

Azores Trail Run® as a sustainable vehicle for promotion and local development

Azores Trail Run® como meio de promoção e desenvolvimento local sustentável

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to evaluate the impact of the trail running event in the Azores territory, and how it fits into sustainable development strategies and the policies promoted by the regional Government. For the present study we used two surveys and an interview with the ATR coordinator during the 2018 edition of the Azores Trail Run ® - Triangle Adventure. One survey was sent by email for non-residents participants and the other was applied in person to residents of Faial, Pico and São Jorge islands during the event, with the objective of evaluating their perception of the event and the impact of the ATR. In order to complement the information gathered through the two surveys, we conducted an interview with ATR director and general coordinator. This sport event follows the principles of local sustainable development defined by the Azores regional Government and promotes the Azores as a sustainable tourism destination.

Keywords: local sustainable development, sport tourism, trail run, Azores.

Resumo

O objectivo deste artigo é avaliar o impacto de um evento de trail running no território dos Açores e de como este se enquadra nas estratégias de desenvolvimento sustentável e nas políticas promovidas pelo Governo Regional. Para o presente estudo foi utilizado dois inquéritos e uma entrevista com o coordenador do Azores Trail Run (ATR) durante a edição de 2018 do ATR ® - Triangle Adventure. Um dos inquéritos foi enviado por correio eletrónico aos atletas participantes não residentes e o outro foi aplicado pessoalmente à população residente das ilhas do Faial, Pico e São Jorge, com o objetivo de avaliar a sua perceção do evento e o impacto gerado. A fim de complementar as informações obtidas através das duas pesquisas, foi também realizada uma entrevista com o diretor e coordenador geral do ATR. Este evento desportivo segue os princípios de desenvolvimento local sustentável definidos pelo Governo Regional dos Açores e promove a Região como um destino turístico sustentável.

Palavras-Chave: desenvolvimento local sustentável, turismo desportivo, trail run, Açores.

1. Introduction

It is widely reported that sports tourism contributes to local development of territories and their communities, and that should be considered when defining policies and subsequent decisions, since sports tourism, in its most diverse forms, has a preponderant role in the exploration of existing endogenous resources. In rural and island territories, such as the Azores, micro, small and medium-sized events are the most representative, as we have seen in Silva's study (2013) and the larger events are carried out in the main cities.

Considering that rural and island territories are more susceptible to the impacts generated by tourism activity and sporting events, it is extremely important that the organizers of these activities are fully aware about the importance of local sustainable development in these places (Ferreira, 2017), and the impact in the local community itself (Valente, 2012).

Sporting events in rural and island territories, such as the Azores, should be in accordance with the guidelines adopted by public institutions, especially the regional Government, in affirming the region as a sustainable tourist destination. Recently, the

Azores, was recognized by the Global Sustainable Tourism Council as the first archipelago in the world with sustainable tourism destination certificate, among other awards and recognitions on the themes of sustainability and development. Considering the importance of preserving and defending the natural and cultural heritage while at the same time creating equitable and lasting wealth; from the international imperatives of climate governance towards a low carbon global economy; and increasing population pressure on the planet and the region, it is essential to “reinforce the Azores as having a tourism strategy with a clear orientation towards sustainable tourism, adapted to the local reality and resilient to the global challenges” (GRA/IPDT, 2016, p. 11).

In this sense, it is necessary that events organized in rural and island territories have a preponderant role in defining strategies, actions and measures with the objective of reducing or mitigating the associated impacts generated. This article fits in depth the ATR, demonstrating how this event contributes in a sustained way to the local development of the Azores.

2. Sport Tourism and Sustainable Local Development

Tourism is an important economic sector in the development of regions, territories and communities. If this is fact, it is still most in rural and island territories where exist a small economy, demographic ageing and population withdrawal, the social and economic local agents considered tourism as an opportunity to development (Mourão, 2000; E. Silva, 2016; F. Silva, 2017). It is indeed tourism, as a rejuvenation of the social and economic activities, which makes many of the rural areas today known and recognized nationally and internationally. In recent years we have been witnessing a clear commitment to the implementation of national and community policies for local development with greater emphasis in rural areas. These policies have the main objective to minimize the effects of dropout of the territory, seeking to promote development that is intended to be sustainable.

It is widely published that tourism and sport as sectors of activity contribute positively to the development of territories, places and communities (Chalip, Ritchie, & Adair, 2004). Sports tourism, as

a structured segment under the most diverse forms, is a means of promoting and disseminating existing endogenous resources, assuming a preponderant role in the promotion and dissemination of territories and communities, with greater incidence in rural and island areas.

The importance of the sector to sustainable local development had led UNESCO to declare 2017 as the International Year of Sustainable Tourism for Development. This commitment clearly demonstrates the importance of the sector and all its tourism activities and respective segments for the local development that is intended to be sustainable. In this sense, the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) itself has launched an official website (2017) on this and other related issues, on the theme of sustainable tourism and development. In addition to these public commitments to the tourism sector, we also find in Agenda 2030 that it is present in three of the 17 objectives outlined: Goal 8 (promote sustainable and inclusive economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all); Goal 12 (ensure sustainable production and consumption patterns); and Goal 14 (conservation and sustainable use of the oceans, seas and marine resources).

Although the theme of sustainable development is mainly related to environmental issues (Borges, 2016; European Commission, 2016), it is assumed by tourism agents as related to the economic issues of an industry that moves people, products, goods and services and respective currencies. Indeed, in spite of the different positions adopted by the most diverse authors and researchers of the theme, tourism as the engine for sustainable local development is no more than tailoring the activities of the sector to the latest principles and objectives of human, environmental, economic, natural development, social, political, institutional and cultural issues (Garcia, 2011; Oliveira & Manso, 2010).

The theme of sustainable tourism and development is not new: as early as 1993, UNWTO had announced a set of measures and principles that the sector should consider for sustainability and its contribution to development. Affirming sustainable tourism means applying new expressions and concepts of development, adopting new technologies and working methods in various domains and introducing new activities and tourism products, favouring the contact of man with nature and valuing the history and culture of places (Mourão, 2000; Saarinen, 2014;

Sharpley, 2000). Local and regional organizations and institutions will be responsible for the planning and management of the territory, as well as the definition of development actions, objectives and strategies, keeping in mind the specificities and constraints of its territory. The sustainable development of tourism is therefore based on its own deontological principles, which are broadly based on the main objectives of economic and social development, spatial planning, nature conservation, protection of the environment and natural resources. improvement of education and the standard of living of the population (SREAT/DRT, 2019b).

Considering all the aforementioned assumptions, it is then strictly necessary that tourist-sporting events (or events of similar nature), even more so when they are carried out in low-density (rural and island) territories, quite sensitive to the impacts caused by them, have a perspective and a tripolar vision of sustainability and development when planning and organizing the event itself.

The sustainable development of the tourism sector is simply achievable through the definition of a clear and objective legislative scope, with concrete planning guidelines, actions and measures, as well as effective and feasible mechanisms for monitoring and managing activities in close connection ambitious and financially robust strategies and programs.

3. Azores: Sustainable Tourism Destination

The Azores, located in the Atlantic Ocean, and being one of the two autonomous regions belonging to Portugal, are made up of nine islands of volcanic origin. In the immensity of deep blue ocean, the Region, known for its landscapes and natural beauty, for the culture and hospitality of the residents, are also recognized for their importance in terms of sustainability and development policies. Just a few examples of these are the recognition by National Geographic, the Quality Coast Platinum Award, and most recently in ITB Berlin (tourism fair) where it was awarded, for the fifth consecutive time, by Green Destinations, as one of the 100 most sustainable tourism destinations in the world, and also by Jeju in South Korea, as one of the two regions in the world to hold all the distinctions awarded by UNESCO, after they are recognized by Global Sustainable Tourism

Council as the first archipelago in the world with sustainable tourism destination certificate.

The sporting activity in nature is a path to environmental awareness, since the characteristics of the natural environment acquire a special highlight during the period in which the activity is performed. The growth of cities and the stress caused by daily life provoke a social need for access to nature that sport shares and intensifies, with a strong relationship between environment and sport. The Azores has exceptional conditions and natural resources for the practice of nature sports. If the Azores are recognized by international organizations with respect to both sustainability and development, it will then be expected that the events held in the region will all take into account the premise of sustainable development. For these national and international awards and recognitions of a sustainable tourist destination, there are policies, strategies, actions and measures of a cross-sectorial nature promoted both by public and private organizations. In this sense, the Strategic Marketing Plan for Tourism of the Azores (PEMTA) was adopted, where nature tourism is defined as the strategic product of the Azores, and where we find, besides many others, the organization and capture of sporting events in direct contact with nature.

Considering that one of the transversal problems of the tourism sector is seasonality, it was defined in the PEMTA that the sporting events should be realized mostly during the season with lower rates of visitation, commonly dubbed low season. For this to be possible, the regional Government supports, logistically and financially, the events with the highest level of recognition and media exposure and of the most impact for local development, in addition to increasing those that fit the perspective of sustainability.

The destination of the Azores is undoubtedly a world reference in terms of sustainable development as a result of the participation of both tourist agents working directly and indirectly in the sector and the policies adopted by public organizations. In this way, tourism development of the Azores will have to meet or exceed and surpass, standards that are stipulated in the booklet for sustainability, "for an unequal environmental supply, allied to energy sustainability, in a concerted strategy to safeguard natural resources, which will enhance the tourist activity of the

archipelago of the Azores as a destination of nature” (SREAT, 2017, p. 11).

Tourism has been playing an increasingly important role in the regional economy, not only at the level of the product generated, but also in terms of the employment and entrepreneurship opportunities it has provided. The decision by the regional Government to recognise tourism as a sector of sustainable local development, along with other economic and sectoral activities, is a clear commitment and a unique opportunity to project the Azores to the international panorama of sustainability, at the same time as reinforces the region’s internal recognition of its potential as a sustainable tourism destination (SREAT/DRT, 2019a).

As mentioned previously, if there are policies in the area of sustainable development adopted by the active agents of the sector, on the other hand, the events organized in the Region must take this clear commitment to the sustainable development of the destination. In fact, if nature is undoubtedly the Azores reference to sustainable tourism development and an integral part of existing policies, it would not make any sense that the events created and organized in the archipelago did not take this care to create the necessary conditions for the objective to affirm, increasingly that the Azores are a world-class tourist destination in the area of sustainability. In this sense, both PEMTA and the new Tourism Planning Program of the Autonomous Region of the Azores (POTRAA) state that:

The lush nature and uniqueness of the landscape, combined with the authenticity of the history and traditions of its people, allow the Autonomous Region of the Azores to assert itself, in the national and international context, as a European tourist destination in the middle of the Atlantic, nine volcanic islands, recognized as environmentally preserved. (GRA/IPDT, 2016, p. 32)

In addition to these singularities, in recent years, the Azores has strengthened its identity matrix, as a tourism destination strongly based on outdoor, cultural and experiential activities. This identity, embodied in both documents mentioned as a strategic bet for the tourism sector, became evident both in the scope of the various tourism products offered and the promotional actions carried out.

All this development and resource framework of the Region determined that the tourism sector in the Azores should be one of the driving forces of the economic development of the Region and that the political orientation for its growth strategy, assumed by the Regional Government of the Azores, be based on the concept of sustainability, combining, in a profitable way, the environmental, economic, social and even cultural dimensions (Moniz, 2006; Valente, 2012).

4. Azores Trail Run ® - A Brand for Regional Sustainable Development

As the name implies, this is a tourist-sport event connected to trail-running. Currently this is one of the most famous events with elevated media exposure that encompasses six of the nine islands, with its main event centred in Faial island and titled as ATR Whalers Great Route. But exist another events with ATR brand: the ATR Triangle Adventure that crosses São Jorge, Pico and Faial islands; the ATR Columbus Trail on Santa Maria island; the ATR Extreme West Atlantic Trail on Flores island; and very recently was presented the ATR Windmills Trail which had its first edition in November 2019 on the Graciosa island.

The ATR is an initiative of the Independent Club of Athletics of the Blue Island and the Faial Island Natural Park and had its inaugural event in 2014 on Faial Island, counting on the logistical and financial support of various public and private organizations. Over the years, the ATR has evolved, making it an integral part of the Portuguese Trail Running Association, Ultra Trail World Tour and the International Trail Running Association, creating new ATR events throughout the Region, making the name of the Azores and ATR recognized internationally. In every year, each of the ATR events reaches a new record of enrolled participants and a greater number of partnerships and partners, both in the public and, mostly, in the private sphere.

It should be noted that for the main event of the ATR, which takes place on Faial Island in May 2019, participants from more than 30 countries was registered (Table 1). The ATR is an example of good practice about the segment commonly known as sports tourism: it combines sport in direct contact with nature and the community for harmonious, sustainable, fair and equitable development.

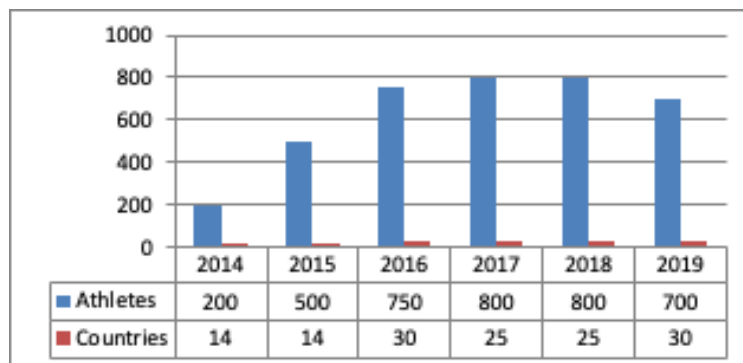


Figura 1
Evolution of ATR in Faial Island.
Source: Azores Trail Run.

The organization of the event has as its vision, to combine sports in a relaxed environment where sustainability is present during the days of the race. Since its first edition, the organization creates several mechanisms in order to minimize the impact caused: planting of native species; use of recycled material and biodegradable; the non-use of plastic either in the route markers or in the filling places; general cleaning of the trails among other initiatives in order to minimize, as much as possible, the impact caused.

The ATR, which started in 2014, was a great novelty in the national and international Trail Running event calendar, and is currently a benchmark in the promotion of the Azores in the national and international arena, with regard to nature and sports tourism, with exposure in numerous regional, national and international media, and it is estimated that it has already reached a multi-million-person awareness (ATR, 2014).

The organization of the event has always wanted this to be considered a factor of dynamism of nature and sport tourism in Faial Island, with the particularity of opposing the seasonality of the sector, since this type of sports can be practised at any time of the year, in addition to the evident dynamism of the local economy, which is a priority and a fact. The impact of this event has been very significant in the promotion of the Region through the general and specialized media, with increases in amongst others of: hotel occupation, rental cars, restaurants, bars, museums, interpretation centres and a significant increase in the number of visitors outside the peak season. The organization affirms that it is very difficult to quantify the events impact in their true expression: both the contribution to the local economy, seasonality, promotion and external

dissemination of the region, as well as other direct and indirect impacts.

The capacity of these events is very important in valuing the different types of heritage of the territories where it is carried out, especially the natural and cultural heritage. In many cases this same heritage is also unknown to the locals themselves, promoting pride, raising the self-esteem and protection of environmental and cultural values by local populations. It is the Azores Regional Tourism Board that recognized the ATR as a perfect example how to promote the archipelago as a sustainable active tourism destination.

5. Methodology

For the present study we used two questionnaire surveys and an interview with the ATR coordinator during the 2018 edition of the Triangle Adventure. The first survey was sent by e-mail to the athletes enrolled in the race and only to non-residents in the Azores. Of the total of the 124 non-resident questionnaires distributed, we received a response from 46 participants, which corresponds to a total of 37%. For the construction of this survey we have used other similar investigations and adapted the main goals related to trail running and adapted the survey to local reality and the investigation (Berdychevsky & Gibson, 2012; Deery et al., 2004; Gammon et al., 2017). The second survey was applied in person to the residents of Faial, Pico and São Jorge islands during the event, with the objective of evaluating their perception of event impacts. In order to complement the information through the two surveys, we also conducted an interview with ATR director and

general coordinator Mário Leal. Since the results were not too exhaustive, we have chosen to manually analyse the data collected by creating a spread sheet for its analysis, without resorting to any information processing software.

6. Main Results

Regarding the survey applied to non-resident participants in the Azores, we obtained a response from 46 of the 124 non-resident participants (37%). Of these, 63% were accompanied by friends and 30% by family members. It is important to mention here the multiplier effect that this type of event generates in the territories, since many of the participants travel accompanied.

The average amount spent per participant during the four days of the event was approximately € 500, which makes a daily average of € 125. Now, with this value deduced and knowing that the total number of participants in the ATR Triangle Adventure 2018 was 140, we were able to calculate an estimate of the local economic impact.

In addition to these results, it should be mentioned that 50% of the respondents stayed in the region five or more nights, taking time to know, discover and explore the three islands of the central group of the Azores. Regarding the satisfaction of the participants, 32% consider the event to be excellently well organized and 33% of the respondents believe that this event contributes to the sustainable development of the territory since it is an event of reduced environmental impact. We refer here to the policy of the ATR organization to minimize and mitigate the impacts caused by the event itself, eliminating the use of plastic, planting native species in places duly licensed for this purpose by environmental and forest authorities, enabling the residents participation for free, promoting volunteering and entrepreneurship, among other initiatives. One of the negative aspects that the respondents refer to is the price of air travel to the destination as well as the entry fee charged by the organization for partaking into the competition (86%).

Regarding the survey applied to the residents of São Jorge, Pico and Faial islands, the population's satisfaction with the ATR event and its contribution to the development of the territory is well known. Of the 55 respondents, 42 (76%) consider that the

ATR is a very important event for the region and for these islands and that other conditions should be created and fostered to capture other events that contribute to the development of tourism and reduction of seasonality.

The interview with the director and coordinator of the ATR, Mário Leal, complemented the inquiries applied, since it allowed the direct contact with the organization of the event. Something that was always present throughout the speech was the expression "contribute to the sustainable development of the Azores as a whole". This event is the only one in the Azores that incorporates several islands with the same goal: the practice of trail running. Mário Leal affirms that "(...) it has always been clear that this event had to contribute positively both to the development of the islands where it takes place and to the local population". This has been and continues to be a responsibility assumed by the organization and shared by partners and public and private partnerships of ATR events. In fact, it would not make any sense if it were not so, since, as mentioned earlier, the Azores are recognized expressly for their policies in the area of development and sustainability.

If the first edition of the ATR in 2014 had 12 entities, the 2019 edition has the support of about 60 local, regional, national and international entities: "there is an effort to attract new partners and to continue with existing ones", says the director and coordinator of the ATR. If in the first edition plastic marking tapes were used to mark the paths, the latest editions count on the organization's investment in environmentally friendly and reusable material.

The evolution of the ATR event is quite significant, both in terms of the number of participants enrolled in the various races that make up the ATR, the number of partnerships and partners, and related environmental, natural, social and cultural issues.

7. Final Considerations

Tourist-sporting events play a major role in the revitalization, promotion and publicizing of territories and regions, whilst targeting intended sustainable local development. The Azores and the ATR event are, unconditionally, a success story due to policies and decisions adopted and the promotion of sports

tourism as the identifying link of the territory and its community.

Considering that rural and island territories are more susceptible to the impacts generated by tourism and sporting events, it is extremely important that the organizers of these events are fully aware of the importance of sustainable local development. While in the Azores this theme is recognized by the various organizations and international entities, through the various acknowledgements, awards and recommendations, the organizations of the events must fulfil this same design.

The ATR is a good example of the large social and economic benefits that these kinds of well managed and developed events can provide, and it can serve as reference model for other destinations in order to achieve sustainable tourism, taking into consideration their specific characters and characteristics, considering their vision and mission: to contribute to a sustainable local development of the Azores, promotion of the Region, contribution to the economy and revitalization of the natural, environmental and cultural spaces where the various events take place.

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