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**Sustainable Tourism Micro-Clusters:**
**The Case of Alentejo Protected Areas**

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**Resumo:**
Os Sistemas Locais de Turismo (SLT) podem ser analisados com base em conceitos que derivam da economia industrial aplicada aos “distritos industriais”, sistemas produtivos locais ou “regiões inteligentes”. O conceito de SLT constitui uma poderosa ferramenta analítica útil para percepcionar a estrutura, diversidade e as diferentes formas de organização dos resorts turísticos. Os resorts podem ser pensados como clusters ou “distritos industriais”, representando ou um acordo perfeito entre a esfera produtiva e a comunidade local ou uma mera justaposição industrial sem qualquer ligação económica ou social. Este artigo tenta analisar o processo de criação de micro-clusters turísticos baseados em práticas de turismo sustentável. As áreas protegidas do Alentejo - Estuário do Sado; Lagos de Santo André e da Sancha; Vale do Guadiana; Sudoeste Alentejano e Costa Vicentina; e Serra de S. Mamede – são analisadas com vista à possibilidade de microestruturas específicas permitirem desenvolvimento turístico sustentável. As questões de recursos, competências e da governança são também analisadas.

**Palavras-chave:** Turismo, Cluster, Micro-Cluster, Sustentabilidade, Desenvolvimento, Alentejo.

**Códigos JEL:** R1

**Abstract:**
Local Tourist Systems (LTS) can be analyzed according to a research structure that derives from industrial economics on industrial districts, local productive systems or learning regions. LTS concept is a useful analytical tool that can seize the resorts diversity and organization. Resorts can be conceived both as clusters or industrial districts, either with a perfect agreement between productive sphere and local community or a mere industrial juxtaposition without any economic or social connection. This paper purposes to discuss how to promote the creation of clusters grounded on sustainable tourism. The Alentejo Protected Areas - Estuário do Sado; Lagos de Santo André e da Sancha; Vale do Guadiana; Sudoeste Alentejano e Costa Vicentina; Serra de S. Mamede - are analyzed under the principle of how specific microstructures can allow for a sustainable tourist development. The issues of “resources and competences” and “governance” are also explored.

**Keywords:** Tourism, Cluster, Micro-Cluster, Sustainable Development, Alentejo.

**JEL Codes:** R1
**Introduction**

This paper examines a specific pattern of sustainable tourism, i.e., the development of recreational and leisure activities in protected areas taking, as a case study, the Alentejo Region. Some theoretical reasoning over the concept of sustainable tourism is presented and, by extension, how it can bring answers to some of the challenges posed by the development needs in poor regions. When we consider the Portuguese Territory as a whole, it is clear that - with the notable exception of Algarve’s coastal areas -, the southern part of the country has always been a less developed region. This feature is even more visible, if we compare Alentejo with other parts of Portugal, namely the so-called Braga-Setúbal axis.

The inexistence of a truly industrial development associated with the loss of agriculture’s relevance and with the problems generated by a long term process of ageing population, made Alentejo a critical area in terms of sustainable economic development. Across the years, successive policies tried to come up with a valid approach: unfortunately, when we take a closer look to how Alentejo performed in recent years, we can easily conclude that this region was not able to reduce the decalage from Portugal’s most developed regions, namely Lisbon Metropolitan Area (see CEVAL, 2007 and INE, 2007a).

In these last fifteen years, tourism emerged as the best approach to promote the economic growth of Portugal’s less developed regions. More specifically, and in particular for regions with Alentejo’s characteristics (a region that concentrates several elements with cultural and natural value), sustainable tourism started to be seen as an important economic strategy, both at regional and local levels. In this paper, we argue that’s particularity the case of Alentejo Protected Areas.

The analysis starts with an attempt to define sustainable development (Part 1), followed by a brief review of tourism activity in Portugal (Part 2), complemented with a short description of Alentejo region, with a special focus on its protected areas - parks and natural reserves (Part 3). Theoretical issues on tourist clusters are discussed (Part 4) which will allow for a better understanding of sustainable tourism in Alentejo Protected Areas (Part 5).

1. **On Sustainable Tourism – elements for a definition**

As a first attempt towards a definition, one can argue that “sustainable tourism is a positive approach intended to reduce the tensions and frictions created by the complex interactions among the tourism industry, visitors, the environment and communities which are host to holiday makers” (Journal of Sustainable Tourism, 1993). In this sense, tourism will always imply both a specific pressure over local resources and a form of turbulence in terms of local communities traditional pattern of living. This way, it seems clear that if tourism implies an idea of multiple agents interacting in a particular region, any possible definition or concept of sustainable tourism must include an approach to the effects caused by the pressure and turbulence previously mentioned.

On the other hand, as Shaw and Williams (2002) stated, sustainable tourism should also involve a particular concern with the long term viability and quality of both natural and human resources. Therefore, resource management seems to play a fundamental role when it comes to a valid sustainable tourism strategy. As Neto (2002: 10) argues, “the promotion of national strategies for sustainable tourism development, including the decentralization of environmental management to regional and local levels, can be seen as one of the main policy areas regarding sustainable tourism”. As the idea of sustainability carries a time frame dimension, unsurprisingly, one of the best definitions conceptualizes sustainable tourism as “tourism and its associated infrastructures that, both now and in the future, operate within natural capacities for the regeneration of and future productivity of natural resources” (Eber 1992:3).

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1 Alentejo purchase power is only 85.6% of Portugal’s average.
2 As an example, we can mention Alentejo regional plans.
3 See the several National Tourism Strategies and, in particular, the PENT (Plano Estratégico Nacional de Turismo – National Strategic Plan for Tourism).
4 See also, Neto 2002.