

## There is another way to light up the night: Switch on the stars! The **starlight reserve in Alqueva**, Alentejo (Portugal)

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**Objectives** | In this poster we intend to present a case study that shows the development of a tourism product in a destination which uses as main resource the night sky. This product is as well as innovative, is also able to create a distinctive image that could attract diversified tourist markets and also allows for clear commitments under the sustainability in economic, social and environmental field, among which the immediate result is the reduction of the energy bill for municipalities, privates and tourism entrepreneurs and a privileged position amongst new tourist markets resulting in positive economic impacts.

**Methodology** | For to develop this work it was used the case study methodology. The case study methodology applies various information sources to focus on studying a situation in a given recent period of time. This work was developed based in a holistic approach (Yin, 2004) and the period of research was from September to October 2011. It was used the following sources: a)Semi-structured interviews with some local actors; b)Documentation collected on various sources of documentation such as internet, regional entities and local libraries; c)Participant observation that was done when there were activities related to the implementation of the starlight certification.

**Main results and contributions** | Alqueva is a large rural area in the interior of Alentejo. However, within the region recently it has been created the largest artificial lake in Europe, the lake Alqueva. This lake resulted from the construction of a dam that has a length of 83 km which is distributed along the Municipalities of Moura, Mourão, Portel, Barrancos, Reguengos De Monsaraz and Alandroal. The lake has an area of 250 km<sup>2</sup>. Around the lake there are now projects that will provide the region with over 10,000 beds. Given the size of the lake, state officials decided in 2008 to set a new entity to manage this emerging tourist destination: TGLA (Tourism land of the great lake Alqueva - Alentejo). For the tourism development to take place in a Sustainable manner and at the same time betting on a strategy of creating innovative products TGLA has been creating partnerships for to maximize the knowledge transfer. With this in mind a partnership in Alqueva was created with the Alentejo network of village tourism (Genuine land) that assumes de coordination of the process, EDIA, SA (Entity that manages the dam), the national association of amateur Astronomers and the Alentejo regional coordination and development commission (CCRA) to implement the agenda for sustainable and competitive tourism though the development of the Alqueva dark sky reserve in which one of the initiatives was the starlight certification. Besides being one of the less night light polluted areas in Europe, the Alqueva region has Astronomical tangible and intangible heritage recognized by UNESCO This set of attributes has lead to the development of a Astro-tourism offer that mixes the natural assets of the region with the cultural heritage, like night observation with telescopes, night walks,

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horse ridings at night, night picnics, a set of cultural events amongst other initiatives. In December 2011 Alqueva became the first starlight tourist destination in the world.

For Crouch (2001) terrestrial space tourism probably began with the movement of Astronomical observers to different locations to better observe certain Astronomical phenomena like eclipses and the movements of planets. But the awareness of preserving the starlight has world heritage is very recent. The starlight convention started in 2007. Starlight tourist destinations are an initiative of UNWTO with the support of UNESCO and also IAU, CMS-UNEP, SCBD, COE MAB programme and RAMSAR convention. These destinations are located at accessible places for tourists, but at the same time, characterized by excellent quality for the contemplation of the night sky and the practice of tourist activities based on this resource. This tourism certification system was created with the aim of encouraging, at world-wide level, the improvement of the quality of tourist experiences and the protection of the night skies in starlight destinations. With this certification tourism and science are connected in order to ensure the quality of tourism experiences involving the nightscapes, the view of stars and the cosmos and the related scientific, Cultural and environmental knowledge, bringing recognition of science as a tourist product. With this certification Alqueva gets the international recognition of a destination that guarantees to tourists the possibility of enjoying the view of the stars and to discover the associated scientific, Cultural, natural and scenic values.

**Conclusions** | In the last years there is a growing demand for Niche markets in rural tourism. According to Clarke (2005) many tourists nowadays seek 'Doing' activities in rural places. Those "Doing" activities are not directly connected with the local Culture, but with what is possible to do in those areas like night activities as night walks, for example, and some activities related to Niche markets interested in space tourism based on land. At the same time, there are other tourism movements that are rising like 'Slow tourism', where the place is appreciated in a way that the visitor has an opportunity to become part of the destination, contacting with the population and with the territory at a pace appropriate to the retention of local Culture and the place has a whole. The differentiation on the basis of the physical attributes of the destination (The night sky, Rural landscape and the lake) and the reputation (Activities done in the context of Sustainable development) of the region may be the foundations for distinguishing the region from other rural destinations.