Impact of residential tourism and the destination life cycle theory

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Abstract

The goal of this paper is to apply the Tourist Area Life Cycle theory to the analysis of Torrevieja, a tourist town located in Southern Alicante province, which represents a paradigmatic example of a residential tourist destination. We will describe its tourist evolution and its present tourist and environmental state. At Torrevieja, the residential tourists reach more than a half a million in August. We will show that the last stages of the TALC are related to the exhaustion of the main offered resource: urban land. Environmental and landscape degradation, urban infrastructure and social service deficits, lacking of complementary offers, declining urban quality of life, and increasing of urban insecurity are also linked to the decline stage. This research has been financed by the Spanish Ministry of Science and Technology.
Keywords: residential tourism, life cycle, tourist environmental impact, Torrevieja, local development.

1 Introduction

From the 1970s onwards, a new model of town planning centred on the offer of second homes began to be developed on the Spanish Mediterranean coasts. Hundreds of horizontal, low density residential estates were built on large areas of land. A new formula for tourism also appeared: residential tourism Mazón and Aledo [1]. The inhabitability of contemporary towns generates a need for escape in urbanites Omberg [2]. In western Europe, access to this type of residential tourism was opened to many strata of society with the development of the welfare state, more free time, an increase in earlier retirement and better pensions.

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We understand residential tourism as being the economic activity dedicated to the urbanisation, construction and sale of residential tourist homes that constitute the non-hotel sector. This sector is formed by the total number of properties, which are generally individually owned and offered to the tourist market, nearly always outside conventional channels. The great majority of these properties are located in the coastal area Mazón and Aledo [1]. The purchasers originate from: (a) the property developer's circle (b) from north and central Spain, and (c) other countries of the European Union. Their use may be weekend, holiday and as a semi permanent or permanent residence Warners [3].

Although it is true that there is ample scientific literature that has studied residential tourism, especially Anglo-Saxon and French, on the contrary, and despite the importance attained by the residential tourist sector in Spain, until recent times there have been few researchers who have dedicated their time to the analysis of this sector and the impact it has on the host society and environment. In general, until a few years ago, studies of tourism were looked upon with disdain by Spanish Universities Mazón [4] and, focussing on the analysis of residential tourism by academics, its scarce development might well be related to the interests of the developers, property agents and regional and local politicians in keeping its disproportionate growth obscure.

2 Objectives

The objectives of this study are: first, to describe the characteristics of the residential tourist model developed on the Spanish Mediterranean coasts; secondly, to explain its nature and how it functions, uncovering the environmental, social and economic non-viability of the model, using an adaptation of the destination life cycle model (DLCM). As an example for this analysis, the tourist town of Torrevieja, situated in the southeast of Spain, was chosen as a case study. It will be demonstrated how the lack of planning and rapid growth of residential estates have exhausted the basic resource that sustains residential tourism, land. Consequently, the exclusive focus of the sector on the construction and sale of property has degraded the environment and destroyed the landscape. Parallelly, there has been no development of a hotel offer, or any complementary offer, services or tourist infrastructure that could serve to rechannel (rejuvenate in Butler's terms) the tourist sector of this town towards viable options.

3 Characteristics

We shall now describe the principal characteristics of residential tourism. (1) Despite its seasonality being lower than that of sun and beach hotel tourism, seasonal concentration levels remain high. Therefore, whilst a high percentage of the users of residential tourist homes may establish themselves totally or almost permanently in the host town, the summer residents (understood as the seasonal users of the residential homes) greatly exceed the first group. In Torrevieja, we have counted around 125,000 residents in the winter months, but in the summer

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high season weeks the figure reaches 500,000. (2) Complementary activities are scarce and of poor quality, which is a frequent problem in the Spanish Mediterranean towns that specialise in this type of tourism. Only the construction of golf courses and marinas improve the level of the complementary services, although these are developed with the aim of increasing the value of the property offer. (3) The appearance of these products is unstructured, the residential tourist properties are not offered to the tourist market. The number of apartments registered in the province of Alicante by the Valencian Tourist Board is only 17,725, whereas in the coastal area alone, we have counted 237,493 residential tourist homes. Therefore, no control mechanisms from the tourist authorities exist and lettings in the rental market are offered clandestinely, defrauding the Spanish revenue. (4) A family that buys a second residence wants to recoup the costs incurred by using or renting the property, which we have found to be much less frequent. For this reason, summer visitors with a second residence are a group who are very loyal to their destination. (5) On the other hand, residential tourism is characterised by a low rotation of tourists and lower spending per tourist/day: This is usually the kind of Spanish tourist who is less given to spending. (6) Spanish town planning legislation leaves a great part of the management and planning of land in the hands of the local authorities. The great majority of coastal councils have based the financing of their budgets on the income generated by urban taxes. This is one of the main reasons behind the lack of planning as, both local authorities and property development businesses have seen urban planning as an obstacle to, or as a brake on, continuous and rapid growth of the economic benefits produced by the construction of these urbanizations Stroud [5]. (7) Finally, the tendency towards the unplanned rapid growth of residential tourism that has taken place in a great number of Spanish Mediterranean towns has had a tremendous environmental impact.

4 Environmental impact of property development tourism

Numerous studies have indicated the environmental impact caused by the expansion of constructed land produced by residential tourist developments Gartner [6]; Grenon [7]; Vera Rebollo [8]. Amongst these negative effects, the following stand out: landscape degradation, reduction of local biodiversity, deforestation and the increase of forest fires, the loss of vegetation, erosion and desertification, the increase of edaphic, acoustic and water pollution, both of superficial and subterranean waters and the eutrophication of the continental waters Almenar et al. [9]. The geographer Vera Rebollo [10] emphasises the battle between agriculture and urban developments for scarce water resources and the abandonment of traditional agriculture for transformation of agricultural land into development land and the cultural loss caused by the disappearance of the agricultural sector.

To understand these impacts, it should be mentioned that whilst ecological flows are mainly vertical, urbanisation and the flows of goods and energy associated with it, together with the development of the built-up area itself, are characterised by being horizontal Bettini [11]. In this way, the vertical flows of

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the ecological cycles are cut. At the same time, the spatial extent of the residential tourist development increases environmental impact for two reasons: firstly, because it extends the concrete and asphalt covering and activates the processes of waterproofing, erosion and desertification mentioned above Aledo [12]; secondly, because control, management and impact reduction are more difficult and expensive than if the tourist homes were concentrated. For example, in the locality under analysis in this text, Torrevieja (Spain), the population quadruples during periods of maximum occupation. Similarly, domestic waste collection and treatment services and the residual water purifying installations are not prepared for such a high volume of users. The local authorities are unable to justify investment in greater infrastructure that would only be used during a few months of the year. All of these environmental impacts give rise to what Plog [13] calls the destructive tourist cycle: tourism that in the first place is attracted by a quality natural space, ends up by destroying the very thing that is its principal attraction and structural basis.

5 Structural weaknesses of the model

The new residential tourist settlements have been at the heart of the development of many Spanish towns due to the economic benefits that they provide in the short term. However, as we shall demonstrate, this is a model that generates scenarios of high risk and vulnerability due to its structural weaknesses in the long term MUNRES [14]. The wealth generated by tourist residential estates is purely property development when it is not linked to a tourist development strategy. When the building process has concluded, a series of negative consequences appear, caused by using up and bad use of the land, the environmental impact that this generates and the lack of infrastructures and services for tourists. These deficits are worsened by the lack of planning of residential tourist developments Vera Rebollo [10]; Torres Alfonsea [15]; Mazón [4]. Based on these structural problems, a model of tourist offer has been established, with property developers at its centre, who are guided for the most part by interests that are merely speculative. In this way, the sector has destroyed its own base due to the intensive occupation of the land and destruction of the landscape Plog [13]; Sancho [16]. The result is a model with a social and urban morphology that, although it has attracted thousands of tourists-residents to the Spanish coasts and has noticeably raised the standard of living of the local populations thanks to the property development business, it has not created infrastructures, facilities nor services capable of responding to the needs of these tourists, nor to plan any sustainable land use in the medium term Munres [14]. We are, therefore, faced with a socio-economic dilemma that can only be resolved through social consensus and a sustainable development policy.

The demand for this type of residential tourist offer comes on the one hand from the national market, as the socio-economic development undergone by Spanish society over the last two decades has enabled its citizens to purchase a second tourist home Asín and Bayón [17]. On the other hand, they have been joined by mainly retired citizens of the European Union Monreal [18]. The latter

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are attracted by the mild climate and the difference in the cost of living between Spain and their country of origin. Their stay is mainly during the winter period to escape from the long dark winters of northern Europe. At this point it must be mentioned that foreign demand is increasing, with an inter-annual growth rate of 15.8%. In fact, and according to data from the regional property developers association, the Alicante coast absorbed 90 per cent of foreign property investment in the Valencian Region during the year 2003, with the purchase of 30,000 tourist homes and billing of 3,700 million euros. This offer gives rise to the fact that in the year 2001, in the towns of the Alicante coast, the percentage of second and empty homes whose function is clearly residential tourism, reached 62.9%, whereas in Spain the percentage is 29.5%. But this property development activity is spreading. Foreign demand, and faced with the situation of saturation and collapse of the coastal zone, is provoking a shift of new property development promotions to the towns of the interior, which are adopting the same property development model as the coast.

6 Application of the destination life-cycle model (DLCM)

Butler [19] modified and applied the *product life-cycle* marketing theory to the evolution and development of tourist destinations. This author suggested that destinations experience a cycle of "birth-disappearance", where the number of visitors replaces the sale of the product. Butler divided the life-cycle of a tourist destination into six phases: exploration, involvement, development, consolidation, stagnation and a final phase of rejuvenation or decline. The application of the destination life-cycle model (DLCM) can be grouped into (a) those that emphasise the explicative and descriptive utilities of this theory to better understand the evolution of a determined tourist destination (b) those that indicate that DLCM may serve as a guide for planning and marketing of the resort; and, finally, (c) some authors suggest that it could be a tool to predict the posterior evolution of the destination. However, criticism has emphasised the lack of empirical studies on the final phase of post-stagnation and the non-inclusion of external factors that influence both the dynamics of the demand as well as the evolution of the internal offer Argawal [20] Bianchi [21]. Despite this criticism and the problems presented by any theory that pretends to be nomothetic, DLCM is still widely used by tourologists and planners due to its formulative simplicity and the irrefutability of the expiry of the socio-economic phenomena and processes.

This theory has hardly been used in studies of residential tourism Girard and Gartner [22]. Problems of a methodological order, such as the difficulty in quantifying residential tourists, may explain this gap in the bibliography. Nevertheless, there are important reasons for applying the DLCM to residential tourism: (a) for the social and economic relevance of this model, when related to the explicative potential of this theory and (b) because, in many cases, the development of residential tourism is one of the formulae that tourist destinations use to alter the economic decline predicted by the DLCM. To apply the DLCM to residential tourist destinations, first of all, a series of modifications must be

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made to the theory. If the classic DLCM, as proposed by Butler, centres on analysis of the demand, taking the arrival of tourists as a dependent variable, and the quality of the offer as an independent variable, then we have to use other variables in the application of the DLCM to residential tourism. The life of a product does not only depend on the strength of demand. The lack or scarcity of one of the resources that forms it may also play a fundamental role. In the case of residential tourism, exhaustion of the land available for development at the destination is a physical limit on the life of the product.

When the object of tourism is not the arrival of tourists but the sale of homes - as is the case of residential tourism, at least in the approach taken by the towns of the Spanish Mediterranean - once the available land for development has been used up, the end of the life-cycle of the product has been reached. The environmental impact of urban development, when it is not undertaken according to sustainable planned formulae, associated with the exhaustion of the land, may accelerate the end of the life of the product. At the same time, if the residential tourist model has not been planned and has developed a poor quality product, the possibilities of restructuring - or rejuvenation using Butler's terms -are directly decreased. In the following pages, we shall apply this theory to a consolidated residential tourist destination, as is the town of Torrevieja, located on the Spanish Mediterranean coast, in the south of the province of Alicante.

Torrevieja: a consolidated residential tourist town.

Torrevieja, situated 48 km to the south of Alicante, covers a surface of 30km^2, 20 km of coast and has a hot dry climate. It has 172 hours of sunshine in winter and 364 in summer, which make it very attractive for tourists who are retired, both Spanish and European. A third of its territory is taken up by a natural lagoon - protected as a Natural Park -, which has been used throughout history for salt extraction. This activity, together with fishing, employed most of its inhabitants until the decade of the 70s in the 20th century. From then on, the decline of fishing, the technification of the salt activity and, in particular, the arrival of tourism transformed the natural and cultural landscape of this town. Since then, the economy of the town has been based on the construction and property business. This is demonstrated by the fact that 28.8% of employment is in these two sectors. Moreover, hotel rooms are scarcely relevant; the hotel offer is a mere 775 rooms, whereas the number of second residences offered is 75,022.

The resident population of Torrevieja has grown considerably, particularly over the past few years, due to immigration Casado-Díaz [23]. If in 1960 - years before the tourist boom - there were 9,564 inhabitants, in 1996 33,521 inhabitants figured on the census, with 82,149 being reached in March 2003. However, calculations based on domestic consumption of water situate the real population at around 150,000 inhabitants in winter, reaching 500,000 in the summer period of maximum occupation.

Immigrants established in Torrevieja are divided into (a) working immigrants attracted by jobs created by the construction and services industries and (b) senior citizens from other Spanish regions as well as from the European Union (especially British) and from other European countries Viruela et al. [24]. According to data from the National Census of the Population and Property of

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2001, from a total census population of 58,828 inhabitants, foreigners represented 24.06% of the total (14,154). From the latter group, 42.77% are over the age of 55. The numerical importance of this population contingent, together with its special sociodemographic characteristics (elderly population, lack of knowledge of the Spanish language, higher level of income than the local population, etc.) may be a source of conflict with the local population.

Torrevieja is a paradigm of residential tourism. There are 257 non-hotel beds for each hotel bed in the town. The total of non-hotel beds reaches 350,000. The model of development has been based, almost exclusively, on the construction of second residences grouped in residential estates - condominiums of bungalows or semi-detached chalets and detached houses. These residential estates are characterised by being separate and at a distance from the town centre, by having important deficits in all kinds of infrastructures and services, and for their great use of land Barke [25]. They are the result of a complete lack of urban planning. Property developers' interests, purely speculative, are what have guided their growth in the search for cheap land. In the following table, the evolution of the number of houses built in this town in the period between 1985 and 2002 is shown.

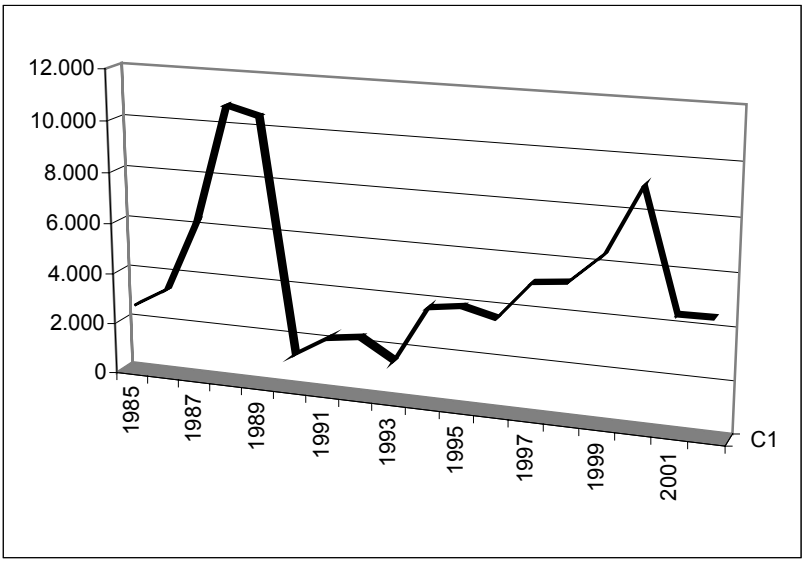

Figure 1: Houses built in Torrevieja (1985-2002).

From 1985 to 2002, 87,259 new homes were built in Torrevieja, with an average of more than 5,000 homes annually. The years of greatest property production are 1988 and 1989 with more than 20,000 homes being built. The economic and tourist crises at the beginning of the decade of the 90s had a serious impact on this sector, which did not recover until 1994, as in 1991 the number of homes built descends 90% in relation to the year before. From 1994

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onwards, the annual number of properties increases gradually until 1999 when 9,030 units are built. During the two following years, building construction drops by half. The growth of housing, using up urban land as it does, has been such that from the revision of the General Plan for Urban Planning (GPUP) in 2000, it can be seen that a mere 13% of the town's land remains available for urban use and that, in September 2003, only 283 ha. remained free from urbanisation, 8% of the total amount of land that is classified as urban. It is thus evident that the residential tourist sector of Torrevieja has reached the final phase of its life cycle by exhausting its basic resource - land available for development. In a few months, no land will remain in Torrevieja on which to continue building and, therefore, a sector that is based on the construction and sale of properties will cease functioning because there will be no land on which to build new urbanizations.

As in the DLCM proposed by Butler, this final phase could be rechannelled through a process of rejuvenation, a change in the model. This is the aim of the proposal made by the Council Urbanism Office, a change in the town's urban model. The idea is to change from an extensive horizontal model, made up of detached or semi-detached houses, to a denser and higher model. To this end, an amendment to the GPUP of 1988 is foreseen, to enable the construction of buildings with up to 15 storeys in the most central zones of the town centre, with special urbanistic benefits if these new buildings are hotels. The real possibilities of these urbanistic measures attracting hotel chains to situate their new hotels in this town are limited by various factors: a) its poor tourist image MUNRES [14] (b) the lack of tourist services and the scarcity and poor quality of the complementary offer (Baja Segura Tourism Report) and (c) the problems that greater densification would cause in a town centre of old design (it was designed after the earthquake of 1830) with narrow roads and pavements, where greater density of buildings would end up causing greater congestion and a decrease in the quality of life in the town.

These urban dynamics have generated an urban morphology that lacks unity, is isolated and of poor quality. Erroneous and deficient town planning at both touristic and urbanistic levels has led to this situation. The guidelines set out in the GPUPs of 1973 and 1986 have been ignored and 28 partial plans have been drawn up - from the 1986 PGOU up until 2000, which incorporate new land, not included in planning, to the constructed land, without attending to the required development of services. This situation of extensive and unharmonic growth is causing a series of negative effects, amongst which the following stand out: A) the absence of a model for the town, seeing that the current one responds to a collection of disperse and unconnected residential estates, the spectacular increase of its population and total number of properties, the lack of planning in the design of new roads and the situation of the beaches next to the town centre have caused a situation of chaotic traffic, especially in the summer-time. B) The road network infrastructure came after the development of the residential estates, in such a way that the access to and exits from this town are totally insufficient, causing serious traffic delays. C) the sea front is totally occupied by tall buildings, with no kind of reserve on land, which prevents its recuperation or

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rehabilitation. D) the lack of balance between services and personnel with the demographic profile of the tourists-residents and the notable increase of the population. For example, there are serious deficits in relation to health services, bearing in mind that the national average for the relation of hospital beds for inhabitant is 255 and, in the case of Torrevieja, in the low season, this figure is 700. As for pharmaceutical services, the national average is one chemist shop for 2,093 inhabitants and here it is 12,500 in the winter months and 50,000 in the periods of maximum occupation. In education, the student-class ratio is 38, whereas the national average is 32; the schooling situation is more complex in Torrevieja due to the high number of immigrant students, of various nationalities, who require special educational support programmes that have not been put into action. E) One of the most important problems currently faced by Torrevieja is that of citizens' insecurity, which has been related to the large urban area that makes the strategies and actions of the public security forces more complicated. In 1996 the number of infractions and crimes per 100 inhabitants was 10.45, increasing in the year 2002 to 16, when the Spanish average was 4.5. F) All of these elements end up by forming a local tourist product that offers a bad image, in such a way that the major European tour operators have decided to exclude this town from its selection of tourist destinations.

7 Conclusions

We can define the expansion of property tourism as *phagocytosis of space* Aledo [26], that is to say, the accelerated and unplanned use of urban land for the construction of residential tourist homes until the exhaustion of this structural resource and, therefore, causing the end of the life-cycle of the product. To understand this process, first the perverse dynamics of this type of tourism have to be examined. We have pointed out that the cycle of property development tourism is reduced to the purchase of land, construction of homes and their sale. There is no tourist business as such, we are faced with pure real estate activity. As with any business, it has to keep growing; that is to say, building, because there are no other objectives nor any intentions to create alternative or complementary ones.

The expansion of property development tourism in the region of Torrevieja has been as follows: in the first place, the coastal strip was occupied, a process that began before the decade of the 1930s but it was from the 60s onwards and, in particular, the 80s of the last century when the entire coastline was filled. Once it had been completely built-up with tall blocks of apartments, expansion took place towards the interior, on land at a distance of between 3 to 15 km from the coast, land that is used for dry farming, taking advantage of the lower prices of this land. To obtain greater benefits, thousands of semi-detached houses and chalets have been built in residential estates without services or infrastructures that, latterly, are financed by the town's treasury. The urbanisation of this second zone has been undertaken in a similar way to the occupation of the coastal area, with no minimum criteria for territorial planning. The landscape is unattractive and erodes quickly, due to the lack of water and agricultural activity having been

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abandoned. Moreover, the poor quality of the buildings and the residential estates is added to this. Over the last few years, the extension of this model to the towns of the interior more than 15km from the coast has been detected. Here, residential tourism competes with the irrigated agricultural land that is more expensive, but the voracity of the model does not seem to have any limits.

It is not only the property development businesses that generate, maintain and benefit this residential tourist circuit, the local political powers also play an important part in the reproduction of the model. The town treasury collects the income that is generated by the process of urbanisation by way of taxes Mazón [27]. In this way, the councils stimulate development of this type of tourism that, in the short term, means significant income. However, in the long term, the costs of maintenance of this enormous urbanisation overtake the income received at the beginning. In the final balance, the cost of the impacts that are not only environmental would have to be entered into the calculation. The costs incurred by the council for the development and maintenance of services and infrastructures that the construction companies and property development businesses do not undertake and which end up coming out of the municipal budget Omberg [2]; McIntyre [28]. Thus, a stage is entered where the councils are obliged to concede more building licences to finance these services and infrastructures that the new tourist-resident population demands. We are dealing with a development spiral with no way back until the town exhausts the land available for development and a crisis point is reached where serious problems of economic viability are faced in the town's finances, due to high indebtedness. In the case of the council of Torrevieja, the individual debt (debt for inhabitant) is 1,105€ compared with 361€ of the Valencian Region – which is added to the environmental unsustainability that the expansion of urbanisation has caused.

These perverse dynamics of tourist-residential development lead to an environmental and socio-economic crisis in the towns centred on this type of offer. To sum up, the exhaustion of the land available for development, the lack of planning, the bad quality of the global product, the destruction of natural resources, the lack of an adequate complementary offer, the scarce hotel development and the bad tourist image of the resort make recovery strategies unworkable. The combination of these elements leads to the exhaustion of the model, at the end of the life-cycle of the tourist product. The sector would need some minimum bases on which to establish the implementation of integrated sustainable tourist development projects McIntyre [28]; Aronsson [29]; Hall and Lew [30] and the sector itself has destroyed the infrastructural basis (environment and land) and has not generated any minimum structures (tourist offer and other services). However, it is very important to indicate that the negative effects are borne by the towns and their inhabitants and not as much by the construction and property development companies; that is to say, the benefits are privatised, whereas the external negatives of the model are socialised García [31]. The real estate businesses and developers have the capacity to move to other zones in their search for new available resources (land and environmental quality) and to initiate a new destructive cycle there. This is what

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is happening on the southern coast of Alicante. The businesses that have exploited this sector have begun to transfer their field of operations to the coasts of the nearby provinces of Murcia and Almería, where there are still large coastal areas without urbanisation.

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