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# Heritage and Accessible Tourism in the Côa Region: A review of Ideas and Concepts

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**Abstract:** The aim of this paper is to develop a holistic conceptual framework to support the development of effective management tools to preserve and explore the potential of a Portuguese low-density region – the Côa River Valley. The Côa River Valley was classified by UNESCO as a World Heritage Site in 1998, recognizing the importance of heritage and natural values, namely the presence of a remarkable open-air ensemble of Palaeolithic art. The significance of this heritage – cultural and natural - justifies an effort of convergence of interests and actions, in order to guarantee a sustained enhancement and integrated management of the diverse patrimonies and the sustainable development of local communities. The region's development strategy based on the development of tourism activities and products must consider this heritage in the pursuit of accessibility and sustainability. Considering that natural and cultural resources are the main attractions of this territory and the basis of its competitive advantage and endogenous growth, it is essential to take into account how these resources are incorporated into qualified tourism products. Moreover, providing accessibility (in a broad sense, including accessibility of information, social, intellectual and emotional components) to heritage sites is considered a way to promote the regions' sustainable management. Consequently, there is a need to research how to promote the conditions of universal accessibility, as well as the improvement and creation of new products and services, their diffusion, the increase of cultural offer and the internationalization of the history and identity of this territory, promoting accessible and sustainable tourism. The influence of climate change on cultural and natural heritage, and more specifically on water resources, must also be considered in this framework. Therefore, in order to support the development of effective management tools to preserve and explore the potential the region, the paper presents a literature review, based on an interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary perspective and encompassing the main topics related to the challenges and opportunities of this territory: accessibility and accessible tourism; tourist profile in low density regions; sustainable trends in low density regions; climate change and its impacts on natural and cultural heritage; routes and networks.

**Keywords:** literature review, tourism, accessibility, natural and cultural heritage, Côa valley

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## 1. Introduction

Côa Valley is a low-density region of Portugal that was classified by UNESCO as a World Heritage site due to the importance of the cultural heritage present in the area. Also, it is a region with a specific natural heritage that should also be maintained and preserved. It is also an area that is suffering a loss of inhabitants, which can lead to the abandonment of several of its activities and to a change in the organization of the territory.

Due to these specific characteristics, integrated management strategies should be considered in order to guarantee a sustainable development of the area and of the local communities.

Developing tourism strategies based on local heritage and considering universal accessibility is one of the ways to achieve more efficient territorial management that is in line with existing heritage values. These strategies will benefit Côa Valley region, creating conditions for universal accessibility and having as its foundation the exploration and promotion of its potentials in terms of heritage - cultural, historical, ethnographic and natural - and increase tourism activities.

These goals will be achieved using a novel and integrated method in a multi and interdisciplinary approach.

A literature review is essential to the research process and should allow the analysis, systemization and interpretation of the existing bibliography related to the various areas of the research project.

It is, therefore, an essential requisite for a correct definition of the problem, but also to obtain a precise idea about the current state of the art about the various themes, the existing gaps and the contribution of research to the development of knowledge.

In this sense, the literature review will be focused on scientific journals, books, conference proceedings, among others. The analysis, synthesis and interpretation will be based on the several concepts referred: universal accessibility and accessible tourism; sustainability and sustainable trends in low density regions; the various types of heritage and collective memory; the tourist profile and destination of the Côa Valley; climate change and its impacts on natural and cultural heritage; and on the development of accessible routes. Due to the constant evolution of knowledge, the literature review will focus the latest works and then going back in time.

This article intends to list a set of ideas and a review of the main concepts that should be analyzed for the development of accessible tourism in the Côa Valley region.

The article is divided, therefore, in 4 parts: one, explaining the cultural and geographical contextualization of Côa Valley; the second part will focus on the literature review of the concepts already identified; the third part will present a conceptual model for Heritage and Accessible Tourism in the Côa region; and finally, in the end, it will be presented the final considerations.

## **2. The Côa River Valley: Location and context**

The Côa river rises in the Serra das Mesas, in the Sabugal municipality, and runs its course in a south-north direction, along 135 km flowing into the Douro River, very close to Vila Nova de Foz Côa, in whose municipality it travels 17 km. It is integrated in an area with a Mediterranean climate with some continental climate influences, being one of the least polluted rivers among Portuguese rivers, so the purity of its water still allows the life of fish fauna, for example, trouts.

It is a geographical area located in the district of Guarda, with low population density, but which has a unique history that must be known in order to be able to develop a comprehensive project applied to the Côa river valley (Figure 1).

It is necessary to have a broad knowledge of the existing patrimony, in order to be able to contextualize the entire archaeological heritage, the built heritage, the ethnographic heritage, the intangible heritage, the gastronomic and wine heritage of the region, as well as the collective memory, based on documentary heritage and traditional literature.

The Côa region stands out for its archaeological richness, with traces of the most diverse times. The best known, for their rarity and importance in contributing to the knowledge of the evolution of human occupation of this territory and, therefore, considered by UNESCO World Heritage in 1998, are the remains related to the Paleolithic, namely the rock engravings, scattered by various nuclei such as Faia, Penascosa, Quinta da Barca, Ribeira de Piscos or Canada do Inferno, where you can see aurochs, horses, goats and deer, among others.

Many other archaeological sites exist witnessing various eras, such as those chronologically attributable to the Chalcolithic, whose most paradigmatic example is the Castelo Velho de Freixo-de-Numão, or to Romanization, for example, the Quinta de Ervamoira. As a binding and explanatory element of all this heritage, we have the Côa Museum, the educational and tourist centre par excellence.

In the context of the Côa river valley there are other important testimonies of its history, of which we can refer to its vast religious architectural heritage, with the characteristic churches, from medieval times to baroque, through the so-called Manueline; the civil and military heritage, with emphasis on the five Historical Villages of Portugal, such as Almeida, Castelo Rodrigo, Marialva, Castelo Mendo or Sortelha, examples of medieval nuclei walled with their castles or fortresses.

The ethnographic heritage of the region, inserted in unique geomorphological and climatic conditions, also occurs in its various aspects, from the traditional architecture, as the dovecotes that still remember a remarkable time, given their direct relationship with the agricultural exploitation of cereals.



**Figure 1:** Côa river location

The culture of olive, almond and vineyard provides unique landscapes and various types of exploitation, whether agricultural or tourist. Cattle breeding and ancient transhumance routes keep their memory alive in the Reserva Faia Brava – Associação Transumância e Natureza. Lavender or rosemary fields of great importance to beekeepers and honey products also foster local entrepreneurship and innovation through the production of various derivatives. Also, of note are the memories of sumac cultivation for the tannery dyeing industry.

Quinta da Ervamoira or Quinta do Vale Meão, among many others in the region, are important centres that characterize the wine heritage, noting the excellent quality of the Côa river wines, such as Barca Velha, given the great thermal amplitudes constituting it is one of the best ways to leverage the territory based on different types of tourism.

Many are, therefore, examples of the wealth of this region that must endure, projecting this collective memory for the future, promoting the development of endogenous resources and bridging tradition and innovation, fostering sustainable tourism.

### **3. Literature review**

Structurally weak (low density) rural regions are faced with major socio-economic problems like depopulation, ageing, unemployment, declining of infrastructures. They are economically less productive and often are captured in downward spirals due to the loss of inhabitants, especially young and highly skilled people (Christmann, 2014).

Since the late 70s, scholars have made a plea for endogenous initiatives for local socio-economic development, based on home-grown assets and resources, like natural resources, human capital, historically rooted skills, local business culture and traditions (Tödtling 2010; Río-Rama et al., 2019).

This project sees the development of accessible and sustainable tourism as an effective economic driver in the Côa Valley River Region, a structurally weak rural region, in order to attract people and new businesses to the region (Apaydin, 2016).

Tourism is one of the world's largest and fastest-growing industries. The international number of inbound tourists has grown up from 25 million in 1950 to 1235 million in 2016 (UNWTO, 2017). Yet, this growth has called for the need to balance the dynamic tension that characterizes the relationship between tourism development and protection of the landscape (Garau, 2015), since tourism may impact negatively, if not effectively planned, on natural and cultural resources. Consequently, monitoring natural and cultural heritage, namely in World

Heritage destinations, constitutes a key point to guarantee the sustainability of these regions (Freitas et al., 2017).

The influence of climate change needs to be taken into consideration in this process since they affect the natural resources of the region.

The academic research relating the climatic change to cultural heritage is quite recent, dating from the beginning of the 2000's (Fatorić and Seekamp, 2017). Also, the UN's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) has been giving little attention to cultural heritage and resources.

However, extant research provides some relevant insights to our study. Firstly, scholars stress the effects of climate change on the historical environment, architectural surfaces and structures (Brimblecombe, Grossi and Harris, 2010; Cassar, 2005; Howard, 2013). Cultural heritage sites can be damaged by severe weather events and to changes in climate, which can affect built structures, archaeology sites and designed landscapes (Phillips, 2015). There is evidence that cultural heritage is neither prepared nor adapted to climate change (Sabbioni et al., 2008).

Secondly, some studies emphasize the impact of climate change on intangible heritage, stressing aspects that shape the place identity like collective memory, values, cultural identity and traditions (Brabec and Chilton, 2015; Mitchell and Barrett, 2015; Serra-Majem et al., 2011; Walter and Hamilton, 2014).

Thirdly, some authors suggest that the preservation and adaptation to climate change have the potential to provide opportunities and benefits, namely by stimulating the development of tourism activities (Colacicchi and Bizzarri, 2008; Sun et al., 2013).

New approaches to heritage site management should be directed towards sustainable development of local communities. The Côa Valley region can be a good example of a World Heritage Site with great potential for tourism development and for effective management. Preservation of archaeological and heritage sites is of great importance, as these historical sites and landscape are non-renewable resources and needs to be protected to guarantee its sustainability for future generations (Lasaponara et al., 2017).

These new approaches advocate the involvement of local people in the development of heritage management plans, since it will raise the awareness of residents in heritage value and will contribute towards the sustainable protection of sites (Río-Rama et al., 2019). They also stress the need to consider the tourist experience in the management of heritage sites "to achieve the goal of sustainable heritage tourism" (Alazaizet al., 2019:269).

Although natural and cultural resources are the main attractions of a territory and the basis of its competitive advantage and endogenous growth, it is essential to take into account the way these resources are incorporated into qualified tourism products, to satisfy the needs and expectations of tourist demand, especially in terms of cultural activities and experiences in World Heritage destinations (Ribeiro and Borges, 2017). Thus, it is essential to satisfy tourists and to involve stakeholders and local communities to achieve sustainability in these heritage sites (Alazaizet al., 2019). Sustainable management of natural and cultural heritage requires conciliation between conservation and the new economic and social function triggered by tourism. The practice of sustainable responsible tourism is essential, and the good use of heritage is the best guarantee of conservation (Troitiño, 2002).

Natural and cultural resources are the main attractions of a territory and are the basis of its competitive advantages. However, it is critical to consider how these resources are incorporated into qualified tourism products, promoting endogenous resources. The interest in the development of "sustainable products" (Carney, 2003; Kastenholtz et al., 2014) and the strategic focus of many regions in the structuring of tourism products based on historical and cultural heritage, aims at a strategy of differentiating their image, their territory.

The creation of tourist routes is of great importance allowing to establish a relationship between cultural activity and tourist activity. They are effective means of disseminating the heritage and tourism potential of destinations, acting as true instruments of local development.

However, its creation implies a careful analysis of tourism supply and demand, crucial for planning and structuring products that reproduce the habits and customs of history, region or place, to provide tourists with a differentiating experience. Tourist routes have emerged as a significant element for tourism promotion (Rogerson 2007). In fact, they are a particularly interesting opportunity, especially for low-density territories with high cultural resources that attract tourists with special interests, who often not only stay longer but also spend more to pursue their particular interests (Meyer, 2004).

In order for this to happen, the development of territories must include the existence of cooperative capacity and forward-thinking regional leadership, but also the creation of networks, or the encouragement of entrepreneurship and the involvement of local communities.

Providing accessibility to heritage sites is considered a way to promote sustainable management of those regions. The concept of accessibility is usually characterized by physical and architectural aspects - space accessibility – but it goes much further, as it also concerns the accessibility of information, social, intellectual and emotional components (Silva, 2015; Silva and Borges, 2019a; 2019b). It means that all people, with or without special needs, must be able to participate in all activities that include the use of products, services or information (Silva and Borges, 2019).

Accessible, Universal, Inclusive or Barrier-Free Tourism can be defined as tourism and travel accessible to all people, disabled or not, who may present temporary or permanent limitations concerning mobility, hearing, sight, cognitive, intellectual or psychosocial limitations (Takayama, 2009; Darcy and Dickson, 2009). It is associated with a way of thinking, planning and managing a specific destination, region or place. An accessible destination should allow all visitors, without exception, to enjoy and use equipment and services, without restrictions or constraints, in an equitable way (Silva and Borges, 2019c)

The promotion of accessible and sustainable tourism in the Côa Valley can be realized through the implementation of organizational innovation adopting “pioneering services, products and technical processes” (Blasco Lopez et al., 2018:277). This can be achieved through the combination of several tools, namely remote sensing analysis and Geographical Information Systems (GIS). Remote sensing analysis is a useful tool in monitoring environmental changes, urbanization, land use, impact of human activities in archaeological heritage sites (Lasaponara et al., 2017). Moreover, UNESCO highlighted fundamental role of these tools images in improving the information flow and communication among stakeholders, heritage site managers and local authorities (Garau, 2015). GIS are an added value for decision making processes in several areas, including tourism and heritage sustainable management, providing resources inventories, developing models, identifying most suitable locations for development, measuring impacts, mapping relationships between different types of data and producing maps of the tourist destination (Bahaire and Elliott-White, 1999; Juodkienė, 2014; Albuquerque et al., 2016; Albuquerque, Costa and Martins, 2018).

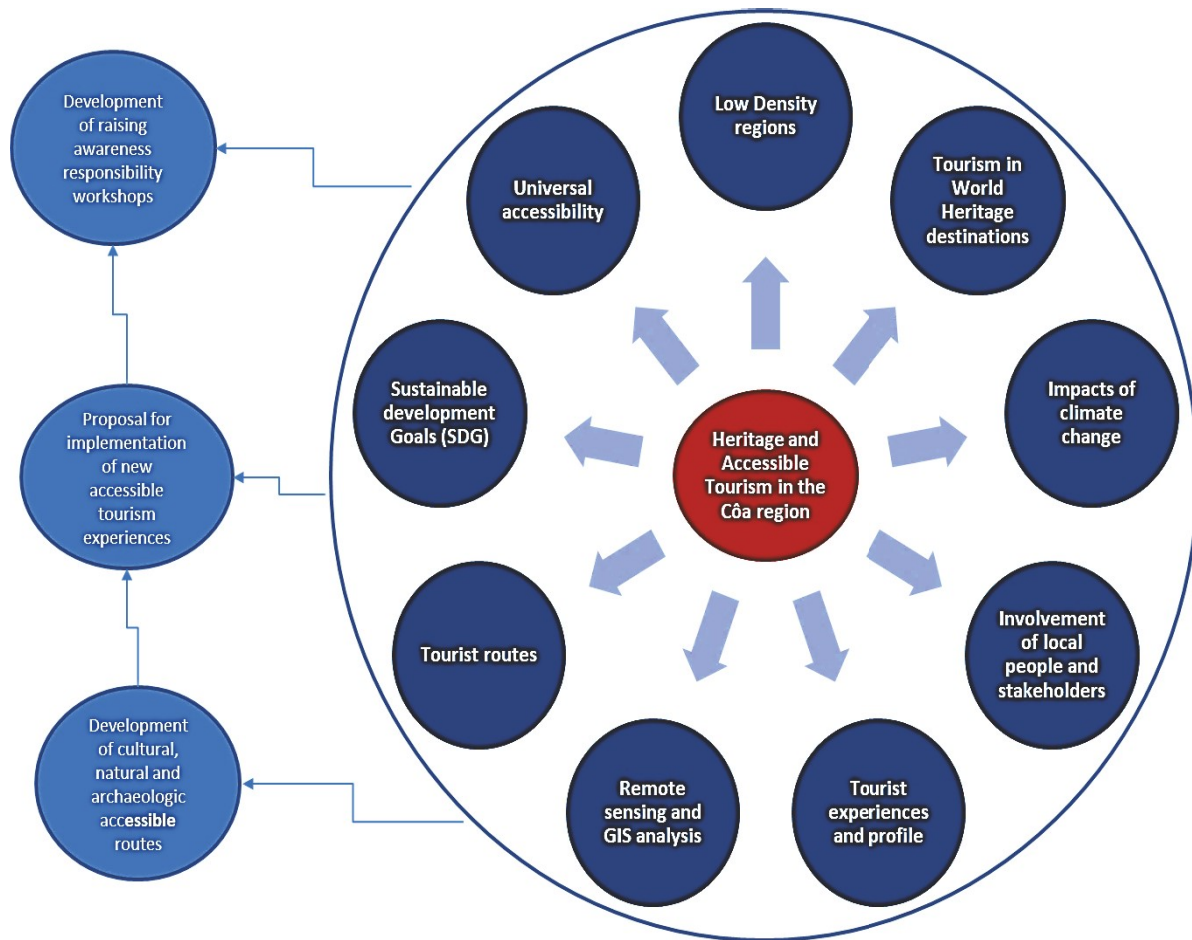
The academic tourism and cultural literature are increasingly interested in the development of new strategies for low-density territories, based on Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) of the United Nations (2019). In these areas it is essential to create innovative strategies, using endogenous resources and promoting employment and quality of life for local communities in order to achieve several SDG. In Côa Valley, through the development of this project, it is intended to contribute to five SDG's, namely: decent work and economic growth [8]; reduce inequalities [10]; sustainable cities and communities [11]; climate action [13]; and life on land [15] (United Nations, 2019).

#### **4. Conceptual model for heritage and accessible tourism in Côa Valley region**

The literature review allowed the development of a conceptual model of the specific areas that should be analyzed in order to achieve the main goal of this project – the development of accessible tourism in the Côa Valley region.

This model supports the identification of core concepts and ideas in an integrated and collective structure, in order to define further steps until the proposal of the specific results in Côa Valley region.





Source: Elaborated by authors.

**Figure 2:** Conceptual model for heritage and accessible tourism in the Côa region

Through the analysis of figure 2, it is possible to understand that there exist nine core concepts/ideas that should be evaluated: low-density regions; tourism in world heritage destinations; impacts of climate change; involvement of local people and stakeholders; tourist experiences and profile; remote sensing and GIS analysis; tourist routes; sustainable development goals; and finally, universal accessibility, which is the basis of this study.

The evaluation of these core concepts will be realized through an empirical study, which will be the next step of the development of this study.

The empirical study will start through the definition of the territorial context (geographic, geologic, geomorphologic, socio-economic, historic and cultural) and the identification of key tourism resources. It is expected to produce a complete territorial analysis and maps of the key tourism attractions and resources of the region. The analysis will also include socio-economic activities and dynamics, including the profile of existing businesses and innovation dynamics, using both primary and secondary data. Geographical Information Systems (GIS) will be used to produce a tourism resource inventory of the region, in an integrated database, which will allow a better interpretation of the data and benefit the decision-making process.

In order to evaluate the impacts of climate change in the natural and cultural heritage of Côa Valley, a dynamic analysis of the hydrological resources will be conducted. It will include the analysis of the evolution of land uses in the last 30 years in the Côa river basin; an evaluation of the hydrological resources and alterations on the Côa Valley; and the identification of climate change scenarios and impact on the hydrological resources. This analysis will allow knowing which the most affected hydrological parameters will be and how can be developed a plan to mitigate their effects.

The assessment of the publics and tourist profile will require extensive field research and the implementation of questionnaires in the region, namely in the Archaeologic Park of Côa Valley and Côa Museum. This analysis

will shed light the visitors experience and its meanings, contributing to the design of cultural, natural and archaeological routes in the area.

It will also be realized an analysis of the accessibility of cultural and tourism resources in Côa Valley region, including lodging. It is expected to conduct a work field to evaluate the accessibility of natural and cultural resources and of lodging of the area that will allow producing a document that will identify the transformations related to accessibility that the area should have.

With the produced information, it is expected to develop a set of actions, namely the development of cultural, natural and archaeological accessible routes; a proposal for implementation of new accessible tourism experiences; and the development of raising awareness responsibility workshops directed to the local community, local agents and stakeholders and to public in general that want to have knowledge about accessibility and sustainability in natural and cultural heritage.

## **5. Final considerations**

Côa Valley is seen as a region that has the potentialities to develop through the recognition and use of its endogenous characteristics and cultural, archaeological, ethnographic and natural resources. Nevertheless, the strategies that have been implemented in territory didn't bring, until now, the expected results to this region. Thus, it is necessary to create innovative dynamics and to raise the willingness to know Côa valley, having into account three main areas: sustainability of the territory; need to minimize climate change impacts and promotion of universal accessibility in all areas. Planning and implementing more accessible tourism are not only a social responsibility, but also a way to increase the competitiveness of tourism in Europe. It is a fact that accessible tourism contributes to the social, environmental and economic sustainability of destinations, and has a positive impact on the local community. Scientific knowledge, especially when funded by public funds, only has reason to exist when it produces knowledge that can benefit and be enjoyed by all. The definition of the conceptual model for Côa Valley territory is the foundation for the development of several multi and interdisciplinary studies that are expected to produce a set of positive results for the region. In this model, the basic concepts are identified, which will provide the implementation of a dynamic that contributes to achieving some of the Sustainable Development Goals of the United Nations.

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