

**INTERVIEW TO THE MANAGEMENT OFFICE OF
THE REGIONAL PARK OF «LA SIERRA DE
ESPADÁN»**

Interviewed by

Lucía Toledo
Jose Vicente Segarra

This interview is part of the research information to create the Intellectual Output 4 of the GET UP! Project.

This project has been funded with support from the European Commission. This publication reflects the views only of the authors of the GET UP! project, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.



**Funded by
the European Union**

PROJECT NAME: GAMIFICATION AS AN EDUCATIONAL TOOL FOR UPPER SCHOOLS ON PARKS AND ENVIRONMENT [GET UP!]

CALL 2020 ROUND 1 KA2 - COOPERATION FOR INNOVATION AND THE EXCHANGE OF GOOD PRACTICES

KA226 - PARTNERSHIPS FOR DIGITAL EDUCATION READINESS

PROJECT NUMBER: 2020-1-ES01-KA226-SCH-096057

[INTERVIEW WITH JOSÉ VTE. ESCOBAR, DIRECTOR OF THE SIERRA DE ESPADÁN NATURAL PARK, MANAGEMENT SERVICE OF PROTECTED NATURAL AREAS].

START OF THE INTERVIEW

- **As director of the regional park of Sierra de Espadán, can you describe a little bit the staff of the park management and the tasks you carry out?**

We have two lines: the field and the office, these offices.

Within the offices we are four people: two technicians and two hired through a management contract with a public company.

The functions of these two people, a man and a woman, are fundamentally environmental education, dissemination of the park, attention to visitors and above all outings with schools, colleges or institutes, to... a little of what we were talking about, to inform about what the park is and to have an awareness of conservation and preservation. He is a technical forestry engineer and a technical agricultural engineer.

And then, on the more technical side, [we have] a technical forestry engineer and myself, a biologist, as park director. That is all the technical personnel assigned to 32 hectares and 19 municipalities. And then we have the field part, which are three maintenance brigades whose priority function is to maintain trails, for example, for public use, recreational areas and actions in very specific areas where there are botanical or faunal communities... [there are three brigades of four people].

As there are 19 municipalities and all of them are in danger of disappearing due to depopulation, what we do offer from the brigade is to carry out actions of public interest, which are not of private interest. So, sometimes, if they are interested, I do not know... now we are working on a project to avoid the burning of agricultural waste. We are doing this with a park brigade. But as long as it has a general interest. If it is a private plot, or particular and it is a particular interest, we do not act.

- **The next question is about the budget because the game will start with an allocated budget that the player will manage, and we would like it to be as realistic as possible. What is the annual budget allocated to the management of the Sierra de Espadán park?**

The park has no budget assigned to it.

- **None? Is any grant allocated to [the park] either?**

No. The only thing that is annual is the management assignments for these brigades. In my case, I count as personnel of the Generalitat. So, there is no budget assigned to the management of the park itself. None of the parks in the Valencian Community has an assigned budget. [...] Let's say that our budget is exclusively those brigades and these two monitors or environmental educators.

- **And how do you carry out the actions for weed collection, or to grant permits?**

Everything that is done in the park is subject to a prior report that is also binding. The Sierra de Espadán covers 32,000 hectares, but 86% of the land is privately owned. Only 14% is public property. When I say public property, they are either assets of the Valencian Community or they are in consortium. We have an agreement with the town councils, generally, to manage that point, but even so it is 14% of the territory. As a private person, if I want to take advantage of the cork oak, for example. This is the most common thing to do here. I have to ask for a forestry exploitation. And that forestry exploitation [is subject to], according to the regulations, to a resolution of the territorial management after a report from the park, or through a forestry management plan.

In both cases it goes through here. That is to extract wood, which is practically non-existent, or to transform the agricultural forest land, or to recover agricultural plots. Any activity that takes place within the park has to be informed. Whether it is a caravan or a visit by a group of more than 60 people.

- **And in the sense of authorizations, for example, for hunting or mushroom picking, does that go through you?**

No, all that is subject either to a synergistic use or a forest use. And all that, the resolution is from the territorial management. What we do is a report, if it is favorable, with the conditions, they are obliged to give it. If it is negative, it cannot be done. Our report is binding.

- **When it is necessary to eradicate some type of exotic flora that has appeared, do they give you a specific budget or do they use the brigades?**

No, unless I say, "this is too extensive, I am not interested in doing it with the brigade because I am mortgaging a lot of their time", then I have to make a proposal. Otherwise, we would do it with the brigade. The brigade is a wild card. If tomorrow a municipality calls me and says "hey, I have a ditch

that is leaking water and so on". We are interested in it because it is feeding a series of irrigation ponds that we use for fires or for aquatic fauna or we are interested in having it, we call the brigade and we do it. It is a trail that we use a lot for hunting and so on, and we are interested in having it tomorrow. It is useful for us for this. And of course, it is much faster than making a proposal.

- **With reference to the park's habitat, fauna and flora, what would you highlight? What is the most common fauna in the park? And the most common vegetation in the park? Which are autochthonous?**

Let's see, we have many autochthonous species, but... not autochthonous either, not in the park. We can talk about the context of the Valencian Community. The natural park is characterized by its geology and lithology. What we have here are the Triassic sandstones, it is the sandstone and, therefore, this represented in the Valencian Community we only have a little in the Desierto las Palmas and a little in the Sierra Calderona. There is no more in all the Valencian Community. We have to go to Gerona or further south in Andalusia or Extremadura. What this allows is a vegetation very adapted to that soil, basically the cork oak grove or all the siliceous scrub. In other words, what is here is in Gerona, and what is in Gerona is in Extremadura. In the Valencian Community, everything we have here is very restricted to this area, but we do not have an endemism that we only have here.

Regarding the fauna, the most interesting, because we have it in danger of extinction, is the Bonelli's eagle. But then, we have some species, the one we are working on is the Triops, which is a large crustacean. Triops cancriformis. It is closely linked to humid lagoons that dry out in summer. It has a very short but very demanding cycle. And the Iberian ribbed newt. These are the species we are working on.

In addition, I would highlight the Achondrostoma arcasii, which is the so called «bermejuela». It is a small fish, with a lot of color, which we have in a very specific point in Alfondeguilla.

- **In terms of danger to people, is there any problem with wildlife here in the park in general? As for example, animal attacks on people or damage to agricultural fields.**

The second yes, because here we have wild boar, which is from here, it has always been here. Now the populations have shot up, we don't know very well why. Maybe because of the abandonment of crops and the fact that there is a continuity of forest mass,

which is very good for them. And the Hispanic goat and the roe deer have entered in the last 10 to 12 years.

- But have the roe deer and the goat been introduced?

No. The goat was very localized in what is the Tinença, all that is Els Ports and Pietra. In the three provinces of Tarragona, Teruel and Castellón. They were very localized there, then there has been an expansion and they have been occupying other areas.

Maybe, when we were still collectors or hunters, maybe there were roe deer. But not for many years. The thing is that, as I was saying, the abandonment of all crops [and] having a continuous forest mass, allows many species to move more than they did before. And these three species are doing a lot of damage to the crops.

- And what measures does the park take to try, in some way, to mediate the damage done to the crops?

The park is not involved in this. Within the natural park, all the municipalities have their own hunting reserves. And well, there is a long tradition of wild boar hunting. There is no partridge because the forest has been closed, and it is no longer a habitat for partridge. Just as there is not much cereal, there is because it can be seen, but it is not abundant. The thrush is there, but it is not a species that I look for. They go more for wild boar because it is a species they like more. And the only thing that we do is the reports on the periods, hunting and technical details of synergistic use that each one of the preserves has. But for us it is not a problem, for the farmers it is.

- And what are the main problems you encounter when managing the park?

The most interesting thing in the natural park are the primary activities: forestry, agriculture and livestock. That, until the 1960s, was the most important thing.

And that maintained the forest. The scrub, the growth of the scrub, and the fact that the forest is so closed nowadays. That has ceased to have an economic yield. The loss of that economic yield is the reason for the abandonment of crops. As a result, we have more and more pine forest and more scrubland, which is of no interest to us. What we are interested in is to maintain the crops. But that economic yield is missing. Now everything has been reduced to if there is a track that I take to a crop, I keep it, but if I don't have a comfortable access, I'm going to [let it go to waste]. And the only economic yield, more or less, is oil. Even from the cork oak, there are five cork

harvesters, no, six cork harvesters. [...] Portugal is the one that has basically taken over the cork market.

The Sierra de Espadán is very peculiar, isn't it? It costs more, more years and is of higher quality.

Yes, it costs more. Just as in Extremadura or Andalusia it is generally 7 years, here it is 13/14 years, some even up to 18 years. However, it has less pore, it is denser and that is being used or was used a lot for cava. If you look at the cava cork, the ones made of agglomerate, with a thicker cork, and then it has several layers. The last layer is the thinnest, it has practically no pores, so as not to lose the gas. And that was basically taken from here.

- The Sierra de Espadán is very peculiar, isn't it? It takes more years [to grow] and is of higher quality.

Yes, it takes longer. Just as in Extremadura or Andalusia it is generally 7 years, here it is 13/14 years, some even up to 18 years. However, it has less pore, it is denser and that is being used or was used a lot for cava. If you look at the cava cork, the ones made of agglomerate, with a thicker cork, and then it has several layers. The last layer is the thinnest, it has practically no pores, so as not to lose the gas. And that was basically taken from here.

- What kind of professional activities are allowed in the park? Apart from agriculture and tourism, is it also permitted to cut trees or excavate the soil or any other activity?

Mining is prohibited. Well, it is prohibited unless there is uranium, diamonds, gold or something like that. But come on, since that is not going to appear here, it is limited.

Logging, it is allowed. It has to be regulated. There has to be a logging plan. As I was saying, we inform you about that, but there is less and less. Basically, the only thing left is cork harvesting. There is practically no livestock, and what there is is more or less stabled or semi-stabled. We have only two cattle ranches, one here in Eslida. Then there are some Lidia cattle, more towards the area of Caudiel or Sureras. It is very limited. For the 32,000 hectares, we have practically no livestock.

More uses that can be made... there is active tourism from some companies. The interesting thing is that we have many caves within the natural park.

- Does that attract caving tourism?

We have it regulated. A lot of people come who are federated, which is what we generally request, that they be federated. And then,

some active tourism companies provide equipment so that someone who is not federated and who has never entered a cave can enter. There are some aquatic caves for diving, in quotation marks because they are 3 meters.

Other activities we have are plots of land, agricultural exploitation, primary exploitation in general, there are many sporting events, we have many of them. This is very attractive, a lot of slopes, a lot of unevenness, a lot of forest mass. Each municipality has its two, three, four races every year, which we are trying to regulate. More in terms of participants than in terms of prohibiting.

We have more problems with the bicycles than with the runners, because this is not like the one in Castellón where 1500 people pass through a very specific place. Here there are 300, 350, 400... participants and after the first kilometer you have them all in single file, there is not such a strong erosion. However, the bicycles do, and it's something that we can take care of so that they don't get into any place.

- **In addition to mountain bikes, do you also allow horseback riding or any other type of sports?**

In general, the natural parks in the Generalitat Valenciana are open. So, private/individual visits are free and free of charge. What we do here is to give information about which trails are interesting or which of the park's routes are the most appropriate for families. Horseback riding is allowed. A certain number of horses or riders are allowed and they go on trails. Bicycles, too, are regulated, road or trail. Trail riding is not allowed. Athletic sporting events, land, are also regulated by number of participants and we also look closely if they pass near a Bonelli's eagle nest or there is a problem in terms of any botanical community. Although all races are required to pass through trails for public use and are mapped as such. And well, hunting is also a sport. What we try (well, I think we have already achieved it) is that all municipalities have a hunting ground or reserve. What we do not allow is free land. There are still some out there that are difficult for us, but we prefer that it be regulated through a use plan.

- **You don't have fishing, do you?**

Not in the park. The Mijares river is on the border of the park. There are no trout here, we have no species of commercial interest.

- **Speaking of tourism, how do you quantify how many tourists come to the park?**

It is impossible. We have a series of conditioning factors. One is that if you go in a group of less than 30 people, it's free, you don't have to contact us. If it is more than 30 or if it is a group organized by a company, you do have to tell us that they are going on an excursion. And we do this basically so that large groups have a record of where they can be. In case of fire, we can always say, we have three groups of 60 people, there are 180 people lost out there that we have to get out.

It is not to increase the number of visitors (which we have been criticized many times), but we are interested in knowing where they are.

And then, of course, in the hunting season there is a lot of conflict. A hunt, for example, can close a third of a municipality, but maybe you have ten trails. A group that passes through the middle of a hunt is a risk for them and for the hunters. So it is in our interest that all the organized groups know each other.

We can control the people who come here to the center to ask us for information and then the groups that pass through here: schools, or senior groups or activities... Now, with the IMSERSO issue, they offer Morella, Espadán has become fashionable, and they come here a lot. They come, they see the center, we give them an explanation and then we make a small tour, usually in Aín, which is the easiest.

- What makes [the park] more dynamic is tourism, isn't it? Or what most activates the area.

Here? Yes, there is a lot of demand. Rural tourism, for example, practically everything is full.

The park's problem is depopulation. And then someone may think of doing something outrageous taking advantage of depopulation. Now there are some lines of work that define them as creating nature. If we have a depopulation problem, we are going to occupy that space with species of agricultural interest.

What do we achieve? Well, there are four companies that bring people from Valencia, Castellón, Madrid or wherever to see certain species. Is it interesting? Not for me. What I would like is for the primary products to be preserved.

This natural park is a cultivated park. It has been worked for centuries, from the Arabs until now, when everything has been abandoned, it has been cultivated. The cork oak grove is not a cork oak grove as such. The cork oak grove has been cultivated, and this began at the end of the 18th century. It coincides with the boom of cava in Catalonia. Here there were cork oaks. You walk around the mountain and even the highest part of the

mountains is all terraced. And Cabanilles, when he talks about the area of Valencia, talks about the important production of wine and grapes in all this area of Palancia.

Everything that was a small plot of land was grapes, what was a little bigger was carob or olive trees and cereal. And now, the flattest part where they could irrigate was the orchard.

- Are grapes still grown?

There are some here because it has come back again now for wine, but with more care.

- What are the highlights of the park? The place where most tourists come to ask how to get there.

What they are most looking for is the cesspool. It has appeared in the press in social networks, it is a place where you can bathe in summer, there is always water. And then there is a lot of ignorance, people who come asking where is the river to bathe, but here are ravines where if it rains there is water, but not if it rains.

The most outstanding thing is the cork oak forest and they always ask us which route has more cork oak. Now in summer it is water, because with the heat it is impossible to walk.

- The park does not manage any type of tourist accommodation?

We have the Parcs brand. It's a bit like those artisanal activities, whether active tourism, wine production, cork production..., have a brand and that brand, because they are produced in the natural park, we give them an image. Almost all the companies involved in active tourism are within the brand and all rural tourism and cheese production as well. It is a product produced within the natural park.

- With respect to the park, do the conservation areas have different areas of park protection? For example, in Italy they are differentiated by A, B or C, from greater protection to lesser protection.

It works the same everywhere.

There are two things, the Spanish legislation where we have the management plans, which is mandatory prior to the declaration of a natural park. It is where you have to define what space it is, what interest it has and what uses or primary resources it has. And then you can declare a natural park. Both the management plan and the natural park have their own zoning. They talk about A, B and C, we talk about reserve areas, special protection areas... we have five or six. Depending on each of the zones,

there is more or less protection or more or less limitations. But that works the same in all the natural parks.

- **Related to the areas of activities that take place within the park, is the most common agriculture in the park's surroundings? We have talked about olive trees, because of the oil, but what else would you point out?**

It is fundamentally rainfed, there is some irrigated land in the closest areas, but it is fundamentally rainfed: almond and olive trees, and now there is a boom in carob trees. It is a species that does not need much care, it withstands drought very well, it withstands this land very well and it is paying very well.

- **It had been abandoned, right?**

But now it is very well paid for cosmetics, medicine, ice cream, everything has algarrobina. The seed is crushed and used for many things.

- **Is picking mushrooms or asparagus something that is typically done here?**

Yes, there is a regulation, but it is general. Through the forestry section there are a series of rules and there is a certain number of kilos, you can't use plastics for picking, etc. Problem: 86% is private. So, the mushrooms are in my forest, if you come and take 20 kilos of mushrooms you have left me with nothing. Peñagolosa does have a lot of problems, the Tinença too, but this area does not have so much.

END OF THE INTERVIEW