2004; Gammon & Robinson, 2003; Gipson, 2003; Hinch & Higham, 2001; Pereira, 2007): in general, implying sports practice during the holidays, away from home, either as main or casual motivation of the journey itself. With the purpose to highlight the fragility and scarcity of distinction between primary and random motivation in sporting activities during one’s trip, considering it less useful, Green and Jones (2005) exemplify as follows: “the sport tourist

who experiences an activity for the first time as an incidental part of his or her trip, and enjoys the activity to the extent that it then becomes the primary focus of the visit" (p. 165).

According to Adeboye (2012), despite having been given little attention to the entertainment as a very particular aspect of the tourism sector by the research, its importance is enormous; the author points out that the fundamental reason for the need to value this tourism subsector relies on the fact that there are more and more tourists around the world that depend on entertainment to make their most enjoyable and memorable holiday. As underlined by Adina & Dana (2010), according to the tourist and his specific physical needs, which can be from rest to the development of his capacities, tourist animation should accomplish a chain of different functions, and for that reason, sports activities must be fortified by the holiday providers; in their study, the authors conclude that the entertainment strategy must be developed by the tourism organizers taking into account the coexistence of two essential dimensions: on one hand, in accordance with the motivations, aspirations and expectations of the tourists; on the other, the profile, structure and characteristics of the resorts involved must be taken as premises.

The new sporting era in which we live attaches to sport an assumption of new forms, new contexts and values, and a growing demand for evasion, wellbeing and health, and new experiences. It should also be noted that the experiences' issue is of undeniable importance in the context of tourism, since dealing with the negotiation of experiences is the primary concern of this economic sector (Buhalis & O'Connor, 2006; Kim, 2010; Volo, 2009). Some studies of the sociological field (Scheurer, 2004) have stressed the growing importance of certain hedonistic values (such as companionship, enjoyment and extroverted lifestyles) compared to the more oriented values to work (such as discipline, effort and application) which have suffered some weakening. More, it seems clear that the times when the tourist flow was encouraged only at the expense of offering a set of basic services - such as accommodation, food and personal hygiene - are part of the past and will not come

back (Adina & Dana, 2010; Jakovlev *et al.*, 2014); as advocated by Jakovlev *et al.* (2014), these days, such services are more a mere assumption of the tourism business than an objective of tourists: today's tourists are people with a high degree of education and they are seeking destinations that are not limited to the basic but rather holders of intangible nature of the tourism experiences, events and changes. In line with this argumentation, Adina and Dana (2010) point out that one of the fundamental concerns of holiday suppliers should be to provide the most pleasant vacation time to tourists and for such purpose animation/entertainment activities are a distinct and important component of the tourism product in accomplishing one of the main characteristics of modern holidays - "the materialization of the active rest desideratum" (p. 858). In this same line of thought, Adeboye (2012) stresses the growth of the importance of experience in society and defends that in the current world, entertainment tourism is an increasingly popular niche of the tourism market, because tourists started to assign a higher value to the experiences with more intensity and energy, rather than sitting on the beach all day long or ending up on stressful sightseeing tour.

It is also noteworthy that, as underlined by Sekulovic (2015), over the twenty-first century, both the rapid development of information technologies and changes in social and economic factors, ascribed crucial variations to trends in tourism demand. In this sequence, although for a long time, still according to Sekulovic (2015), tourism remained associated with traveling packages with paradisiacal beach destinations - the so-called sun, sea and sand holidays - in the recent past, consumption habits of tourists have undergone strong changes, which are summarized by the author as follows: (a) tourists have become more knowledgeable and independent and have better information; (b) tourists started to assign a higher degree of importance to the transmitted information word-of-mouth and through social networks than the paid advertising; (c) changes in terms of lifestyle, such as work with greater flexibility of time, allow tourists to take shorter but more frequent holidays; (d) tourists are mainly looking for the

uniqueness of experiences, which means “more activities while travelling, but also more interaction with local people” (p. 1630), as well as for sporting and musical events, “probably because it is hard to resist one’s passions while visits to historical sites could be postponed” (p. 1630); and (e) new market segments have emerged – for instance, countries like Brazil, Russia, China and India have grown strongly while outbound tourism, which implies that certain particularities in terms of preferences have to be understood more deeply. In her study, Sekulovic (2015) concludes that the agents of tourism supply should not incessantly struggle with the creation of new touristic products, but rather with the creation of experiences in such unique ways that are able to give tourists the feeling they are playing an active role in such creation. Moreover, the growing demand for more participatory and interactive experiences has been demonstrated by several authors (Mathisen, 2013; Morgan, Elbe & Curiel, 2009; Scott, Laws & Boksberger, 2009). In a study conducted by Campos, Mendes, Valle and Scott (2015) concerning the co-creation experiences in the tourism context, the authors emphasize the importance of recognizing the active participation and interaction in the co-creation experiences, for its ability to induce the involvement of diverse nature - emotional, cognitive, physical and social - and intensely close the related parties.

Methodology

In this research we used a multi case study approach (Yin, 2003) in order to characterize the phenomenon. The case study as a strategy allowed us to investigate “a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context” (Yin, 2003, p.13). The multi case study enabled us to study each resort by itself in order to identify the appropriateness of the offered services. Simultaneously, it allowed us to analyze the resorts in comparison with the obtained results in other hotel units in order to develop an integrated view of the sporting services offered in the region.

Sampling

The sample is composed of three resorts: a) Tróia Design Hotel – Blue & Green (TDH); b) Zmar Eco Camp Resort & Spa (Zmar); and c) Matinha Farmstead (HM). In the Alentejo coast

there are 5 resorts, subsequently the sample corresponds to 60% of the universe under study. Two of the three resorts in the analysis - Tróia Design Hotel and Zmar Eco Camp Resort - started operations recently, in 2009; Matinha Farmstead started its activity earlier, in 1998. The number of existing beds in each of the hotel facilities is an important indicator to characterize the dimension of a region’s tourism supply. Regarding the size of these resorts, we find that there are two distinct levels: two (Tróia Design Hotel and Zmar Eco Camp Resort) are large, having more than 300 beds; Matinha Farmstead’s offer is substantially reduced (less than 50 beds). Another auscultated issue was the number of employees and its fluctuation throughout the year. Regarding this we find that: a) the larger the size of the resort, the bigger is the number of employees – in high season, Tróia Design Hotel and Zmar Eco Camp Resort have more than 100 employees and Matinha Farmstead has less than 20; b) the number of employees is only affected by seasonality in one of the resorts – Tróia Design Hotel – where it can range between 61 and 100 employees in low season. In short, the majority (67%) of the resorts in Alentejo Coast is large, since we are in the presence of units which have both high number of beds and employees.

Data collection

The semi-structured interviews were the elected method; they were carried in person lasting one hour in average. We made three interviews with the directors of each resort during the period of July-October of 2010. The interviews weren’t tape recorded but the researcher made a full written record of the interviews and at the end asked the interviewers to sign in accordance to its accuracy. The semi-structured interviews used an outline of topics based on the dimensions of a survey already validated by Pereira (1999), which, in turn, had supported the suggestions of market segmentation of Richers and Lima (1991), namely the characterization of: i) resorts (e.g., dimension); ii) priority markets and their motivations; iii) sport facilities and equipment; iv) sport services (e.g., financial and human resources); v) perception of the resorts’ director about sport services (e.g.,

strengths and weakness) and its importance to promote the destination (i.e., strategic ideas).

Data Analysis

We used the categorical/thematic quantitative content analysis (Bardin, 2009) in a deductive perspective based on the dimensions/categories of the survey. We selected the text according to its relation with the category and then, in the exploration phase, we selected the unit of analysis – related to the constructed code of the semi-structured interview, but we also used *in-vivo* codes for main ideas of the text as second content to differentiate sublevels of categories in questions related to the “strengths” and “weakness” variables. Regarding the content analysis of data on the variable “strategic ideas”, the categorization was made using the concept of sports development factors identified by Paz (1977) and later adapted by Pires (1986). Thus, according to Paz (1977), the concept includes the “set of activities which combined into programs tend to develop various aspects of the situation and thereby to directly or indirectly improve the sporting level” (p. 35). In turn, the adaptation of Pires (1986) lists the following twelve factors of sports development: organic, activities, marketing, training, documentation, information, facilities, equipment, human resources, finance, legal and management.

Finally, the quantification of the categories and subcategories enabled more accurate and objective information about the frequency of occurrences. The descriptive statistics was used in order to identify the frequency of the categories and subcategories results. In view of the enhancement of relevant information, following the suggestion of Marôco (2011), the data were organized according to the criterion of simplicity.

Results and discussion

Source markets and motivations of tourists

Data show that the domestic tourism is the source market that has higher percentages, both in high season (90%) and low (85%). We note that at the HTD, in high season, which corresponds to the usual vacation period of domestic tourists, all clients are Portuguese; in the others, the representativeness of the national tourism reaches 90% (HM) and 80% (Zmar). The minor decline in this trend during the low season is mostly taken by tourists from Spain, UK, Holland and Germany. The predominant age group in these resorts differs from high season (35-49 years old: 53%) to low season (18-34 years old: 42%). Not surprisingly, seniors are the least represented in both periods. The low level of income of this layer of the Portuguese population may be a possible explanation for this particular result. Regarding to the family life cycle, the category “couples” is the most prominent: 57% in both

Figure 1. Alentejo Coasts Resorts' Most Popular Types of Tourism

high and low seasons. However, we point out a difference in terms of subcategory "couples with children", which reaches a higher percentage in the high season (54%) than in the low season (37%). These results should not be oblivious to the fact that the school term focus predominantly on low season.

As we can observe in figure 1, the region under study is strongly affected by seasonality: during peak season tourists primarily seek to "sun & beach" (83%) tourism, while in low season this kind sharply decreases (8%), and other types climb, including "business" (47%) and "others" (40%) – gathering nature tourism and tourism of school groups. Sports tourism has a weak representation in demand throughout the year, ranging between 3% and 5%; this illustrates that sports don't constitute the main motivation for travelling to this region. Regarding the average length of stay, most tourists seek these hotel units for up to three days of lodging. In high season, 55% of tourists stays in these resorts "within 3 days", and 40% remains between 3-8 days. In low season, the vast majority (87%) of customers prefers staying "up to three days" in the region's resorts.

In what specifically concerns to the motivational nature of sports tourism, the responses of these resorts' managers show the absence of maximum appreciation of the importance of any one of its subcategories. In fact, the managers of the Alentejo resorts evaluate almost all subcategories as unimportant, namely the following: "golf and tennis holidays", "holidays with occasional sporting practices", "holidays with assorted sports entertainment", "holiday with health and wellness sports activities", "sports training" and "sports events".

Thus, these results appear to carry a certain tendency of managers to the devaluation of the sporting practices' potential to increase the tourist revenue. However, 67% ranks "holiday with sporting activities in nature" as "fairly important" and considers that "holiday with water sports practices" are "important".

In fact, in the theoretical model of destination branding developed by Qu, Kim and Im (2011), water sports are taken as a main attribute, within the factor that aggregates

entertainment/outdoors activities; the authors have concluded that the beliefs and knowledge of the destination's attributes are the greatest way to influence the formation of the overall image of the destination, which directly bears on the purpose to revisit and recommend the destination to others.

Characterization and utilization of sports facilities and equipment

Overall, the sample includes a total of 22 sports facilities. However, their distribution is uneven in the studied resorts, since one (Zmar) of these is responsible for holding 15 (68%) of such installations. It was verified that there is roughly the same number of roofed and discovered sports facilities (12 and 10, respectively). Among the covered facilities, "kids' playhouses", "indoor pools", "gyms" and "spas" arise more often and they're held by two of the three resorts in the study. The "outdoor pools" are the uncovered facilities with the largest representation, a total of 4, meaning that one of the resorts has more than one. The other covered and uncovered sports facilities mentioned by the resorts' managers in the sample of this research have scant representation, namely: "tree climbing", "horse arena", "squash", "all-terrain bike circuit", "multi-sports gym", "football table", "maintenance circuit", "indoor tennis" and "tennis".

These results turn out to be the mirror of the managers' perception about the typology of tourism demand in the region: in high season, tourists are most enthusiastic of the "sun & beach" tourism product, and the outdoor pools are an extension of that source of recreation. Also, high importance given by managers to holiday with water sports practices justifies both indoor and outdoor pools. Moreover, as most customers often travel with the family, the services of sports animation of these resorts include a set of activities aimed to entertain the younger age group within the kids' playhouses.

Concerning the average frequency of use of the existing sports facilities, the data reveal it's greatly reduced throughout the year, which corroborates the results of the study developed by Pereira (1999). In fact, from a general perspective, there aren't any noticeable differences between the two tourist seasons:

more than 50% of the enumerated sports facilities have an occupancy average below 50%, tendency more accentuated in the period of greater tourism (64%) than in the low season (59%). Nevertheless, there are some exceptions that are worth mentioning: (1) in Zmar, the indoor and outdoor pools present, in both seasons, an occupancy rate higher than 80%; (2) in Zmar, the spa also reaches an 80% occupancy rate in low season; (3) still in Zmar, an occupancy rate greater than 50% (but below 80%) is denoted in the gym, playground and kids' playhouse throughout the year; (4) finally, in TDH there are also three cases where the occupancy rate is over 50% (although not reaching the 80%) – the outdoor pool (in high season) and the indoor pool and the spa (in low season).

Regarding the payment of the sports facilities by the resorts' customers, we verify that in most cases (64%) their use is totally free. In the remaining set of 8 facilities, clients are charged an additional fee for its consumption. It is also possible to observe a relationship between the average frequency of the sports facilities' use and the variable payment: the free sports facilities have a much higher average frequency of use than those whose consumption requires charging an additional price to their customers. These results support the findings of Pereira (1999), where the relation between the variables "frequency of the sports facilities' use" and "facilities' payment" was found to be statistically significant: in high season, the values of lower frequency (20% utilization) corresponded to the paid installations and the values of higher utilization (over 80%) corresponded to the free facilities.

The three resorts that comprise the sample under study provide a set of five sports equipment; in all of them, their use requires charging an additional price to their customers. Thus, the resorts offer the following services: (1) horseback riding and riding lessons in the arena of the hotel unit (HM); (2) rental bicycles that can be used by customers to make tours inside and outside the resort (HTD); (3) rental bicycles that can be used by customers in the all-terrain bike's circuit and inside the hotel unit, as well as the rental of rackets and tennis balls (Zmar).

Sports services outlook

For most of these hotel units' managers, sports services are seen as important contributors in decreasing tourist seasonality. Moreover, all interviewed managers admit that sports services are a way to occupy the leisure time of the tourists, to increase diversity of supply, and also consider them as a good magnet for tourist attraction. The results are in line with the vision of Jakovlev *et al.* (2014), which highlights an announced death of the hotel units unable to meet tourists' new needs by offering a wider and diversified range of potential services in addition to basic assumptions such as food and accommodation.

Among the opinions of the interviewed managers about possible reasons for the existence of a meager and barely varied set of offered sports services at their resorts stand out the following: for three of the exposed motives, the results show an overall agreement among the resorts' directors, namely: (1) sports services offered by their resorts are already sufficient to satisfy the existing demand; (2) there's a lack of coordination between public and private organizations; and (3) the existing sports services offered by the resorts aren't economically profitable. Furthermore, it is a belief for the majority (67%) of the managers that tourists show interest in sporting services to the point of willing to pay for their consumption, which probably explains why all of them are convicted that the sports services are desirable from a profitability point of view insofar as they can be strong contributions in reducing seasonal tourist.

Concerning the suitability assessment of the existing sports services in relation to the sports needs of the tourists who attend and use such services, the three directors of the studied resorts are unanimous in considering that there is a proper fit. In addition, in none of the three resorts comprised in the sample is expected any adjustment concerning its sport offering, in terms of the construction of new sporting facilities, in the near future (from 6 to 12 months). Thus, there seems to be a certain perceptual consistency between the adequacy of the sports services supply of the hotel units and the sporting desires of their customers.

Financial and human resources' panorama

In only one of the resorts (HM) is confirmed the existence of a specific budget for the sports area. As for the distribution of funds from the total budget for sports services, all directors state that the funds are in the range between 0% and 10%. It is also verified that the parameters with the highest importance of budgeted funds are allocated to purchase sports material, advertising and to the payment of the sports services staff. Again, these results confirm the findings of Pereira (1999), insofar as the author concluded that only 33% of the hotel units had an own budget for sports services, and even among these the average value corresponded to 2% of the overall financial plan.

Among the resorts in the sample, only one (Zmar) has a sport services director, corresponding to the resort that offers a greater number of sports facilities (68%). Zmar's sport services director has academic training in the field of sports science. In order to have an idea of the sports services' dimension on balance of organizational functions, it's also important to know the number of people working in the sports services in each of the resorts. Overall, 15 employees are allocated for sports animation services, and its distribution as follows: TDH (8); Zmar (6); and HM (1). In this group of workers, only a fringe of 20% has sports academic training and the vast majority (73%) only has one year of professional experience. We also verify that the employee with more professional experience performs the job for only three years. Despite the poor qualifications (academic and professional experience), only one resort (Zmar) promotes vocational training to employees working in the sports services.

Indeed, the described panorama emphasizes the insignificance that the sports sector has yet to hotel units that exploit the tourism in this region and the findings support the previous study developed in the Algarve region (Pereira, 1999); the author concluded that despite the majority of the accommodation units had a sport services director (52%), their training wasn't in sport and even in tourism there were just three. These results are also in line with the study realized on the areas of the biggest

Bulgarian tourists centers (Dimitrov, 2014), which concluded that "the sport staff resource is not as up-to-date as the tourist business requires" (p. 42).

Managers' perception of the sports services and their strategic ideas

On the principal advantages of sports services, the interviewed managers mentioned the following: (1) "the variety of sporting activities offered to their customers" (Zmar and HTD); and (2) "a landscape of open space" (HM). As we've emphasized, Zmar holds 68% of sports facilities recorded in the sample, so the perception of its director seems natural, given the reality of the sporting facilities of tourism' supply in the region. Nevertheless, given the small number of the TDH's sports facilities, the manager of its sports services alludes to a set of services which is offered to customers through an outsourcing system instead of those under is direct responsibility. The HM's manager attaches the competitive advantage of the supply of sporting services outlined in the organization he runs to the ecological component surrounding the resort, thereby demonstrating the scant importance he attributes to the sporting services.

Regarding weaknesses of sports services, the interviewed managers point to the following: (1) the "distance between the various sports services" and "the kind of multi-purpose sports floor that doesn't allow the practice of certain sports" – technical issues - are the two main disadvantages underlined by the Zmar's director; (2) the remaining managers mostly concern the aspects linked to the cost structure of sports services - "the cost of hiring facilities/services to external entities (outsourcing) is the major drawback" since it increases the price charged to the customers for practicing of sports activities (HTD) and "the high cost of sports services" is considered as a disadvantage because it reduces sports services' financial returns (HM).

From the foregoing, it should be noted a marked that the interviewed sports services managers express very different opinions regarding the strengths and weaknesses of those services in their resorts. This disparity may be due to: (1) tourists' motivations,

aspirations and expectations are distinct in each resort; (2) the uniqueness of the profile, structure and the characteristics of the involved resorts. According to Adina and Dana (2010), the combination of those factors should be the foundation of the entertainment development strategy.

The interviewed managers advocate several strategic ideas regarding the way of using sport as a tool to promote Alentejo Coast's tourism: (1) the largest number of occurrences (50%) corresponds to a set of views that overall focus on increasing the resorts' sport supply, in which both sports events and partnerships with local sports enterprises are the most mentioned; (2) in the second biggest group of occurrences (40%) managers advocate ideas which aim to improve or innovate sports services, particularly evoking the quality of human resources; (3) finally, the remaining occurrences (10%) relate to marketing ideas mostly concerning the promotion of the existing supply of sports tourism in the resorts. As mentioned earlier, in the section on overview of sports services, managers state that in the next 6 to 12 months will not be any investment in the sports area. However, innovation and improvement of sports services that comes in second place in the context of the results of the strategic ideas to promote tourism through sports in the region of Alentejo Coast applauded by the interviewed managers seems to be a contradiction. Thus, while the managers of the studied hotel units suggest innovation of sports services as a good strategy, they are simultaneously averse to the idea of making the necessary investments for the production of such services.

In the study for the Algarve region (Pereira, 1999) similar conclusions were found since the most cited strategic ideas to promote tourism through sport were the increase of sporting supply (sports events most mentioned), marketing and new sport facilities.

Conclusions

The study of the sports recreation's characterization in the Alentejo coast's resorts fulfills a vacuum in knowledge of sport tourism at the regional and local levels, as it has been urged in the literature (Higham & Hinch, 2002);

furthermore, in addition to the study of Pereira (1999), allows a greater understanding of the state of the supply of sport tourism in Portugal. The results show that the services of sporting recreational activities in the resorts located in the Alentejo coast region are still underdeveloped. The majority of such resorts has a small amount of sports equipment and facilities. Although modern sport management "may be achieved through the excellent sport-entertainment staff selection and human resources" (Dimitrov, 2014, p. 42), the results show that the human resources in these resorts have low academic qualifications and unskilled professional experience; also, the organizational role of director of sports services was found in only one third of the resorts' sample and in most cases, there isn't any incentive for the vocational training of employees. Most of the offered sport services are free. The search for these services is meager, despite their gratuitousness nature. In spite of the reduced offer of the sports animation services, in the years to come, the resorts' managers have no intention of making any new investments in the area because - according to their perception - the actual level of sports demand has hitherto been satisfied by the existing sports supply. The strategic ideas to promote tourism through sports recreation most supported by the interviewed resorts' managers are: (1) the increase of the resorts' sport supply (particularly through the hostage of small-scale sports events and partnerships with local sports enterprises); (2) the improvement/innovation of the sports services (predominantly by means of the quality of human resources); and (3) the broader promotion of the existing supply of sports tourism in the resorts.

Based on the results obtained in this study, some recommendations for the management of sports services in the tourist offer of the region of Alentejo Coast can be highlighted:

(1) Firstly, a special attention to human resources component is suggested. The low academic and professional training of human resources that are assigned to the sports area should be quickly overcome in order to improve the quality of the tourist offer, making it more attractive especially in view of the decline in seasonality. The strategic vision of the

managers interviewed towards innovation and improvement of the sports services will be very difficult to sustain without some adjustment concerning their sport offering. For instance, it seems urgent to select human resources with proper academic training in the sports area as well as high professional skills.

(2) Secondly, another reasonable recommendation would be the option for a broader outsourcing system over the direct responsibility of all sports services. In addition to meet the unwillingness on the new investments denoted by the responses of the resorts' managers, the outsourcing strategy would enable the opening of a new window of opportunities for the creation of new companies specializing in the provision of sports services of these accommodation units. Given the limited level of the human resources skills of these resorts, the recommendation concerning the outsourcing system should still consider professional consulting in innovation and quality of sporting services.

(3) Finally, thirdly, managers should consider the increase of sports offer in the respective accommodation units through public-private partnerships.

The lack of data on the specific budgets of the sports area and also on the distribution of funds to better understand the importance given to sport by these resorts is the major limitation of this study. Future investigation should be directed towards action through the research of case studies pursuing the logic of Business Process Management, as advocated by Ko, Lee & Lee (2009). The main goal is to get an initial context for developing organizational improvements, articulated with the real needs of the organization, materialized in its core capabilities, encompassing the design, implementation and monitoring.

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