

DESIGN AND COMMUNICATION STRATEGY FOR THE TROIARESORT ECO-TOURISM PROJECT

João JOANAZ DE MELO¹ and Francisco ANDRADE²

¹ Assistant Professor, Department of Environmental Science and Engineering, New University of Lisbon.
2829-516 Caparica, Portugal. E-mail: jjm@fct.unl.pt

² Assistant Professor, Marine Laboratory of Guia, University of Lisbon.
Estr. Guincho, 2750-642 Cascais, Portugal. E-mail: f.andrade@mail.telepac.pt

ABSTRACT

Tróia is a sandy peninsula at the mouth of the Sado River in Portugal. Heavy construction was laid down in the 1970's for a sun-and-sea type tourist resort, but the business concept failed and the largest landowner in Tróia, Torralta, went bankrupt. By 2000, the credits of Torralta were acquired by the Portuguese multinational SONAE, following negotiations with the Government, the main creditor. By then, SONAE had found there were major environmental constraints and no competitive sun-and-sea market in Tróia. Thus, they decided to downsize the project and redirect it towards eco-tourism. An innovative information and communication strategy was laid down with the help of IMAR: 1) A strategic environmental assessment was conducted by 1998; 2) The general concept of the project assumed environment both as a constraint and a major business opportunity; 3) Stakeholders (national and local authorities, NGOs and the general public) were successfully involved in project discussion from 1999; 4) Environmental impact studies were performed between 1999 and 2002, with demanding guidelines for project design; 5) Formal environmental impact assessment was conducted by early 2003, including the display of the complete environmental impact statement on the internet for the whole public hearing, the first ever in Portugal.

INTRODUCTION

Tróia is a narrow peninsula in the western coast in Portugal, making up the southern bank of the Sado estuary and protecting it from the Atlantic Ocean. The peninsula is about 20 km long and between 1 and 2 km wide. Geologically, it is a young coastal sand dune formation, formerly a barrier island, created by the joint influence of the Sado River and the coastal currents.

Due to its excellent beaches and good climate, Tróia has been a favorite beach destination for several decades. The original concept for the urban development of the peninsula, back in the sixties, foresaw a population (residential and touristic) of about seventy thousand people. By the mid-1970s, about 7000 "beds" (that is, lodging for 7000 people) had actually been built. It was a classic mass-tourism concept that did not turn out as expected. The largest operator in Tróia, a company called Torralta that owned the northern end of the peninsula, went bankrupt, with a legal battle following suit. Although poor management played a role in this outcome, the chief cause of the demise was the inability of Tróia to compete with more favorable sun-and-sea resort locations, both in Portugal and abroad.

For years, the Portuguese Government, the main creditor of Torralta, tried to find a solution for the bankrupt company and its employees. In 1997, following a lengthy public concourse, an agreement was at long last reached with SONAE, one of the leading Portuguese economic groups. SONAE was committed to present a new investment project by early 1999.

When SONAE began to prepare the new project, it became immediately apparent that there were a number of major hurdles. First, the sun-and-sea type touristic resort clearly would not be profitable: a completely different model was called for if the investment was to be successful. Second, the whole area is ecologically highly sensitive and current environmental regulations would not allow the free hand that developers in the seventies enjoyed. Third, the project promised to be a high-profile media issue, because it would be a very large investment, moreover in a sensitive area. Fourth, there were a number of stakeholders to account, from local residents and old employees to beach users, local authorities and environmental NGOs.

SONAE then decided for an approach completely different from any other touristic project in Portugal: they called in expert advice on environmental matters from the very start of project conception. The

chosen consultant was IMAR-Institute of Marine Research, a research facility with links in several Portuguese universities.



The Sado estuary and Tróia peninsula

THE DESIGN AND COMMUNICATION STRATEGY

1) Strategic environmental study

The strategic environmental study (IMAR 1998) included a preliminary ecological survey and identified the major environmental constraints in the area. Land use guidelines were defined, so that all urban development and activities would be located on the least sensitive areas.

Existing environmental regulations were assumed to be fully complied with, even when the agreement between SONAE and the Government allowed for some “creative interpretation” of regulations.

2) Investment project: environment as business opportunity

The investment project (SONAE 1999), presented to the Portuguese authorities in January 1999, complied in full with the strategic environmental study. It assumed environment both as a constraint and as a major business opportunity, the project having been completely redrafted towards the environmental-oriented market. Economic studies performed at the time showed that the market value of a good environmental profile would be a major asset for the investment project.

3) Stakeholder involvement

As early as May 1999, the involvement of stakeholders was actively sought by the developer. An innovative scoping procedure was conducted, including public hearings, according with the European Directive 97/11 on environmental impact assessment (then just entered into force and not yet transposed to national law). This scoping procedure was the second ever in Portugal, and the first for a tourism project. The hearings gathered considerable interest from national and local authorities, NGOs and the general public, and gave rise to terms of reference for the ensuing environmental impact studies.

Later on, many informal meetings were held with key stakeholders, including national and local authorities, local inhabitants, NGOs and the media, so that the questions arising from the developing projects could be solved without ever becoming major problems.

4) Environmental studies and project design

Detailed studies with intensive fieldwork were conducted by IMAR between 1999 and 2002, in parallel with project design. Major issues included coastal dynamics, environmental quality, coastal and estuarine ecology, terrestrial ecology, archeology, landscape, noise, regional socio-economy, and mobility.

Besides specific impact mitigation measures, a comprehensive environmental design and management concept was devised for the enterprise as a whole, now denominated Troiaresort. Regular meetings were held between the environmental consultants and the project developers and designers, to promote optimized design solutions from both environmental and economic points of view.

The scientific studies conducted by IMAR supported not only the project design, but also the plans and regulations drafted by the authorities. By May 2000, the Government approved two key instruments for further development in Tróia: the final investment contract between SONAE and the Portuguese State, and the Tróia Urbanization Plan.

At this stage, the Troiaresort comprehends a number of individual projects: the demolition of half the built-up area in the former Torralta holding (the first such action to be undertaken in Portugal), with systematic material recycling; the rehabilitation of a golf course and urban area lodging 3700; the urban development of further 3730 touristic beds in three separate new projects; a small marina; a new ferry dock; a mobility plan focused on public transportation; a utility renewal plan (water, sewage, energy, road access); an environmental protection and monitoring program; and an environmental management system. The total intended investment amounts to over two hundred million euros.

5) Environmental impact assessment

Because the Portuguese legal framework does not allow for integrated assessment of large multi-function enterprises such as the Troiaresort, it was decided that formal environmental impact assessment would be conducted only for the individual projects subject to this regulation. The first environmental impact statement was then drafted for the marina and new ferry dock projects and filed by 2002.

This study (IMAR 2002) contained not only the information relevant to assess the marina and ferry dock, but also comprehensive information on the Troiaresort as a whole, as it was felt that this projects would make no sense outside the overall enterprise.

Full-fledged public hearing was conducted by the Ministry for Environment by early 2003, including a number of public sessions. The environmental impact statement was fully available on the Internet for the entire duration of the public hearing, the first ever to do so in Portugal (despite the fact that the technology has been available for over six years).

After some exchange with the Portuguese authorities (due not to matters of science or actual environmental impact, but to matters of formality and policy), the marina and new ferry dock were approved in October 2003. Other projects in the Troiaresort complex are pending approval or under various design stages.

THE INFORMATION MANAGEMENT STRATEGY

Since the environmental evaluation of the Tróia peninsula began, it was acknowledged that the quantities of information and data types being gathered and generated required a specific management approach.

The environmental zonation of the territory – including its sensitivity and potential for occupation and use – was the first result searched for, and this required that all the data could be integrated on a geographically referenced base. At the same time, the potential and need for public diffusion of the results was also taken as a basic goal. Indeed, in view of the public involvement approach, accessibility to all data and results was an *a priori* condition underlying the project structure.

Available cartography of the Tróia peninsula was found to be inadequate and largely outdated. Maps used by authorities to indicate classified areas (such as the tourism development areas or the Natura 2000 network) dated back to the early 1960's, when the main road that crosses the peninsula did not exist yet.

Recent dynamics of the peninsula has been so intense that land area increased by several hectares, with a linear seaward growth of more than 200 m; and in other places, the shore drew back dozens of meters.

These reasons led to the decision of working on a photographic rectified layer, which was specially acquired and prepared for this effect. From then on, all data and results gathered could – with relative ease – be drawn on that base layer, allowing for a maximum visibility and potential for public understanding.

The disciplinary scope of the study created additional problems. Crossing disciplines such as inter-tidal ecology, archeology and socio-economy, with their different scales, was no mean issue. Again, the solution was to use a cartographic approach, at the most adapted scale, based on the largest scale/most adapted base references. Indeed, for the largest scale approaches – e.g. beach dynamics and morphology – a topographic base had to be created and installed from scratch.

As a result of this approach, and although we cannot with total rigor claim that a GIS for Tróia has been developed, we were able to create a geo-referenced database, on which all available information can be viewed and, to a large extent, superimposed. Technically speaking, this is all out-of-the-shelf technology. However, it should be said that such a comprehensive approach has very seldom been applied in Portugal, either to environmental impact assessment or to planning procedures.

This was a key factor when public presentation and discussion of the results took place, since it contributes to an easy understanding of concepts and conclusions found. Also, the use of a multi-scale, nested approach, allowed us to increase or decrease the analysis scale in view of the problems studied: archeology, where geomagnetic prospections and trench digging were carried, was studied at a scale in excess of 1:1000; impacts on the Sado estuary resident dolphin population were viewed at the estuary scale, after alternative ferry routes and main recreational navigation areas were understood; socio-economic impacts were treated at the scale of the whole region where the project is inserted.

For the project team, this meant that information had to be gathered having in mind its final integration in the overall sensitivity/occupation priorities scheme. For the public in general, this meant that all the information gathered was readily available and understandable with no specific scientific knowledge needs. This was also one of the reasons that allowed for the ready and original dissemination of the final report results in a digital form.

CONCLUSION

The Troiaresort case study allows for a number of interesting conclusions.

First, it demonstrates that a major development project can indeed be optimized both economically and ecologically. Tróia was (still is) in a sorry state and thus the job was easier than if we were dealing with a pristine area, but it is still a relevant achievement.

Second, the public transparency approach paid off and indeed set a standard. This project began with the prospect of becoming a major battle between different ministries, local versus national authorities and NGO versus government, and ended up, if not object of total consensus, certainly with most problems solved on a cooperative basis.

Third, as found before by the authors on a number of occasions, technology was the easy part. The difficult part was to get policy to be upgraded to available scientific knowledge.

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