

Hiking tourism and rural development: The case of the Mondego Walkways, Portugal

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Abstract: This article examines hiking tourism's contribution to rural development, as perceived by both visitors and local stakeholders / residents, with reference to the Mondego Walkways in central Portugal. The study is based on data collected through quantitative and qualitative methods, namely a survey carried out *in situ* with walkways' visitors (n = 299) and a set of 16 semi-structured interviews conducted with local stakeholders / residents in 2023. First, the results show that most of our interlocutors believed that the Mondego Walkways are already having a positive impact on local development through increased tourism and related economic activities. Second, they considered that the increase in the flow of visitors is also causing some adverse impacts. Third, visitors stated that the walkways may counteract rural depopulation, whereas local stakeholders / residents expressed a contrary opinion.

Keywords: Hiking tourism; Rural development; Visitors' perceptions; Stakeholders' and residents' perceptions; Portugal.

Turismo de senderismo y desarrollo rural: El caso de las Pasarelas del Mondego, Portugal

Resumen: Este artículo examina la contribución del turismo de senderismo al desarrollo rural, tal y como la perciben tanto los visitantes como los residentes y las partes interesadas locales, con referencia a las Pasarelas del Mondego, en el centro de Portugal. El estudio se basa en datos recogidos mediante métodos cuantitativos y cualitativos, a saber, una encuesta realizada *in situ* a los visitantes de las pasarelas (n = 299) y un conjunto de 16 entrevistas semiestructuradas realizadas a los residentes y las partes interesadas locales en 2023. En primer lugar, los resultados muestran que la mayoría de nuestros interlocutores creían que las Pasarelas del Mondego ya están teniendo un impacto positivo en el desarrollo local a través del aumento del turismo y de las actividades económicas relacionadas. En segundo lugar, consideraron que el aumento del flujo de visitantes también está causando algunos impactos adversos. En tercer lugar, los visitantes afirmaron que las pasarelas pueden luchar contra la despoblación rural, mientras que los residentes y las partes interesadas locales expresaron una opinión contraria.

Palabras clave: Turismo de senderismo; Desarrollo rural; Percepciones de los visitantes; Percepciones de las partes interesadas y de los residentes; Portugal.

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1. Introduction

In the past decades, most rural areas in Europe have changed from densely populated spaces, dominated by agriculture and other primary sector-based economic activities, to sparsely populated and multifunctional spaces of production and consumption (e.g., Silva & Figueiredo, 2013; Woods, 2005). As noted by Halfacree (2007: 131; *italics in original*), nowadays, rural areas are often regarded as “consuming idylls”, where “key spatial *practices* are consumption-orientated: leisure, residence, counterurbanisation, dwelling, contemplation”, and tourism. Besides other types of tourism activities, such as agritourism, cultural tourism and ecotourism (e.g., R. Sharpley & J. Sharpley, 1997), this also increasingly includes hiking tourism, defined as “a vacation or holiday-related outdoor activity that consists of shorter or longer walks (from less than an hour up to many days) in natural and cultural landscapes, and often in rural areas” (Nordbø et al., 2014: 383).

A considerable body of research on hiking tourism has already been produced (e.g., Atari & Feldman, 2023; Basil, 2023; Bichler & Peters, 2020; Collins-Kreiner & Kliot, 2016; Geiger et al., 2023; Gómez-Martín, 2019; Lee et al., 2018; Mayer & Lukács, 2021; Nordbø et al., 2014; Poulaki et al., 2023; Timothy & Boyd, 2015; Zurawik, 2020; Wall-Reinius & Bäck, 2011), including in Portugal (e.g., Carvalho, 2021; Kastenholz & Rodrigues, 2007). Most of these studies focus on the motivations and experiences of hikers, or else, on the physical and mental benefits of hiking. Some scholars (Kastenholz & Rodrigues, 2007; Wall-Reinius & Bäck, 2011) suggest that hiking tourism benefits rural development by enabling all-year-round tourism. Yet, with a few exceptions (e.g., Attali et al., 2023; Oliveira et al., 2019), little empirical research has been conducted on the nexus between hiking tourism and local development in rural areas.

Nevertheless, this is a topic that merits further investigation, because an increasing number of public and private entities are investing on hiking tourism to increase the levels of consumption in the countryside and, thereby, promote rural development and revitalisation, as occurs with other types of rural tourism in Portugal and other countries since the 1980s (Silva & Prista, 2016; Walmsley, 2003).

This article addresses that gap by studying a Portuguese case, related to what can be considered the most recent chapter of the tourismification process of the country's countryside, namely the construction of walkways. Particular attention is given to the viewpoint of visitors and local stakeholders / residents. The rest of the text is structured as follows. Section 2 presents the research methods. Section 3 outlines the context and background of the investigation. Section 4 analyses the case study results. Section 5 discusses the research findings, puts forward the main conclusions, sheds light on the study limitations and gives suggestions for future investigation.

2. Methods

This article is part of a wider investigation on walkways developed by the authors in Portugal (Azevedo et al., 2024; Matos et al., 2025). The text draws on different sources of information. First, there is data from a survey conducted *in situ* with visitors to the Mondego Walkways from 17 February to 2 June 2023. The survey was responded to by 299 visitors. Participants took approximately 20 minutes to complete the survey, which was available in Portuguese, Spanish and English. The survey was applied by recruited personnel either at the walkways' entrance / exit points or during the hike. Answers were filled in an online google form by the interviewers or in a self-administered way by respondents who could read the survey's QR code in their smartphones. The survey focused on the following main topics: sociodemographic characteristics; travel partners; number of visits to the walkways and of overnight stays in the region during the visit; type of accommodation; and perceived positive and negative local / regional impacts of the walkways.

Table 1 presents the respondents' profile. The survey's respondents are mainly Portuguese and Spanish – who accounted for 89% and 9.6%, respectively, of the 116,243 total visitors registered by the Guarda municipal council between November 2022 and January 2024. They are mainly urban and periurban dwellers with high education levels. Most, 65.8% (197/299), of them are under 46 years old. Moreover, a large percentage of respondents did not stay overnight in the region during the visit, whereas the remaining ones stayed mostly in local accommodation / rural tourism units, or else, in hotels.

Additionally, most, 52.8% (158/299), respondents said that visiting the Mondego Walkways was the only reason why they have made the trip, 23.7% (71/299) stated that it was the principal reason, 17.4% (52/299) asserted that it was not the main reason, and 6.0% (18/299) declared that the visit occurred by chance. About a third of the respondents also stated that the visit to the Mondego Walkways was part of a journey to the Serra da Estrela, the highest mountain in mainland Portugal, including visits to its well-known tourist attractions / destinations (e.g., Belmonte, Celorico da Beira, Covilhã, Gouveia, Guarda, and Manteigas).

Table 1: The profile of the survey's respondents

Gender	Male = 157; 52.5% Female = 142; 47.5%			
Citizenship	Portuguese = 266; 89.9% Spanish = 14; 4.7% Other = 19; 6.4%			
Education level	4 th grade = 6; 2.0% 9 th grade = 23; 7.7% 12 th grade = 12; 4.0% Professional degree = 46; 15.5% University degree = 157; 52.5% Not provided = 0			
Age	16-30 years = 94; 31.4% 31-45 years = 103; 34.4% 46-64 years = 96; 32.1% ≥ 65 years = 6; 2.0%			
Occupation	Self-employed / entrepreneur = 57; 19.1% Student = 41; 13.7% Employee = 181; 60.5% Retired = 11; 3.7% Unemployed = 9; 3.0%			
Travel partners	Family members = 152; 50.8% Friends = 112; 37.5% Organised tour = 28; 9.4% By myself = 5; 1.7%			
Number of visits	1 st visit = 274; 91.6% 2 nd visit = 18; 6.0% 3 rd visit or more = 13; 4.3%			
Type of accommodation of those who stayed overnight	Hotels = 38; 12.7% Local accommodation / rural tourism units = 48; 16.1% House of friends or family = 28; 9.4% Caravan = 9; 3.0% Other = 6; 2.0% Own house / residents = 22; 7.4%			
No. of overnight stays in the region by non-residents	0 = 148; 49.5% 1 = 55; 18.4% 2 = 46; 15.4% 3 or more = 29; 9.7%			
Place of residence	Distance (Km)	Examples	No.	%
	<50	Guarda, Covilhã	61	21.6
	51-100	Viseu, Castelo Branco	51	18.0
	101-200	Aveiro, Oporto, Salamanca	80	28.3
	201-500	Madrid, Lisbon, Viana do Castelo	79	27.9
	>501	Portimão, Faro	9	3.2
	Other places	Angra do Heroísmo, Paris	3	1.1
			283	100

Source: Authors' survey**Note:** Residents = in Guarda and / or neighbouring municipalities

The data obtained through the implementation of this survey was complemented by 16 semi-structured interviews conducted with local and municipal political authorities (4), tourist entrepreneurs (7) and residents in the parishes crossed by the walkways under investigation (5). Of the 16 interviews,

12 were recorded and notes were taken on the remainder. The interviews addressed the following principal topics: perceived and anticipated positive and negative local impacts of the walkways; assessment of the project's overall cost; and perceptions regarding the contribution of this project to local development and the fight against depopulation.

The article also draws upon secondary sources of information, including statistics produced by the European Union / Commission and the Portuguese *Instituto Nacional de Estatística* (Statistics Portugal).

3. Context and background

According to the Eurostat (2022), only 3% of Portuguese adults walk or cycle at least 30 minutes per day. This constitutes the third lowest percentage in the European Union (EU), after Malta (2.4%) and Cyprus (0.1%). Moreover, according to the Special Eurobarometer on Sport and Physical Activity produced by the European Commission (2022), 73% of the Portuguese never exercise or practice any sport activity and only 4% do it regularly, well above and slightly below, respectively, the EU average (45% and 6%). Additionally, 49% of the Portuguese respondents stated that they had walked for at least 10 minutes on at least four days in the week before the survey, whereas 29% said that they had never walked for at least 10 minutes at a time, below and above the EU average, respectively (61% and 13%).

Nevertheless, over the past two decades, the country has made significant investments in the construction of walking and cycling paths, with the construction of more than 180 bike paths, totalling more than 1,850 kilometres, both in urban and non-urban settings (<https://www.ciclovias.pt/ciclovias/sitemap.php#TCiclovias>); the approval of more than 265 hiking trails, including short-distance (with less than 30 kilometres) hiking trails (PR) and long-distance ones (GR) (<https://www.fcmportugal.com/percursos-pedestres/>); and the creation of more than 60 walkways (Carvalho, 2021: 58). This study is precisely centred on one of the most recently built and longest walkways in Portugal, namely the *Passadiços do Mondego* (Mondego Walkways).

Located in the Serra da Estrela Natural Park (created in 1976 by the Decree-Law No. 557/76) and the Estrela UNESCO Global Geopark (designated in 2020), the Mondego Walkways consist of a 12-kilometre-long linear path, of which about 7 kilometres are over wooden walkways (some of them flat, others on stairs) and *circa* 5 kilometres follow pre-existing rural trails (see Figures 1 and 2). Access to these walkways requires online registration and the payment of 1 euro per person (access is free of charge for children under 12 years old) for each of the authorised daily entries.

Figure 1: Mondego Walkways, next to the Caldeirão Dam



Source: Authors' photo

Figure 2: Mondego Walkways, next to the village of Videmonte

Source: Authors' photo

There are three official entrance / exit points along the walkways: next to the villages of Videmonte and Vila Soeiro, and the Caldeirão Dam. The Mondego Walkways offer three distinct routes adapted to each person or group of visitors: the "full" route (about 12 kilometres in length) and the "family" and the "reduced mobility" routes (about 2 kilometres in length each). Due to its linearity, it takes 24 kilometres to walk the entire route and return. The inexistence of organised transportation between entrance and exit points forces visitors to either take two cars or use a taxi. To find a taxi, one may ask for help at one of the ticket offices, or else, call directly to the taxi contacts available on the walkways' website.

The full route of the Mondego Walkways goes through scenic waterfalls, suspension bridges, old water mills and a hydro power plant, as well as deactivated wool factories, along the Mondego River. The walkways go through three parishes in Guarda, a municipality located in central Portugal grappled with the problem of a rapidly declining and aging population and an out-migration of skilled youth (see Figure 3). According to the censuses, the municipality of Guarda had 42,541 inhabitants in 2011 and 40,117 inhabitants in 2021, whereas the parish of Videmonte had 449 inhabitants in 2011 and 388 inhabitants in 2021; Corujeira and Trinta had 117 + 394 inhabitants in 2011 and 408 inhabitants in 2021; and Mizarela, Pêro Soares and Vila Soeiro had 131 + 69 + 39 inhabitants in 2011 and 200 inhabitants in 2021.

It is noteworthy that the parishes of Corujeira and Trinta, as well as of Mizarela, Pêro Soares and Vila Soeiro, were abolished in 2013 and aggregated into the currently designated *União de Freguesias* (Union of Parishes) (Law No. 11-A/2013). In all these parishes, including Videmonte, the resident population is predominantly elderly, with 40% or more being older than 65 years old. The main sources of income for local families are employment in public or municipal administration and the construction sector, small-scale retail and money transfers from pension and retirement payments, complemented by small-scale agriculture almost exclusively for family consumption, and, more recently, particularly in the villages of Videmonte and Trinta, tourism-related activities. Tellingly, the parish of Trinta was an important centre of the wool textile industry between the mid-19th century and the 1980s, with the existence of seven factories, the last of which was shut down in September 2023 (see Pinheiro, 2016, for historical information regarding the wool textile industry in the Beira Interior region, which includes the municipality of Guarda).

Something close to a "walking niche", if we may use this expression, seems to be taking place in the Guarda municipality, with a diversified offer that clearly complements the Mondego Walkways. Despite its length, the Mondego Walkways are slightly shorter than any of the four short-distance hiking trails existing in the Guarda municipality, of which two go precisely through the village of Videmonte, namely the *Rota da Cabeça Alta / Videmonte* (Cabeça Alta / Videmonte Route) (19 kilometres in length) and the *Rota de Barreiras / Famalicão - Videmonte* (Barreiras / Famalicão - Videmonte Route) (15 kilometres in length). The other two short-distance hiking trails are: *Rota do Azeite* (Olive Oil Route) (13 kilometres in length) and *Rota do Castro do Jarmelo* (Castro do Jarmelo Route) (14 kilometres in length).

Figure 3: Geographical location of the case study



Source: Authors' elaboration

Besides, the Mondego Walkways are much shorter than two long-distance hiking trails existing in the same municipality, namely the *Grande Rota do Zêzere* (Zêzere Great Route) (370 kilometres in length) and the *Caminho Nascente de Santiago (de Compostela)* (Santiago East Path) (219 kilometres in length), which also goes through the village of Trinta, where a hostel for pilgrims was inaugurated in 2020.

The walkways' project started to be built in 2018 by initiative of the then mayor of Guarda, Dr. Álvaro Amaro, and opened to the public on 6 November 2023. In the field, most of our interlocutors declared him as the “father of the Mondego Walkways”. This local perception was confirmed by Amaro himself, who told us that he was the person responsible for having established the initial contact with the architect who designed the Paiva Walkways – built along the Paiva river and opened to the public in July 2015, in the municipality of Arouca –, inviting him to design the Mondego Walkways as well. The main purpose of this initiative was to revitalise the local and regional economies through tourism.

As Diana Monteiro, tourism councillor of the Guarda municipal council, pointed out in an interview at her office in the city hall in July 2023, and illustrative of the decline of agriculture in the region, the land on which the Mondego Walkways are built was once used for pastoralism and rye growth but has remained largely abandoned for several decades. Also, some plots of land were privately owned, whereas others were owned by the parish councils, including *baldios* (common land). Furthermore, some plots of land were acquired by the municipal council, while others were donated to this entity.

Another significant statement that we would like to highlight from the interview with this public official is directly related to the policy and expectations about the Mondego Walkways created by the municipal administration. The weekends that followed the opening of these walkways saw large crowds of visitors “invading” the infrastructure. After assessing the situation, public officials in Guarda decided to impose stricter limits on the number of authorised daily visitors. The maximum of 2,000 daily entrances was established after acknowledging that having a higher number of people visiting this infrastructure was contrary to the sort of experience that the Mondego Walkways designers and the municipal council intended to offer. The Mondego Walkways experience should be based on a “peaceful” recreational walk, in close contact with nature and the region’s biosphere, clearly differentiated from any sort of large agglomeration of people often experienced in urban settings. The words of Diana Monteiro are quite clear about this:

“When we opened the Mondego Walkways, we allowed the entrance of 6,000 persons per day, and we had to cut that number. I have decided to permit only 2,000 daily visits. Why? Because we don’t want to overcrowd a natural space with visitors; it must be something peaceful; we can’t scare the rare species that live in that place, we can’t overcrowd it with all the tourists who want to see it. [...] It must continue to be a peaceful, natural area of relaxation, [...] without feeling like we are in a shopping centre.”

Overall, the project had a total cost of about 4 million euros, of which 85% were funded by the European Union through the European Regional Development Fund and the remaining by the Guarda municipal council. In March 2024, the Mondego Walkways were awarded the Europe’s Leading Tourism Development Project 2024 at the World Travel Awards Gala Ceremony in Berlin, Germany (<https://www.worldtravelawards.com/award-europes-leading-tourism-development-project-2024>).

4. Results

4.1. The viewpoint of visitors

As can be seen in Table 2, the survey’s respondents believed that the Mondego Walkways are already having a positive impact on local development, notably by boosting the economy and helping to combat depopulation through tourism promotion. However, they also considered that this infrastructure is not free from negative impacts, particularly regarding the prices of goods and services, pollution and litter, and the region’s dependence on tourism.

Table 2: Perceived benefits and harms of the Mondego Walkways

Positive impact	No.	Min.	Max.	Mean	S.D.
Brings economic benefits to the region	299	2	10	8,46	1,431
Improves the life of local populations	299	1	10	7,84	1,808
Increases local tourist attractiveness	299	3	10	8,75	1,273
Creates new jobs	299	1	10	7,09	2,033
Fights the municipality’s depopulation	299	1	10	6,77	2,308
Negative impact					
Raises the prices of goods and services	299	1	10	4,96	2,429
Generates conflicts between locals and visitors	299	1	10	3,72	2,416
Destroys heritage	299	1	10	3,80	2,485
Fuels the regional dependence on tourism	299	1	10	4,56	2,540
Increases pollution and litter	299	1	10	4,74	2,512

Source: Authors’ survey

Note: S.D. = Standard deviation

4.2. The viewpoint of local stakeholders / residents

Virtually all interviewees stated that the investment made in the construction of the Mondego Walkways and associated infrastructures (parking lots and toilet facilities) was justified and needed for the region. In the words of two interviewees,

“The money [spent in the walkways’ construction] was well invested, because it is a way of bringing added value to the region.” (Francisco, 76-year-old, tourist entrepreneur, Trinta, interviewed on 22 March 2023)

“[The walkways] will bring benefits to the region quickly. The investment came from the municipal council and European funds. The municipal council will not profit much directly, but the region’s economy will profit much more than that, and in just a few years. If you do the maths for 700 people per day, see how many people are here per month, how many meals are eaten, how many overnight stays, etc.” (Armandino, 63-year-old, physician, Videmonte, interviewed on 18 February 2023)

Accordingly, most interviewees expressed their agreement with the idea that the Mondego Walkways are already having a significant impact on the local and regional economies. This was particularly the case of political authorities and tourist entrepreneurs, who highlighted the project’s positive effect on tourism-related activities, notably restaurants and the tourist accommodation sector:

“It’s a good investment, because it brought a lot of people to the village and to the village’s businesses: there is a bakery, seven cafes, three restaurants, a drugstore, a gas station, a physician, two rural tourist accommodation establishments... [...] The walkways brought life to the village, especially at weekends. Many Spaniards come and all the terraces are full. A lot of people also come on organised bus trips [...] but they bring their own food and don’t stay overnight. There is a travel agency in Oporto that has already called us to prepare lunches at the restaurant. The problem is that I don’t have the capacity to accommodate 55 people to eat.” (Filomena, tourist entrepreneur, 65-year-old, Trinta, interviewed on 22 March 2023)

“The objective [of the walkways] was to boost tourism and the entire economy. This objective was already achieved! Both touristically and economically. By bringing people here, the economy will certainly improve. [...] We had restaurants that closed on Sundays; at this moment, they no longer close [...]. The entire region will benefit from the walkways. We have already spoken to other mayors, [and] they say that we have seen an increasing demand for tourist accommodations thanks to the walkways.” (Diana Monteiro, 45-year-old, tourism councillor of the Guarda municipal council, interviewed on 27 July 2023).

Diana Monteiro’s statement also gives a good reason to note that, according to Statistics Portugal (INE, 2023, <https://www.ine.pt>), the municipality of Guarda registered 59,812 guests and 93,266 overnight stays in tourist accommodation units in 2023, up from the 48,207 guests and 73,495 overnight stays in 2022. Furthermore, the majority, 12/21 – offering a total of 76 rooms –, of the tourist accommodation units existing in the area crossed by the Mondego Walkways began operation in the past two years.

Many entrepreneurs have invested in converting inherited buildings, including old haystacks and residential houses, into accommodation. This, for example, is the case of two entrepreneurs who invested in Videmonte to make a business out of tourism, one in a restaurant and a local accommodation establishment and the other in an agritourism unit. Others, in turn, bought small and derelict houses at relatively cheap prices, carried out their restoration and converted them into tourist accommodations, as occurred with a contractor in his 60s in the village of Videmonte. All this occurred in a short period of less than three years, thus confirming, we believe, the existence of a direct link with the construction of the walkways.

Armindo Maia, the mayor of the union of parishes of Mizarela, Pêro Soares and Vila Soeiro, however, expressed a different opinion:

“For the parish, [the walkways’ construction] was neither good nor bad. What income does the parish derive from this? None. (Are there no cafes or tourist accommodation units here?) No, there is nothing here. [...] It can generate income in Guarda, Videmonte and Trinta, where there are restaurants.” (70-year-old, Mizarela, interviewed on 23 March 2023)

And yet, the owner of a restaurant in Mizarela openly contradicted this statement, declaring that the walkways’ construction has led to an increasing demand for his services:

“For a year now, on Sundays, we had practically a full house in this room. Now, we have a full house in this room and the terrace, and sometimes, like today, the difficulty is to have the necessary staff. When Spring

comes, you'll notice it even more. Because, in addition to the walkways, the area has a lot of potential for tourism. The Mondego Valley has a lot of things to see." (Manuel, 75-year-old, interviewed on 18 February 2023).

Additionally, nowadays, there are four tourist accommodation units in this union of parishes – offering a total of 19 beds and 16 rooms –, of which two began operation in 2022 and two in 2023, before and after the interview with the corresponding mayor, respectively.

Besides restaurants and tourist accommodation units, some interviewees stated that the walkways are also already having a positive impact on the sale of locally sourced food products, namely chorizos, cheeses, and rye bread, especially in the village of Videmonte, where there is still a community wood-fired oven. Another important aspect of the regional and local economies that we would like to highlight has to do with transportation. Among our interlocutors there is a widespread idea that, in the absence of organised transport between the entrance and exit points of the walkways, these are also good times for taxi owners. In fact, many visitors find it difficult to get adequate transport from the exit to the entry point of the walkways, where the majority leave their cars. Taxi drivers in the neighbouring town of Guarda (some 15 kilometres away) are reportedly hard to find at weekends, as they all move to the Mondego Walkways exit points.

Despite a generally positive perception, many of our interlocutors expressed concern about the increase of littering in the walkways area. In this regard, a resident in his 30s interviewed in Vila Soeiro in March 2023 commented: "Some visitors, especially those coming on organised tours, bring their meals and leave the litter here. The increase of litter is already noticeable. This has both advantages and disadvantages." Likewise, the tourism councillor of the Guarda municipal council declared in July 2023 that

"People have to start remembering that they are in nature and cannot throw litter on the ground; people cannot destroy what is natural. If you throw a bottle of water on the ground and if I don't have a way to pick it up, it's bad for others who see the litter and it's bad for nature because we're ruining it."

Regarding the crucial aspect of the region's (dramatic) demographics, most of our interlocutors believed that the Mondego Walkways are unable to revert the depopulation of the area:

"Depopulation is a constant in our region, whether there are walkways or not." (Diana Monteiro, 45-year-old, tourism council of the Guarda municipal council, interviewed on 27 July 2023)

"Most residents are old and almost all of them are retired. I have been in the parish council [of Mizarela] for 20 years. Thirty years ago, there were 400 or so people voting; now, there are less than 100. Few are born and those few newborns eventually leave." (Armando Maia, 70-year-old, mayor of the union of parishes of Mizarela, Pêro Soares and Vila Soeiro, interviewed on 23 March 2023)

Plus, especially in the village of Trinta, several of our interlocutors declared that tourism development is also unable to offset the negative impacts on employment caused by the decline of the wool textile industry observed in the past decades. As a tourist entrepreneur, Francisco, 76-year-old, noted during an interview in the village of Trinta in March 2023, "all of this doesn't exactly compensate for the industry we had here because the textiles we had in our region are gone, right!?"

5. Discussion and conclusion

This article sought to scrutinise the contribution of hiking tourism to local development in rural areas, as perceived by visitors and local stakeholders / residents, with reference to the Mondego Walkways, Portugal. The findings presented above show that most of our interlocutors believed that the Mondego Walkways are already having a positive impact on local development through increased tourism and the subsequent expansion of related economic activities. Aside from echoing what has already happened on the ground to some extent, this finding is consistent with the results of a survey conducted by Oliveira et al. (2019) with visitors to the Paiva Walkways. Yet, our interlocutors also perceived the existence of some adverse impacts associated with this infrastructure. Notably, visitors mentioned rising prices of goods and services, pollution and litter, and the region's dependence on tourism, whereas local stakeholders / residents flagged the increase of litter, which is a frequent impact of tourism (e.g., Mathieson & Wall, 1982). Moreover, in contrast to local stakeholders / residents, visitors believed that the Mondego Walkways can also reverse the trend of depopulation that marks the region.

Although this aspect of the investigation was not clearly addressed in the case study results section, there is evidence that the Mondego Walkways are not suitable for visiting during Summer and Winter peaks.

As other places in Serra da Estrela, Guarda is characterised by meteorological conditions that vary from extreme heat during the Summer and severe Winters (often with ice and snow). Neither of these scenarios offers adequate conditions for visiting the Mondego Walkways, thus limiting its preferable use to Spring and Autumn. This runs counter to the idea advocated by some scholars (Kastenholz & Rodrigues, 2007; Wall-Reinius & Bäck, 2011) that hiking tourism benefits rural development by allowing year-round tourism.

Regarding development policy options, we would like to offer some more global considerations at this stage. Currently, the construction of walkways can almost be viewed as a “national obsession” in Portugal. This is somehow paradoxical, given that Portuguese people do not walk or engage in any physical or sporting activity on a regular basis (as mentioned in section 3). The rationale for the construction of walkways may well lie in the attempt to extend touristic offer to rural areas in a country heavily dependent on tourism, including domestic and inbound tourism (OECD, 2023).

The research presented here is not free from limitations. First, the number of local stakeholders / residents consulted is relatively small; thus, the study results do not fully reflect the viewpoints of the people living in the villages crossed by the walkways under study. Second, the investigation was carried out only a few months after the opening of this infrastructure, hence excluding its medium- and long-term impacts. And there is evidence that the perceptions of residents about tourism and its impacts may vary over time, changing from a condition of enthusiasm in an early stage of tourism development to one of the disappointments in a later stage (e.g., Silva, 2014; Sharpley, 1999: 262-267; see also Butler, 1980, for details on the tourism area cycle of evolution). Future research could investigate the actual and perceived impacts of the Mondego Walkways on rural development and revitalisation over time.

Despite these limitations, the relevant authorities now possess data on visitor profiles and perceptions, as well as on local stakeholders’ and residents’ expectations regarding the infrastructure’s contribution to local development. This data can be used to design strategies to maximize the project’s benefits and mitigate any negative local impacts.

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