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# THE STATE OF THE ART IN RESEARCH INTO RURAL TOURISM IN SPAIN: AN ANALYSIS FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF MARKETING

José Manuel Hernández-Mogollón

University of Extremadura (Spain)

[jmherdez@unex.es](mailto:jmherdez@unex.es)

Ana María Campón-Cerro

University of Extremadura (Spain)

[amcampon@unex.es](mailto:amcampon@unex.es)

Helena Maria Baptista-Alves

University of Beira Interior (Portugal)

[halves@ubi.pt](mailto:halves@ubi.pt)

## ABSTRACT

*The study of rural tourism has been addressed from different perspectives, such as geography, sociology, psychology, economics, business management, tourism marketing, etc. This positions it as a multidisciplinary research field of great interest which is growing in strategic importance. However it requires appropriate tools to improve its performance and become more professional. The level of interest it now produces is palpable in the quantitative increase in the attention devoted to it in the scientific literature over recent years. Nevertheless there is a need to improve the quality of this research effort, especially in fields related to economics and the management of businesses and even more so with regard to issues related to marketing, all of which would contribute to a better understanding of issues such as the planning, management and marketing of these destinations and businesses. This paper is an analysis of rural tourism as an area of scientific research that aims to classify the most relevant topics in the field, with particular reference to those that focus on marketing and market research. Its main contribution is a proposal of a research agenda for the coming years.*

**KEYWORDS**

*Marketing research; tourism marketing; rural tourism; literature review; performance improvement.*

**ECONLIT KEYS**

*L830; M310, O180*

## **1. RURAL TOURISM AS A RESEARCH SUBJECT: AN INTRODUCTION**

Tourism has arrived in the countryside at a time when agriculture is in decline and it is misinterpreted as a panacea for the problems of rural areas. While it can function in a supporting role it cannot be an alternative to the primary economic sector (García, 1996; Andrés, 2000; Besteiro, 2006). Nor can it be ignored that rural tourism operates in an environment which is unfamiliar with the service sector and even less so with the tourist sector seen as a business, all of which produces difficulties for its professionalization (Millán, 1999b). This situation means that there exists a requirement for technical assistance in the area of marketing and management strategies for destinations, businesses and business groups working in the area of rural tourism. This assistance can only come from the academic world and, in this sense, it is necessary to establish the current state of research related to the implementation of strategies and tools for managing and marketing tourism in rural areas.

In recent years rural tourism has been widely studied in terms of defining what exactly it is, its evolution and development in various parts of the world. As in the study of tourism in general, this research has been carried out from perspectives as diverse as geography, sociology, psychology, economics or business management. All of these viewpoints have converted it into a multidisciplinary research field of great interest. While there has been a quantitative increase in research into rural tourism there is a need for a qualitative leap in this work. There are specific needs related to the economics and management of firms, especially with regard to marketing. Addressing these would allow for improvements in the planning and management of both destinations and rural tourism enterprises. A practical and professional approach aimed at businesses and rural tourism destinations require powerful tools for better, more effective and efficient management of its limited

resources in an environment of increasing competitive intensity and in the context of market globalization.

The idea would be to continue the trend that already exists in other tourist activities such as accommodation, travel agencies, airlines, restaurants and other types of tourism and destination management. The objective of this would be to lay down a base on which to construct new research hypotheses that will solve problems and offer proposals to improve the performance and professionalism of rural tourism destinations and SMEs.

Therefore the objective of this paper is, thus, to obtain an overview of the current state of research in Spain on the implementation of strategies and tools for the managing and marketing of rural tourism, as well as establishing a roadmap to advance knowledge of the subject and in the process of signaling new areas for research where little or no work has been done. All of this, with the hope that the results of these investigations will result in a qualitative improvement in the sector.

The methodology used consisted of a review of Spanish and international tourism management journals of sufficient quality to be included in prestigious catalogues. It were chosen Spanish journals indexed in Latindex Catalogue and international journals indexed in the Journal Citation Report (JCR) (see Table 1). Firstly, the articles in these journals dealing with rural tourism were identified. These were then grouped according to fields of study in an attempt to identify the main research tendencies in the area of rural tourism.

Field	Journal Title
<b>Spanish journals</b>	<i>Cuadernos de Turismo</i> <i>Papers de Turisme</i> <i>Pasos, Revista de Turismo y Patrimonio Cultural</i> <i>RESTMA, Revista de Economía, Sociedad, Turismo y Medio Ambiente</i> <i>TURyDES, Revista de Investigación en Turismo y Desarrollo Local</i> <i>Annals of Tourism Research en Español</i> <i>Rotur, Revista de Ocio y Turismo</i> <i>Revista de Análisis Turístico</i> <i>Estudios Turísticos *</i>
<b>International journals</b>	Tourism Management Annals of Tourism Research Tourism Geographies Journal of Sustainable Tourism

Table 1. Reviewed journals

\* Although this journal is not in the catalogue of Latindex enjoys wide recognition in Spain.

Source: Own elaboration

This article is divided into six sections. The first is introductory. It makes an initial presentation of the subject under study and underlines its interest and the article's purpose. The following section provides background on rural tourism as a tourist activity, highlighting some ideas about its definition and development in Spain. The following section provides support for this with statistics relating to its growth. The fourth section focuses on the implementation of a classification of perspectives from which rural tourism has been studied. Some issues are then identified towards which research efforts in the area of rural tourism should be directed, specifically in the area of marketing. The final section presents conclusions, limitations and suggestions for future research.

## **2. DEFINITION AND DEVELOPMENT OF RURAL TOURISM: THE CASE OF SPAIN**

While sun and beach tourism has stagnated in recent years as it has reached maturity as a product, other kinds of tourism have started to develop and this is the context in which rural tourism must be seen. Cánoves *et al.* (2005a) see it as opposing the three "S"s of beach tourism "Sun, Sea and Sand" with three "P"s of its own "Patrimonio, Paisaje, Productos agrícolas", (Heritage, Landscape and Agricultural Products).

The current fashionable enthusiasm for things perceived as "rural" arises from the spirit of conquest of urban society of the space that surrounds and the rising recognition of the value of rural culture (Andrés, 2000). The desire of urban dwellers to stay in touch with nature is not a new phenomenon, but what is new is that this leisure activity should produce enough profit to replace agricultural activities in crisis. This is the reason for which tourism products have emerged based on recreational activities in rural and natural environments (García and Grande, 2005).

Rural tourism in Spain has enjoyed remarkable growth and become of considerable importance as a result of the strong boost received from the EU authorities (Bardón, 1987). It was during the 1990s that these authorities gave rural tourism a greater degree of continuity, albeit fragmentary and unequal, with a dual focus on agriculture and tourism (Blanco, 1996). The objective of these activities was to revitalize fragile rural economies without falling into the trap of seeing rural tourism as a panacea for all their problems. The intention, therefore, was to complement rural

agricultural income and diversify economic activity in the countryside with the new income benefiting the local population and promoting sustainable development (García, 1996; Andrés, 2000; Besteiro, 2006). As well as the complementing of agricultural income the protection of the environment and the development of rural culture are also of importance (Bardón, 1987). Millán (1999b) holds that tourism can be an important factor in the complementing of rural income. However, we must be aware of the difficulty of developing competitive tourism products, with quality as a comparative advantage, in declining, aging populations that are poorly trained for effective management. In terms of the of the benefits to employment, Besteiro (2006) maintains that it is wise to take a cautious view given that many of the jobs produced by rural tourism are highly seasonal, part time and require little training.

There is no agreed definition of what constitutes rural tourism. Mediano and Vicente (2002) maintain that term is broad and diffuse and that this explains the absence of an agreed definition. With the aim of merging the various definitions of that have emerged they highlight the following characteristics of it: it is carried out in rural rather than urban areas, it is small in scale, it uses that natural and cultural resources of the local environment and is respectful of these, it is an important factor in the development of local economies, and its principal customers are tourists who want to come into contact with the countryside.

Rural tourism in Spain begin in 1967 with the “*Vacaciones en Casas de Labranza*” (Farmhouse Holidays) program (Bardón, 1987; Galiano, 1991; Rico, 2005; Besteiro, 2006). It did not enjoy much success but led to improvements being made to some rural homes and represented the first attempt to develop tourism in the countryside. Rural tourism as we know it today dates from the 1980s (Rico, 2005). Recent years have seen a consolidation of the product, its spread throughout Spain and a commitment to quality as a distinctive element of it (Cánoves *et al.*, 2005a).

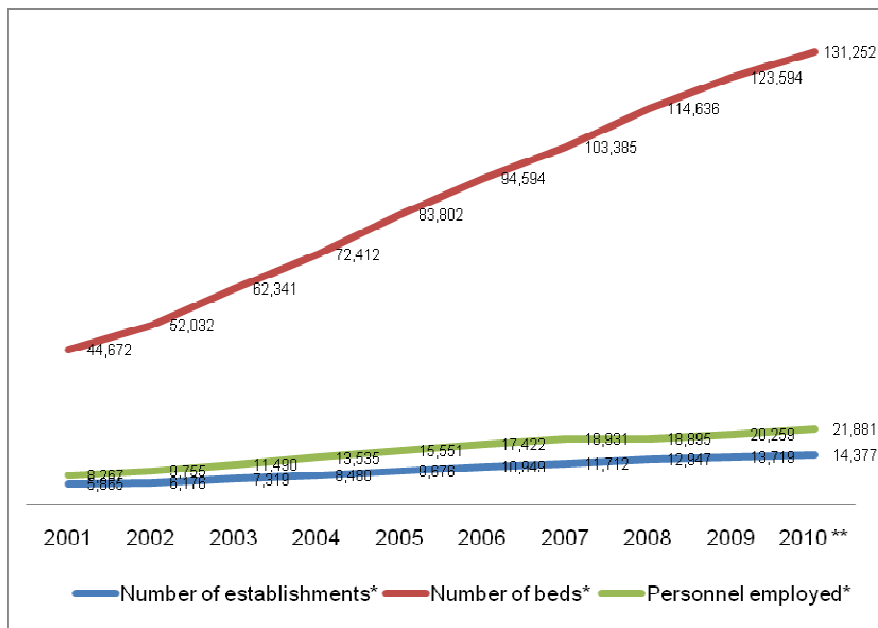
The factors that have led to the development of rural tourism have come from both the supply and demand sides (García, 1996; Solans and García, 2001; Cánoves *et al.*, 2005b; García and Grande, 2005; Besteiro, 2006; García and De la Calle, 2006). These include: the exhaustion of the classic sun and beach tourism model, improvements in consumer education, changes in the lifestyles of urban dwellers, a greater appreciation for the countryside, its heritage and customs, more concern about the environment and more leisure time split up into short periods.

López (2001) highlights the fact that rural tourism has produced important innovations in the Spanish tourism market with the incorporation of new destinations, the creation of new kinds of accommodation, the merging of people with personal and professional profiles that are very different from those typical of the tourism business as well as a notable degree of involvement by local and regional public bodies and local populations.

### **3. RURAL TOURISM IN SPAIN, A BOOMING SECTOR**

In order to see the importance of the rural tourism sector in Spain, both the supply and demand side data, will be presented. Graph 1 shows that between 2001 and 2010 the amount of rural tourism accommodation, according to the *Encuesta de Ocupación en Alojamientos de Turismo Rural* (Rural Accommodation Survey) of the *Instituto Nacional de Estadística* (National Statistics Office), increased by 5,865 to 14,377. This has meant an increase of 145.13%. Measured in terms of beds the increase was from 44,672 to 131,252, with a growth of 193.81%. In the same way, personnel employed have evolved from 8,267 to 21,881, an increase of 164.68%.





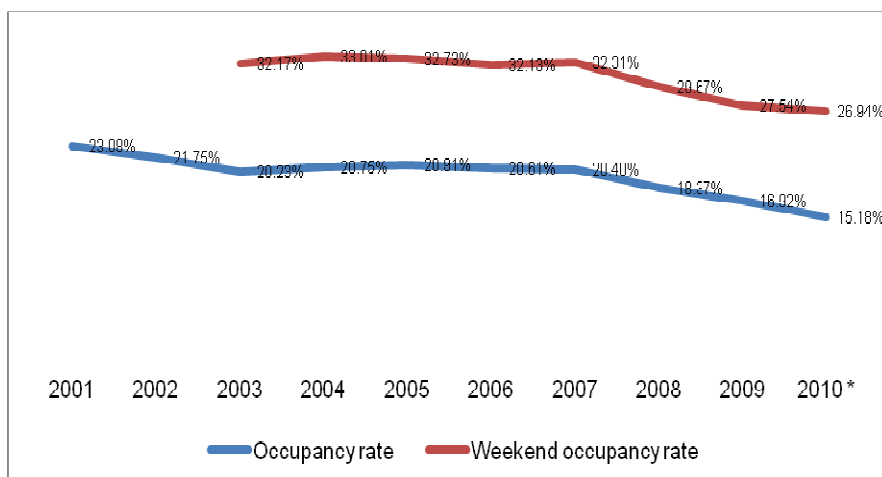
Graph 1. Evolution of rural tourism supply in Spain from 2001 to 2010

\* The number of establishments, beds and personnel employed belongs to the month of December of that year.

\*\* 2010 data are provisional.

Source: Own elaboration from information obtained from *Encuesta de Ocupación en Alojamientos de Turismo Rural* (Rural Accomodation Survey) of the *Instituto Nacional de Estadística* (National Statistics Office)

The overall occupancy rate has fluctuated between 23 and 15%, a decline of 34.23% while the weekend occupancy rate fluctuated, between 33 and 26% in the period from 2003 to 2010, a turn down of 16.26% (see Graph 2).

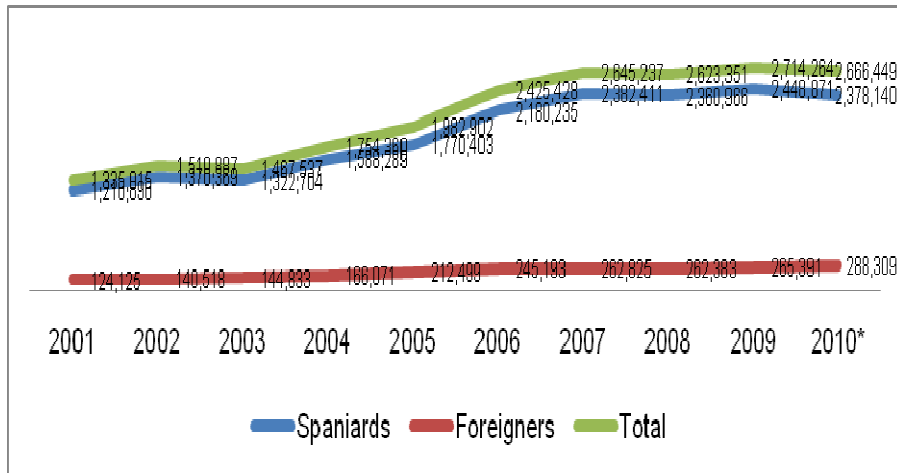


Graph 2. Evolution of rural occupancy rate and weekend occupancy rate in Spain (annual average total)

\*2010 data are provisional.

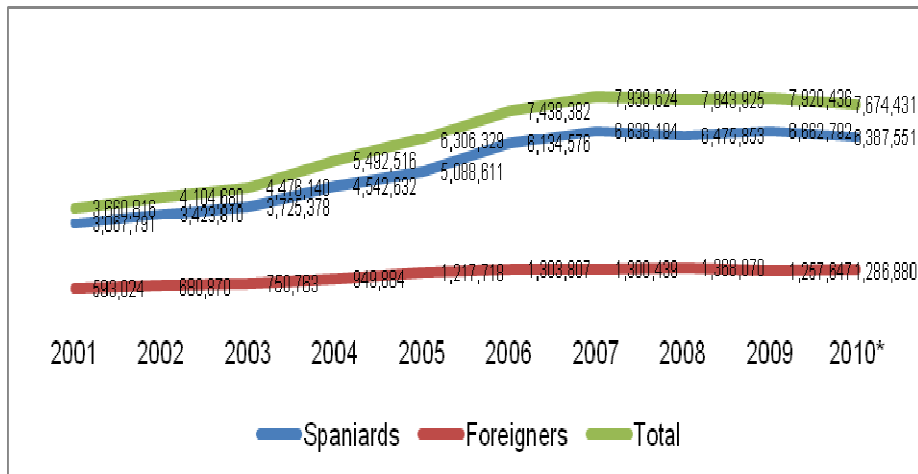
Source: Own elaboration from information obtained from *Encuesta de Ocupación en Alojamientos de Turismo Rural* (Rural Accomodation Survey) of the *Instituto Nacional de Estadística* (National Statistics Office)

The strong supply side growth has been matched by growing demand. The total number of travelers in the decade from 2001 to 2010 grew by 120.21%, from 1,210,890 to 2,666,449. Of this latter number 288,309 were foreigners in 2010, representing 11% of the total (see Graph 3). Overnight stays rose by 109.64% in the same period, from 3,660,816 to 7,674,431, and of this latter number 1,286,880 were foreigners in 2010 (see Graph 4). The average length of stay was around 2 to 3 days, though it has declined by 4.64% (see Graph 5).



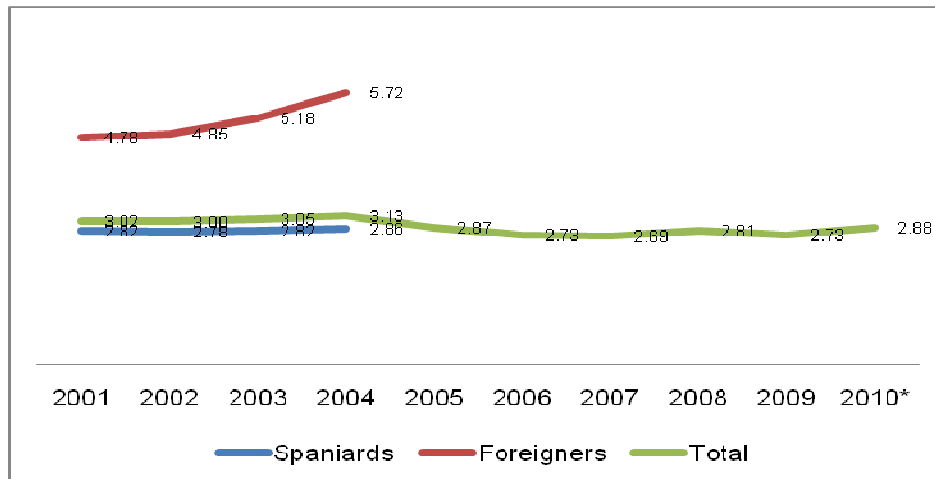
Graph 3. Evolution of rural tourism travellers in Spain from 2001 to 2010  
\* 2010 data are provisional.

Source: Own elaboration from information obtained from *Encuesta de Ocupación en Alojamientos de Turismo Rural* (Rural Accommodation Survey) of the *Instituto Nacional de Estadística* (National Statistics Office)



Graph 4. Evolution of rural overnights in Spain from 2001 to 2010  
\* 2010 data are provisional.

Source: Own elaboration from information obtained from *Encuesta de Ocupación en Alojamientos de Turismo Rural* (Rural Accommodation Survey) of the *Instituto Nacional de Estadística* (National Statistics Office)



Graph 5. Evolution of average length in rural tourism in Spain from 2001 to 2010

\* 2010 data are provisional.

Source: Own elaboration from information obtained from *Encuesta de Ocupación en Alojamientos de Turismo Rural* (Rural Accommodation Survey) of the *Instituto Nacional de Estadística* (National Statistics Office)

In the light of the data presented, it is apparent that the rural tourism in Spain is well established. It creates jobs and has been developed by the pressure of growing demand. However, a certain pattern of stabilization of demand growth in recent years can be observed as well as a decline in the average length of stays, overall and weekend occupancy rates. This situation suggests the need to support a sector that is growing but will gradually come to acquire the need for management tools that will strengthen the positioning of these rural areas as sites for tourism development. Development, that brings many benefits to local communities in which the activity is based. These are challenges that have to be addressed from a management and tourism marketing perspective.

#### **4. RESEARCH INTO RURAL TOURISM FROM A MARKETING PERSPECTIVE**

The first articles on rural tourism in journals of tourism management date from the early 1980s. On the international scene there appeared such articles as the one by Middleton (1982), published in *Tourism Management*, which highlighted the strength of rural areas to attract visitors as a tourism phenomenon, an attraction that is particularly strong in northern Europe, where the climate is less favorable for the development of coastal tourism. In Spain the first articles also appeared in this decade. Fourneau and Martin (1984), in an article published in *Estudios Turísticos*, also cite the appearance of rural tourism with a modern face in northern Europe, a

trend that had then already been present in Spain for some years and was already moving towards consolidation, especially around the major cities.

A wealth of research on rural tourism began to be produced in the 1990s and this trend has continued up to the present time. This research has been spread across a number of different fields such as geography, sociology, psychology, economics, business management, etc., both in journals dealing with these topics and those dealing specifically with tourism. All of this has positioned rural tourism as a multidisciplinary research field which can be studied from a number of viewpoints as is shown by the thematic breadth of the articles published about it.

With the aim of providing an overview of research into rural tourism in Spain, Table 2 presents a classification of representative studies of the perspectives and issues identified. These are: conceptual work on rural tourism, its importance as a strategic factor and the momentum given to it by government agencies; work on the development of tourism in different areas; work on the different uses of rural space (especially agro-tourism); work on the management and organization of companies, institutions and destinations; work on marketing and market research; work on heritage, valuing the environment and sustainable development; and other legal, sociological and anthropological issues.

Perspective	Issues	Some examples
<i>Economic-geographical</i>	Conceptual work on rural tourism, its importance as a strategic factor and the momentum given to it by government agencies	Bardón (1987, 1990), Elizalde (1994), Blanco (1996), García (1996), Yagüe (1998), Millán (1999b), Andrés (2000), Aparicio (2004), Rico (2005)
	Development of tourism in different areas	Fourneau and Martín (1984), Galiano (1991), Fourneau (1998), Gil (1998), Millán (1998, 2004), Aguña (2002), Delgado <i>et al.</i> (2003), Camargo <i>et al.</i> (2004), Cánoves <i>et al.</i> (2005a, 2005b), Besteiro (2006), García and De la Calle (2006), Cruz and Cadima (2007), Mondéjar <i>et al.</i> (2008, 2009), García (2009)
	Different uses of rural space (agro-tourism, ecotourism, cultural, or health tourism, etc.)	Montemagno and Arancio (1991), Martín (1994), Alberdi (2001), Sayadi and Calatrava (2001), Mediano (2002), López (2003), Grande (2006), Parra and Calero (2006), Solís (2009)
<i>Economic</i>	Management and organization of companies, institutions and destinations	Gómez (1999), Sparrer (2003), García and Grande (2005), Rico and Gómez (2005), Brunet and Alarcón (2006), Cawley and Gillmor (2008), Bravo <i>et al.</i> (2009), Diéguez <i>et al.</i> (2009)
	Marketing and market research	Bote (1987), Muñoz (1994), Fuentes (1995), Traverso (1996), Díaz and Vázquez (1998), Albaladejo and Díaz (2003), Cebrián (2003), Albaladejo <i>et al.</i> (2004), Camargo <i>et al.</i> (2005a), García (2005), Royo and Ruiz (2009), Royo and Serarols (2005), Francés (2006), Loureiro and Miranda (2006), Albacete <i>et al.</i> (2007), Hernández <i>et al.</i> (2008), Guzmán and Tous (2009), Cawley <i>et al.</i> (2007)
<i>Geographic</i>	Heritage, valuing the environment and sustainable development	Millán (1999a), Brinckmann and Cebrián (2001), Martínez (2004), Camargo <i>et al.</i> (2005b)
<i>Other sciences</i>	Legal, sociological, anthropological issues and others	De Souza (1997), Nogués (2006), Costa and Barretto (2007), Montemayor <i>et al.</i> (2007)

Table 2. Rural tourism research in Spain

Source: Own elaboration

Since this paper focuses on the economic aspect of rural tourism, it seems appropriate to make a brief comment about the work that has been classified as being on the management and organization of companies, institutions and destinations and especially that concerned with marketing and market research.

In Spain, under the rubric of management and organization of companies, institutions and destinations Sparrer (2003) and Rico and Gómez (2005) on the role of women in entrepreneurial initiatives in rural tourism; García and Grande (2005) on the design of rural tourism products; and Cawley and Gillmor (2008) and Diéguez *et al.* (2009) on questions related to strategy, can all be cited. Work on quality has emerged strongly in the field of rural tourism. While quality was originally an issue with the organization of enterprises, in recent years studies have proliferated that deal with it from a marketing perspective, especially with regard to the evaluation of measurement scales in various areas, among them rural tourism. That is why this section cites the work of Gómez (1999), Brunet and Alarcón (2006) and Bravo *et al.* (2009) as examples.

With regard to the marketing and market research perspective work related to the study of demand and the profile of the tourist may be cited (Bote, 1987; Fuentes,

1995; Albaladejo and Díaz, 2003; Cebrián, 2003; Albaladejo *et al.*, 2004; Camargo *et al.*, 2005a; Royo and Serarols, 2005), while with regard to the variables of the marketing mix there is (García, 2005), the organization of supply and marketing (Muñoz, 1994; Francés, 2006), communication (Traverso, 1996), the measurement of client perceptions (Royo and Ruiz, 2009) and service quality (Díaz y Vázquez, 1998; Albacete *et al.*, 2007), all work which within the field of quality comes close to that of marketing.

Although this paper concerns itself with research into rural tourism in Spain it is also appropriate to look at developments in this area at the international level. The situation regarding articles published in international journals of tourism management is similar to that presented in the previous analysis. Table 3 makes use of the same classification employed in Table 2, but in this case for articles published in international journals.

Perspective	Issues	Some examples
<i>Economic-geographical</i>	Conceptual work on rural tourism, its importance as a strategic factor and the momentum given to it by government agencies	Middleton (1982), Hjalager (1996), Fleischer and Felsenstein (2000), Deller (2010)
	Development of tourism in different areas	Chow (1980), Hermans (1981), Luloff <i>et al.</i> (1994), Forsyth (1995), Oppermann (1996), Fleischer and Pizam (1997), Sharpley (2002), Liu (2006)
	Different uses of rural space (agrotourism, ecotourism, cultural tourism, or health tourism, etc.)	Dernoi (1983), Frater (1983), Pearce (1990), Nilsson (2002), Pulina <i>et al.</i> (2006), Sharpley and Vass (2006), Choo and Jamal (2009)
<i>Economic</i>	Management and organization of companies, institutions and destinations	García-Ramón <i>et al.</i> (1995), Galindo <i>et al.</i> (2002), McGehee <i>et al.</i> (2007), Petrou <i>et al.</i> (2007), Saxena and Ilbery (2008)
	Marketing and market research	Gilbert (1989), Gilbert and Tung (1989), Reichel <i>et al.</i> (2000), Cai (2002), Yagüe (2002), Frochot (2005), Hernández <i>et al.</i> (2007), Molera and Albajadejo (2007), Loureiro and Miranda (2008), Albaladejo and Díaz (2009), Royo (2009), Rozman <i>et al.</i> (2009)
<i>Geographic</i>	Heritage, valuing the environment and sustainable development	Daugstad (2008)
<i>Other sciences</i>	Legal, sociological, anthropological issues and etc.	Park and Stokowski (2009)

Table 3. International rural tourism research  
Source: Own elaboration

Once more the focus is on articles that that can be grouped together as having an economic perspective. Under the rubric of the management and organization of companies, institutions and destinations there again appear articles related to the role of women in rural tourism (García-Ramón, 2005; McGehee *et al.*, 2007), as well as the application of data bases to management (Galindo *et al.*, 2002) and strategy (Petrou *et al.*, 2007; Saxena and Ilbery, 2008).

The theme of marketing and market research usually appear in this research in the context of marketing in general (Gilbert, 1989, Gilbert and Tung, 1989), and includes the study of demand, its segmentation and the profile of the tourist (Yagüe, 2002; Frochot, 2005; Molera and Albaladejo, 2007; Albaladejo and Díaz, 2009), measuring the quality of service (Reichel *et al.*, 2000; Rozman *et al.*, 2009), relational marketing and customer loyalty (Loureiro and Miranda, 2008), the image of destinations (Royo, 2009) and its relationship with the brand (Cai, 2002) and customer satisfaction and its relationship with variables such as loyalty (Hernández *et al.*, 2007).

This review is not exhaustive and only provides some examples of what has happened in rural tourism research since the advent of the first articles in journals. Nevertheless it is clear that although many of these studies were written from a marketing and market research perspective, many issues remain untouched or have not been well dealt with. The next section will attempt to identify these issues.

## **5. THE RESEARCH AGENDA IN RURAL TOURISM MARKETING**

In the attempt to draw up an agenda for research into rural tourism marketing it will be necessary to examine the three literature reviews in this area carried out by Bigné and other authors and which cover the period from 1980 to 2006 (Bigné, 1996, 2004; Bigné *et al.*, 2008). The most significant ideas are summarized in Table 4.

What might be termed the first stage in the evolution of research areas in tourism marketing extended from 1980 to 1995. This stage was characterized by consumer and marketing mix variables research. There was a focus on interesting lines of research in the study of products that differed from the prevailing model of sun and beach tourism. These included nature, culture and sport, three aspects of rural tourism. The period reviewed between 1995 and 2003 was characterized by a focus on the image of destinations, products and brands, the study of consumer behavior and strategic aspects of marketing such as satisfaction and relationship marketing. In the third stage, from 2004 to 2006, Bigné *et al.* (2008) returned to issues related to consumer behavior. Other themes also appeared such as marketing strategy, management and planning, product research and new technologies. It was at this point that rural tourism emerged in research under its own name having previously appeared in different guises. The study of marketing mix variables, ethics and social

responsibility of marketing and research methodologies is recommended for future research.

	<b>1<sup>ST</sup> STAGE: Bigné (1996)</b>	<b>2<sup>ND</sup> STAGE: Bigné (2004)</b>	<b>3<sup>RD</sup> STAGE: Bigné et al. (2008)</b>
<b>Study period</b>	From 1980 to 1995.	From 1995 to 2003.	From 2004 to 2006.
<b>Publications journals</b>	Spanish specific publications of tourism and marketing: journals ( <i>Estudios Turísticos, Papers de Turisme, Esic Market, Información Comercial Española</i> ) and congress ( <i>I Congreso de la Asociación Española de Expertos Científicos en Turismo, V Congreso Nacional de Economía, Encuentros de Profesores Universitarios de Marketing</i> ), among others.	Spanish specific journals of tourism and international ones: <i>Annals of Tourism Research, Tourism Management, Papers de Turisme, Estudios Turísticos, Annals of Tourism Research en español.</i>	International specific journals of tourism: <i>Annals of Tourism Research, Tourism Management, Journal of Travel Research.</i>
<b>Main lines of research of the period studied</b>	Consumer behavior, marketing mix (product, price, place, promotion), tourism marketing promotion, generals.	Destination image (as well as products and brands), the consumer-tourist (service quality, satisfaction and emotions) and relationship marketing.	Topics: consumer behavior, marketing strategy, management and planning, product, and new technologies. Subsectors: destinations and types of tourism (cultural, rural, nature, sport and adventure tourism).
<b>Future research lines</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Consumer behavior (attitudes, motivations, culture, destination choice and accommodation, among others).</li> <li>2. Destination image (differentiation and loyalty strategies).</li> <li>3. Promotion (destination choice and budget as moderator variables).</li> <li>4. New tourism products different from sun and beach tourism (derived from sport, nature and culture).</li> </ol>	Unspecified.	Marketing mix (price, distribution channels, personal selling, promotion), ethics and marketing social responsibility in marketing, research methodologies.

Table 4. the evolution of tourism marketing research  
Source: Own elaboration

As well as the literature reviews on tourism marketing carried out by Bigné and other authors (Bigné, 1996, 2004; Bigné et al., 2008) the results produced by Oh et al. (2004) must also be considered. They conducted a literature review on the same theme between 2002 and 2003 of a selection of international journals. According to these authors the most studied issues in this period were satisfaction/complaining behavior/recovery service, market segmentation/positioning/targeting and relationship marketing/CRM/ loyalty.

The literature, therefore, points to rural tourism as a research topic of interest. To try to establish a research agenda on issues relevant to rural tourism marketing, the results of these reviews can be extrapolated and they could be applied to rural tourism. Topics of interest are:

- Marketing mix variables in rural tourism.



- The need to deepen knowledge of consumer behavior in variables such as attitudes, motivations and emotions, satisfaction and in the process of choice in this type of tourism.
- Management and marketing planning in rural tourism.
- The strategies of differentiation and positioning of destinations and rural tourism products.
- The image of destinations and products, as well as the importance of tourism brands in these environments.
- Measuring the quality of service establishments.
- Relational marketing, loyalty to the tourist and the implementation of CRM (Customer Relationship Management) programs in destinations and establishments.
- The application of new technologies in the rural tourism sector.
- Ethics and social responsibility in marketing.
- New research methodologies.

Related to the latter point, the literature reviews of Oh *et al.* (2004) and Bigné *et al.* (2008) reveal that the research methodologies more used in tourism marketing are descriptive, factor/cluster/discriminant analysis, regression/logit-logistic regression, analysis of (co)variance (ANOVA/MANOVA), structural equation modelling/path analysis, time series, neural models/data mining, or the reliability of scales. The application of some of these techniques can already be seen in research in rural tourism marketing. It would be interesting to encourage this expansion, especially the use of structural equation modelling as a technique which is becoming more important in marketing research to identify causal relationships between variables, with the implications this may have for the management and marketing of destinations and rural tourism enterprises.

## **6. CONCLUSIONS AND FINAL REFLEXIONS**

Rural tourism is an alternative to the stagnating model of sun and beach tourism in Spain (García, 1996; Cánoves *et al.*, 2005b; Besteiro, 2006) and it has particular characteristics: it is carried out in the countryside, it is smaller in scale and uses natural and cultural resources from the local area, it is an important factor in

development and its main motivation is desire to be in contact with the countryside (Mediano y Vicente, 2002).

It has enjoyed strong growth in Spain as in other countries in recent years. The supply side of the sector has grown in tandem with a demand to escape from the stress of the city and find tranquility in the countryside and also to have motivating, authentic, educational, personalized experiences without being part of a crowd (García, 1996; Yagüe, 2002; Cánoves *et al.*, 2005b). In Spain it has also benefitted from promotion by the EU authorities (Bardón, 1987) as it is can contribute to improving the economic situation in the countryside which has been damaged by the crisis in agriculture as it responds to the demands for new forms of tourism in Europe (Blanco, 1996).

In Spain it has experienced an increase of 145.13% in the amount of rural accommodation, 164.68% in the personnel employed, and 120.21% in the number of travellers between 2001 and 2010 according to the *Encuesta de Ocupación en Alojamientos de Turismo Rural* (Rural Accommodation Survey) of the *Instituto Nacional de Estadística* (National Statistics Office). It is thus a kind of tourism that generates income and employment for rural areas. However, it faces important challenges. The overall occupancy rate fluctuated between 23 and 15% and the weekend occupation rate between 33 and 26% over the same decade which represented a decline of 34.23% and 16.26% respectively. Also, the average length, which ranges between 2 and 3 days, has declined by 4.64%. Given this situation there arises the need to support a growing sector, but one that needs management tools to strengthen its competitiveness and position in terms of tourism destinations, and to improve its professionalism. These challenges can be addressed from the viewpoint of marketing.

It is in this context this research assumes a fundamental role in the improved comprehension of this phenomenon of rural tourism at a scientific level. Although rural tourism has been studied from a wide range of perspectives (see Tables 2 and 3), there is a need for a qualitative leap in this area, specifically with regard to the economics and management of firms, especially with regard to marketing in order to achieve better planning, management and marketing of destinations and rural tourism enterprises. On the basis of the literature reviews carried out by Bigné (1996, 2004), Bigné *et al.* (2008) and Oh *et al.* (2004) an attempt has been made to set out

an agenda for research on questions that are being looked in the study of tourism marketing in general and the application of which to rural tourism would be of benefit.

In view of the issues currently being tackled in marketing research and the research priorities there, and observing the needs and demands of the rural tourism sector, it seems plausible to direct the focus of research attention on three main areas:

- **Operational Marketing.** This means getting involved in the study of the marketing mix. As for the product development, one must stay abreast of the demands of clients as they seem to change rapidly. In recent years there has been a move towards specialization in rural tourism, especially in terms of accommodation directed at specific market segments. For this reason it would be advisable to study the best positioning and differentiation strategies and their impact. The potential of new technologies in marketing is incalculable. Not only the Internet in itself but also the popularity of PDAs; the BlackBerry, iPhones or Smartphones in general; iPads or tablets and computer software for these devices, in conjunction with the development of Web 2.0 and social networks are having a major impact on tourism. They are powerful tools for distribution and communication and their impact is not limited to e-commerce, call centers or the web sites of rural tourism destinations and businesses. The application of new technologies in this subsector would represent a major step forward in the management of businesses and destinations that have to deal with an ever more technologically advanced tourist.
- **Strategic Marketing.** To provide a product totally tailored to the needs of the tourist, the study of their behavior is essential. Their attitudes, satisfaction, motivations and emotions, choice processes and perception of quality of service offered are basic in this regard. It is a proven fact that it is easier, cheaper and more profitable for companies to make existing customers loyal than to find new ones. Relationship marketing strategies are of particular interest here, especially in a tourism subsector where the relationship between tourists, local people, businesses and the environment is so close and enriching. The development and application of simple CRM could have good results. The image of tourism destinations is an issue of increasing relevance in rural tourism as well as their association with travel brands. A key role is to

perform the planning and coordination of strategies and agencies to improve the performance of small organizations and tourist destinations in rural areas.

- Research techniques. Various methodological proposals have been made regarding techniques being used in tourism marketing research especially in relation to the use of structural equations.

The main limitations of this study arise from the difficulty of carrying out a comprehensive literature review of global scope, in a multidisciplinary field such as tourism. Hence the need to classify the perspectives from which the phenomenon has been studied. In this way one can study the journals of each area, although this risks leaving out other articles in other journals that may also be of interest. Furthermore, the literature on tourism management and marketing is highly concentrated in specific publications on tourism management, but also very sparse in business management and marketing. Therefore, in order to draw up a review of management and marketing of rural tourism is necessary to examine both types of publications. For these reasons it may sometimes be worthwhile to limit searches to those journals that have editorial quality recognized by prestige indices.

Given that this paper has examined issues being addressed with respect to the marketing of rural tourism in the academic literature, a thorough review of the tourism management, management and marketing journals, limited by the most appropriate quality indicators, would be necessary to improve the quality of the results found. Other future research areas could arise from reviews of the literature on rural tourism from the field of geography, sociology, psychology and other areas, with the aim of synthesizing the theoretical research of this topic by knowledge area.

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