

Readiness for Developing Rural Tourism in Egypt: An Overall Assessment and Three Case-Studies

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Abstract

This paper explores the readiness for rural tourism in Egypt. After introducing the concept of rural tourism, the paper will outline the necessary methodology involved in the measurement of rural tourism readiness and its application in Egypt. The central part of the article explains the results obtained in two sections: an overall quantitative assessment applied to the governorates of the country; and three specific case-studies contrasted and qualitatively analysed through fieldwork. The conclusion is that there is territorial unevenness in the readiness for rural tourism. The research also shows that while there are relevant possibilities and opportunities, at the same time there are also disadvantages due to political instability and insecurity. The paper focuses on the discussion of the concepts of 'rural areas' and 'rural tourism' specifically in case of Egypt.

Keywords: rural tourism, rural areas, sustainable development, Egypt.

Resum: *La disposició per desenvolupar turisme rural a Egipte: una avaluació general i tres casos d'estudi*

Aquest article explora la disposició per al desenvolupament del turisme rural a Egipte. Després de conceptualitzar el turisme rural, s'ofereixen les consideracions metodològiques necessàries relatives al mesurament de la disposició per al desenvolupament turístic rural i la seva aplicació a Egipte. La part central de l'article exposa els resultats obtinguts en dos apartats: una valoració quantitativa global aplicada a les governacions del país i tres estudis de cas específics diferents, analitzats qualitativament mitjançant treball de camp. Es conclou que la disposició per al desenvolupament turístic rural és territorialment desigual. La recerca també mostra que existeixen potencialitats i oportunitats rellevants, però, alhora, debilitats com ara els cicles d'instabilitat política i inseguretat. L'article permet debatre els mateixos conceptes d'espais rurals i 'turisme rural' aplicats al cas específic d'Egipte.

Paraules clau: turisme rural, espais rurals, desenvolupament sostenible, Egipte.

Resumen: *La disposición para desarrollar turismo rural en Egipto: una evaluación general y tres casos de estudio*

Este artículo explora la disposición para el desarrollo del turismo rural en Egipto. Después de conceptualizar el turismo rural, se ofrecen las consideraciones metodológicas necesarias relativas a la medición de la disposición para el desarrollo turístico rural y su aplicación en Egipto. La parte central del artículo expone los resultados obtenidos en dos apartados: una valoración cuantitativa global aplicada a las gobernaciones del país y tres estudios de casos específicos distintos, analizados cualitativamente mediante trabajo de campo. Se concluye que la disposición para el desarrollo turístico rural es territorialmente desigual. La investigación también muestra que existen potencialidades y oportunidades relevantes, pero, al mismo tiempo, debilidades tales como los ciclos de inestabilidad política e inseguridad. El artículo permite debatir los propios conceptos de ‘espacios rurales’ y ‘turismo rural’ aplicados al caso específico de Egipto.

Palabras clave: turismo rural, espacios rurales, desarrollo sostenible, Egipto.

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1. Introduction

Egypt has a strong reputation on the world tourism map, benefiting from its rich archaeological and cultural heritage as well as its attractive coastal landscapes. According to Ibrahim and Ibrahim (2003), until the 1970s the immense majority of the international tourism flux was directed toward the iconic pharaonic monuments located in Cairo, Luxor and Aswan, conveniently linked by means of the famous Nile river cruises. Arguably, the pyramids located on the plateau of Giza, nowadays part of the Greater Cairo metropolitan area, are one of the oldest, if not the oldest, tourist hotspots of the planet. In Hellenistic times visitors labelled them as one of the seven wonders of the world, and indeed it is the only site which still remains intact from classical antiquity (Lew *et al.*, 2008; Shetawy and El Khateeb, 2009). The pyramids were also at the centre of the Egyptomania that blossomed in Europe after Napoleon’s invasion in 1798-1801, when elite scholars ‘discovered’ the sumptuous pharaonic past while the French army was occupying the territory. These scholars provided a detailed record of them by means of literature that became widely disseminated (Ibrahim and Ibrahim, 2003), leading to the development of ideas that Said (1978), would eventually describe as Orientalism. Be that as it may, since the 1980s coastal tourism, mainly in the Red Sea and Sinai, has also expanded (Ibrahim and Ibrahim, 2003). Thus, by making use of the widely known Hall and Page’s (2006, p. 39) typology of contexts with a “distinctive nature of tourist and recreational activities”, tourism developments in Egypt have affected urban and coastal/ocean areas, while rural and wilderness (in

the case of Egypt, deserts) have been less developed, or are undeveloped, in terms of tourism.

Despite the fact that the Egyptian countryside takes up the vast majority of the land and shelters more than half of population (according to the United Nations Statistics Division website <https://unstats.un.org/>, the Egyptian population was 100.6 million inhabitants in 2020: 57.5 % rural and 43.1 % urban), there is limited interest in the development of rural tourism in the country. This paper explores the readiness of rural tourism in Egypt hypothesising that the Egyptian countryside includes plenty of unused tourist potential.

The remainder of this paper is organised as follows. After a section devoted to introduce the concept of rural tourism, the paper will outline the necessary methodology involved in the measurement of rural tourism readiness and its application in Egypt. The central part of the article explains the results obtained in two sections: an overall quantitative assessment applied to the governorates of the country and three specific case-studies qualitatively analysed. The last concluding section briefly discusses the results obtained in relation to the theoretical foundations.

2. Conceptualising Rural Tourism

According to Hall and Page (2006), the first point to address when defining rural tourism is what is understood by ‘rural’. However, this is a highly-contentious and elusive discussion (Halfacree, 1993; Woods, 2005; Shucksmith and Brown, 2016), with inconclusive results. From the perspective of rural geography, at least since Clout (1972), tourism is seen as one of the economic activities present in rural areas. Interestingly, Clout (1972, p. 76) defined rural tourism as a specific mechanism of “urbanization of the countryside” given that visitors to rural areas are urban-based. Although Clout (1972) and Woods (2011) have noted that rural tourism can be traced back to centuries ago, even to Roman and Renaissance times, in reality they acknowledge it is basically a mid-20th century development, facilitated by factors such as the rise of paid holidays and the private cars in the general population. Arguably, this rural tourism development affected the advanced economies first but currently “in [...] significant parts of the global south [...] the consumption economy is now at least as important as the production economy in sustaining rural livelihoods” (Woods, 2011, p. 93).

Hall and Page (2006, p. 283) expound that there is a wide variety of terms to refer to rural tourism beyond the term itself: ‘farm tourism’, ‘agritourism’, ‘alternative tourism’, etc., with different nuances varying from country to country. This makes the definition of rural tourism inherently difficult. For instance, many of the definitions of rural tourism in Western countries are based on the assumption that rural tourism develops in low-density inhabited areas

(Halfacree, 1993; Woods, 2005; Shucksmith and Brown, 2016). Furthermore, rural tourism is quite often defined as a way of “contact[ing] with nature and the natural world” (Hall and Page, 2006, p. 283) but the already mentioned Hall and Page’s (2006, p. 39) typology of geographical tourism contexts distinguishes between rural tourism and nature-based tourism, making the latter contradictory with the former in the sense that nature-based tourism can be both considered a part of rural tourism and an independent type of tourism.

In any case, rural tourism tends to be associated with what is understood as being a rural area in every country, with a focus given to tradition and rural economy, history, landscape, etc., and it is implemented on a small scale in the sense that it does not include massive developments (Roberts and Hall, 2001; Hall and Page, 2006). This is consistent with the official definition given by the United Nations World Tourism Organization (2019, p. 34):

“Rural tourism is a type of tourism activity in which the visitor’s experience is related to a wide range of products generally linked to nature-based activities, agriculture, rural lifestyle/culture, angling and sightseeing. Rural tourism activities take place in non-urban (rural) areas with the following characteristics: 1. Low population density; 2. Landscape and land-use dominated by agriculture and forestry; and 3. Traditional social structure and lifestyle.”

Again, this definition overlaps with what is defined by the World Tourism Organization (2019) itself as “ecotourism” (p. 32) and “mountain tourism” (p. 50), amongst others. In any case, these definitions imply that rural tourism comprises a wide range of possible activities, including gastronomy, visits to natural and cultural heritage hotspots, practising sports, acquiring handicraft, etc.

Typically, farm tourism (also known as agritourism) is understood as a core activity of rural tourism (Hall and Page, 2006). Phillip *et al.* (2010) have reviewed the scholars who have defined farm tourism and they conclude again that there is no consensual definition. Obviously, what is essential for farm tourism is the very existence of a farm with agricultural activities. However, tourists can merely visit a given farm just for accommodation and/or hospitality, undergoing a limited interaction with the working environment of the farm. In this sense, Phillip *et al.* (2010, p. 756) label tourist participation in farm tasks as “authentic agritourism”, given that there is direct contact between visitors and agricultural activities taking place in an actual working farm.

Rural tourism is widely seen as an important factor in the development of local economies (Roberts and Hall, 2001; Cànoves *et al.*, 2006; Hall and Page, 2006; Saxena *et al.*, 2007; Galdeano-Gómez *et al.*, 2011). In this sense, the impacts of rural tourism are commonly regarded in the literature as positive in terms of local and endogenous development. This includes the reversal of migration from rural to urban areas given that rural tourism allegedly implies the creation of employment opportunities in rural areas, thus the retention of workforce. For this reason, public policies of different countries across the globe have earmarked tourism as a way to develop rural areas, in particular

the institutionalised rural development policy of the European Union (Cànoves *et al.*, 2006; Saxena *et al.*, 2007; Paül, 2013; Paül *et al.*, 2016). As a widespread aspiration, rural tourism is supposed to be implemented within the framework of sustainable development (Cànoves *et al.*, 2006; Hall and Page, 2006; Saxena *et al.*, 2007). However, while the “pros” of rural tourism have been highlighted, the research has also shown how rural tourism may benefit only a small group in the local community, or even only outsiders (who might be the owners of the properties), generate inflation, and can lead towards environmental degradation and artificialisation of the local culture, as well as other undesirable consequences (Cànoves *et al.*, 2006; Hall and Page, 2006).

3. Methodological Considerations

From a tourism research perspective, two methods are used to analyse the readiness of rural tourism in Egypt. On the one hand, a quantitative survey is undertaken by means of a specially developed indicator, the results being shown in section 4. On the other, qualitative research is developed for three particular case-studies, which are expounded in section 5. All these research developments are based on the epistemological considerations contained by Eisa (2017).

Regarding the quantitative indicator, data were collected from official national sources such as: the Central Agency for Public Mobilisation and Statistics (CAPMAS), the Egyptian Ministry of Tourism and the Egyptian General Authority for Tourism Development. The small number of previous studies concerning rural tourism in Egypt have also been reviewed: in particular, El-Barmelgy’s (2004) analysis of “pros” and “cons” of rural tourism in Egypt; Eraqi’s (2007) assessment of local communities’ attitudes towards impacts of tourism development in Egypt; and El-Habaa’s (2017) survey of eight districts in three governorates (Giza, Ismailia and Sharkia) aiming to identify rural places that attract tourists.

For each one of the 27 Egyptian governorates, a rural tourism readiness index has been calculated following the next steps:

- Available attractions are surveyed and enumerated for every governorate. The typology of these attractions is as follows: Nile course and main canals, Nile isles, irrigation barrages, agricultural land, religious events, museums and culture monuments and handicrafts.
- For every governorate, an effectiveness factor expressing the influence of rural tourism available attractions is estimated, ranging from 0 % (null influence) to 100 % (maximum influence).

- The readiness value for every governorate is calculated by the ratio of the available attractions and the maximum total number of attractions and multiplied by the effectiveness factor. The final index is estimated mathematically as percentage, ranging from 0 % (no possibility of accommodating rural tourism) to 100 % (total tourism development).

A second methodological procedure has been developed by means of systematic fieldwork visits in June 2019 to three case study areas: Tunis (Faiyum governorate), Dahshour (Giza governorate) and Kotameya reservoirs (Menoufia governorate). All three are located in north-eastern Egypt: the first one is in the Faiyum oasis, adjacent to the Nile Valley to the West and irrigated by means of a channel (Bahr Yussef) from the Nile, but a tectonic depression in the middle of the desert, and the last two are in the Nile Valley. Tunis and Dahshour are located South of Cairo, while Kotameya is located halfway between the Egyptian capital and the Mediterranean Sea, in the Nile Delta. These case-study areas have been selected because of the different situations of rural tourism, as will be shown in section 5: in Tunis a spontaneous rural tourism has taken place; in Dahshour rural tourism has been implemented by national and international institutions; and in Kotameya a decade ago the author proposed an intervention that has not yet materialised (Eisa, 2011). Also, section 4 will go into more detail about the choice of these particular three case-studies for a different reason.

4. Rural Tourism Readiness Index per Governorates

Applying the adopted methodology explained in the previous section, a readiness value of rural tourism has been obtained for every governorate. Potentially, there are seven types of rural tourism attractions, but some governorates have been ranked twice if there is more than one attraction of the same sort: the maximum score obtained by one governorate being 8 (table 2).

It is out of remit of this paper to show in detail the calculations carried out for each particular type of existing or potential rural tourism attraction. However, table 1 shows the research that has been carried to evaluate one particular asset: farmlands, expressed in feddans (1 feddan equals to 0.42 hectares). Depending on the relevance of farmland, they have been rated accordingly. Importantly, the Red Sea governorate scores 0, implying that it is the only governorate with a final readiness value of 0 (see below). In the case of agricultural lands, there is potential for farm tourism, given that farm tourism is absent in Egyptian rural culture: rural dwellers can host visitors in their own houses, considering them guests, thus not charging conventionally for the service and expecting only a voluntary courtesy. The area of arable land in Egypt ranges from 8.5 to 9 million feddans, some 2 million of which

have been reclaimed from the desert during recent years. Unfortunately, in the wake of the 2011 revolution in Egypt, some 50,000 feddans of agricultural land have been lost to unregulated urban encroachment in only three years (Adly *et al.*, 2015).

Table 1. Agricultural lands per governorates (2018)

Governorate	Farmland (in feddans)	Governorate	Farmland (in feddans)
Alexandria	171,000	Matruh	308,000
Aswan	188,000	Menoufia	377,000
Asyut	351,000	Minya	497,000
Beheira	1,594,000	New Valley	145,000
Beni Suef	291,000	North Sinai	120,000
Cairo	17,000	Port Said	51,000
Dakahlia	668,000	Qalyubia	231,000
Damietta	111,000	Qena	351,000
Faiyum	437,000	Red Sea	0
Gharbia	394,000	Sharqia	822,000
Giza	214,000	Sohag	325,000
Ismailia	240,000	South Sinai	8,500
Kafr El Sheikh	625,000	Suez	25,000
Luxor	53,000		

Source: Author's elaboration derived from CAPMAS

The main results of this section are shown in table 2 and mapped in fig. 1. There is no governorate ranking with high rural tourism readiness (above the threshold 75 %). The top score is obtained by Giza (68 %), followed by Menoufia (63 %) and Faiyum (56 %). These three are the governorates with most successful existing rural tourism activities and are even promoted globally, implying that international tourists come to these destinations. This is another reason for choosing the particular case-study areas of these three governorates, as explained in section 5.

The remaining governorates can be classified in three different situations:

- Semi-specialised governorates in rural tourism are those eight scoring between 25 and 50 %. They contain particular rural villages with artistic heritage, but rural tourism attractions are under-used.
- Those 15 governorates ranging less 25 % but excluding the only one with an index of 0 % are considered as having minimum rural tourism readiness.

These governorates tend to depend on other economic bases and include some of the main urban areas of Egypt such as Cairo and Alexandria.

– The only governorate scoring 0% is Red Sea, even without farmlands (table 1).

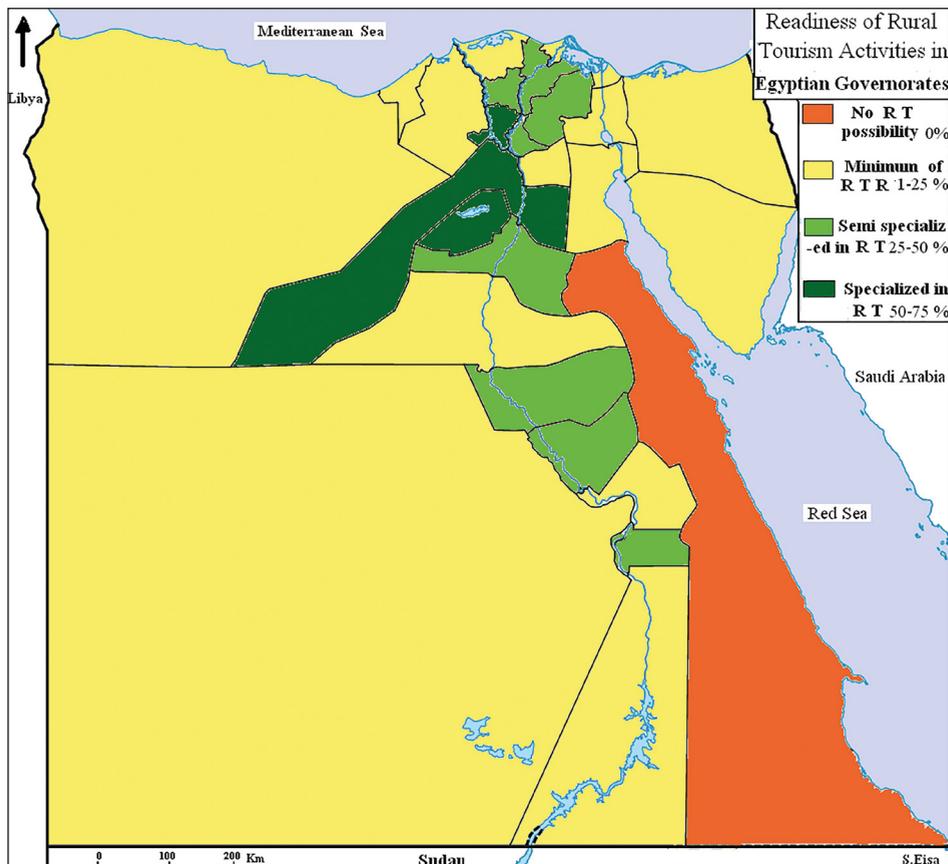
In general terms, cultural and religious heritage located in rural areas tends to be important for tourism, for instance related to Islamic and Christian holy places. Also, the Nile is very relevant, including the riparian vegetation, course banks, barrages, irrigation channels, orchards and palm groves, etc.

Table 2. Rural tourism readiness by governorates

Governorate	Available Attractions	Effectiveness Factor (%)	Readiness Value (%)
Alexandria	1	30,0	4,3
Aswan	4	40,0	22,9
Asyut	5	42,0	30,0
Beheira	4	40,0	22,9
Beni Suef	5	42,0	30,0
Cairo	3	30,0	12,9
Dakahlia	5	42,0	30,0
Damietta	3	43,0	18,4
Faiyum	8	49,0	56,0
Gharbia	6	47,0	40,3
Giza	8	60,0	68,6
Ismailia	3	43,0	18,4
Kafr El Sheikh	4	40,0	22,9
Luxor	6	46,0	39,4
Matruh	2	50,0	14,3
Menoufia	8	55,0	62,9
Minya	4	35,0	20,0
New Valley	2	50,0	14,3
North Sinai	1	30,0	4,3
Port Said	1	30,0	4,3
Qalyubia	5	46,0	32,9
Qena	3	30,0	12,9
Red Sea	0	0,0	0,0
Sharqia	5	54,0	38,6
Sohag	6	38,0	32,6
South Sinai	1	30,0	4,3
Suez	1	30,0	4,3

Source: Author's calculation

Figure 1. Rural tourism readiness by governorates



Source: Author's elaboration

4. Three Case-Studies

4.1. Tunis

The village of Tunis is a personal initiative that has become a global tourist attraction. The village is located on an elevated site adjacent the southern west bank of Lake Qaroon, an endorheic basin below sea-level lake which is currently mainly filled from the drainage of agriculture in the Faiyum oasis, which has received water from the Nile river since pharaonic times. Traditionally, this is a very fertile farmland area, as the pre-eminence of the Temple of Qaroon, located near the village of Tunis, makes evident. With an area of 600 feddans and 4,000 inhabitants (according to the CAPMAS), the presence of foreigners who decided to settle in this place attracted visitors to the village, which has become a tourist hotspot.

The story of tourism in the village of Tunis began in the mid-1960s, when the Swiss artist Evelyn Bouré (fig. 2), a graduate of Fine Arts in Switzerland, decided to live in the place with her then husband, the Egyptian poet Sayed Hijab. The village consisted of dozens of simple houses, but the artist opened a ceramics and pottery school in a part of her house, teaching neighbours an art form that gradually spread to other workshops. Evelyn later separated from Hijab and married Frenchman Michel Pastorly, but she decided to stay in the village with her family. Speaking fluent Arabic, she is known by the locals as ‘the Mayor of Tunis’. Her house is still open to villagers who learn from her, even nowadays. The existence of dozens of pottery, ceramic and porcelain shops has attracted tourism attention to the village (fig. 2).

The creation of this particular atmosphere in recent decades has also implied that a number of Egyptian and foreign writers and artists stay in the village of Tunis, seeking calmness and natural beauty. Gradually, a new community model developed by foreigners in cooperation with the villagers has taken place. One of the most famous foreigners who has lived there is the British translator Dennis Johnson Davis, who declared his wish to be buried in this village he loved. After his death in May 2017, people of the village carried out his last request.

Consequently, the village currently has a buoyant tourism industry based on the aforementioned shops, but that now includes other craft workshops (for instance, leather goods). In addition, a caricature museum also has been created. Some of these buildings follow the style of the well-known Egyptian architect Hassan Fathy (1900-1989), who devoted his life to housing the poor by using the traditional materials present in Egypt as opposed to Western building systems: indeed, one of the houses in the vicinity of Tunis was built following his plans (Serageldin, 2007). There are several restaurants and more than 20 places offering accommodation, including a resort with a spa (classified with 5 stars) which are reported to be quite successful.

4.2. Dahshour

Dahshour is a tourism development planned by national and international institutions. Dahshour contains the Southern section of the famous UNESCO World Heritage Site *Memphis and its Necropolis – the Pyramid Fields from Giza to Dahshur*, given the outstanding relevance of the archaeological area of the three Dahshour pyramids: the Red Pyramid (north); the Curved Bent Pyramid (the two built by King Sneferu); and the Black Pyramid built by Amenemhat III (UNESCO, s. d.). However, unlike the well-known pyramids of the plateau of Giza (Shetawy and El Khateeb, 2009), Dahshour is not part of the metropolitan area of Cairo: it is located 35 km south of the city. It must be reached by travelling an hour by car, or by train or by sailing on the “Nile Pharaon” steamer to the neighbouring towns of Al-Badrashin and Mazghona, and finally taking a tuk-tuk, reducing its tourist appeal. For this reason, there

Figure 2. Evelyn Bouré’s original workshop and one of the potteries developed around in the village of Tunis



Source: Author's pictures in 24/06/2019 and Valeria Patil's picture in 04/03/2022

was a governmental effort to promote rural tourism as a means of developing the area during the 2010s. Most of the inhabitants practice low-income farming and there are no other job opportunities rather than agriculture. The area consists of five villages (Dahshour itself, Zawyet Dahshour, Manshiyet Dahshour, Kaseb and Mazghona), with a population of 40,000 inhabitants (according to the CAPMAS).

Importantly, the Dahshour area contains the Birket (pond) of Dahshour, on the outskirts of the desert, a shallow seasonal natural lowland where papyrus plants grow, and migrant birds reach in early spring and late autumn. These wetlands are one of the only remaining wild ecosystems in Middle Egypt. Unfortunately, the Egyptian government issued a decision to dry Dahshour pond for fear of the

spread of bird flu virus in 2017 (fig. 3). Consequently, migratory birds cannot rest in the migration season and ornitho-tourist numbers have declined.

A project aiming to develop tourism in the Dahshour area commenced in 2009, called *Mobilization of the Dahshour World Heritage Site for Community Development* (World Tourism Organization, 2012). Implemented by the relevant Egyptian authorities with a contribution from the Spanish Government and five United Nations agencies (UNESCO, UNDP, UNIDO, ILO and UNWTO), the project envisaged sustainable tourism developed as means of reducing human development disparities, with special reference to addressing the gender gap and implementing environmental goals. Two aspects were targeted: reducing poverty in the local communities in Dahshour; and enhancing the national institutional capacities to attain a better protection and management of the archaeological and natural resources present in the area. From the perspective of social capital, the training of skills valuable to the tourism sector was developed. Regarding investments, infrastructure for tourism was improved in Dahshour including the setting up of a visitors' centre and the paving of roads and highways. Furthermore, two tourism experiences were promoted:

- A walking tour to experience historical and cultural landscapes between the rural villages of Dahshour and Kaseb. The tour consists of stops in several attractions, tasting local food, experiencing the cafés located in palm groves (fig. 3) and visiting handicraft workshops.
- A bicycle tour in the desert departing from and returning to the villages surrounded by palm groves (fig. 3). The bicycle trip, which typically takes two to three hours, follows a path across the desert, palm fields and villages by making use of local roads, including the roads parallel to the water canals derived from the Nile.

The plan did not include the development of lodges and accommodation in the area, which still needs to be done in urban areas (Cairo and Giza cities). The plan is considered a global benchmark by the World Tourism Organization (2018) of systematic good practice in sustainable tourism development, especially in terms of creating an atmosphere of trust in tourism within the local community. However, the conflicting political developments in the early 2010s in Egypt and the raising security concerns for tourists have particularly affected this rural area.

4.3. Kotameya reservoirs

Kotameya reservoirs is a proposed project for environmental rural tourism that has not taken place. It was submitted to the Menoufia Governorate and the executive authority responsible for tourist development by Eisa (2011) as an unfunded research project. The Kotameya reservoirs are located in the agricultural lands of the village of Kotameya, with an area of 2.8 km², and

Figure 3. The dried wetlands of the Birket of Dahshour, with the pyramids in the background, and the landscape of a café located in a palm field in Dahshour



Source: Author's pictures in 25/06/2019

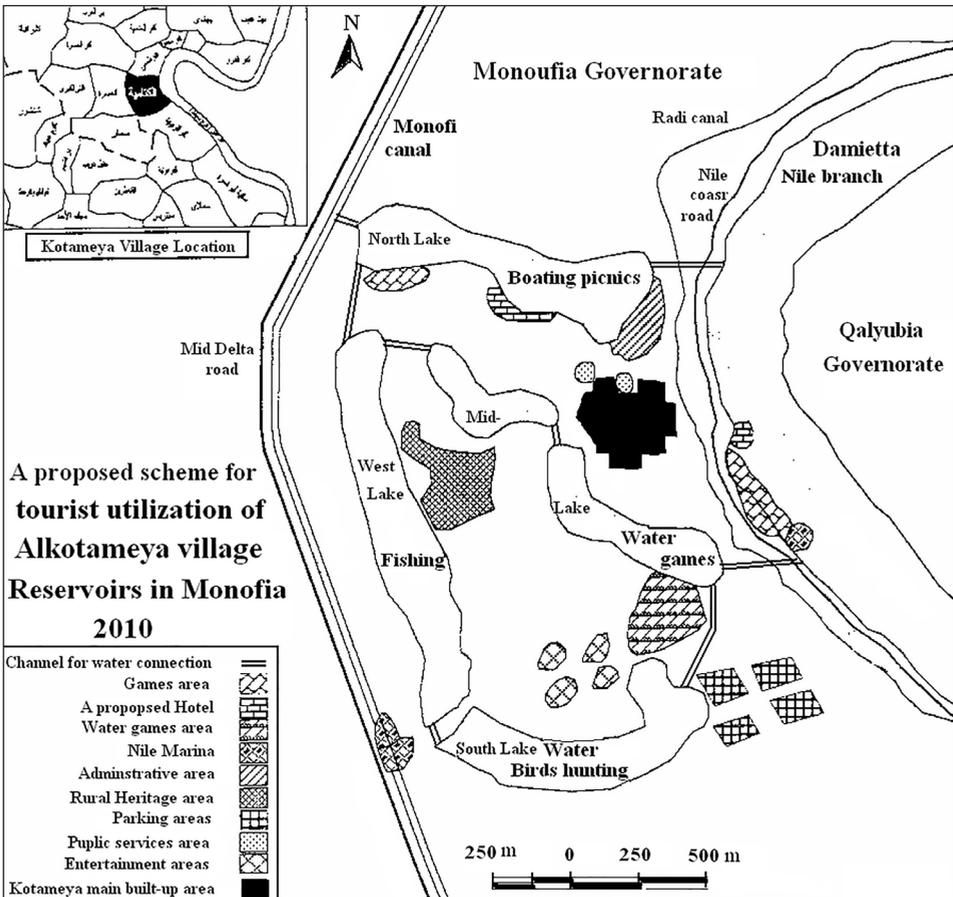
a population of 6,000 inhabitants (according to the CAPMAS). The reservoirs are situated on the west bank of the Damietta branch, the main eastern distributary of the Nile River, in the middle of the fertile farmlands of the Nile Delta.

Kotameya reservoirs include four oxbow lakes, or cutoff lakes, which began as curves in the Damietta branch but then developed into oxbow water lakes rich with wildlife habitats on the west side of the branch. These four lakes are the ancient outlets of the pharaonic canal from Damietta branch crossing the mid-delta westward to the Rosetta branch (the main western distributary of

the Nile River). The actual length of these reservoirs is about 5.8 km, and the average width of the reservoir is about 200 m, which means that there is a water surface of more than 1 km².

Eisa (2011) proposed a comprehensive development for the reservoir region for rural tourism purposes by means of eco-tourism activities as follows: boating (North lake), fishing (West lake), water birds hunting (South lake) and water games (Middle lake) (fig. 4). These varieties allowed the implementation of a myriad of recreational and tourism programmes, for at least a day or more, including the required tourist accommodation and the establishment of facilities for services. The idea was that tourists could experience more than one of each activity, spending a day in each reservoir. The project was intended to benefit the rural community of the village of Kotameya by making use of the agricultural crafts being produced and guaranteeing the provision of local food for visitor consumption as an essential element of rural tourism development.

Figure 4. The draft of the proposed rural tourism development in the Kotameya reservoirs



Source: Eisa (2011)

Eisa (2011) also proposed the construction of some facilities such as a sewage network, a Nile marina adjacent to the village, artificial water links between reservoir segments supplied from the Damietta branch, reception, management and service facilities near the entrance of the area, a museum of the Nile Delta rural life, a central restaurant in the reception area, a handicraft exhibition, parking areas, tourism accommodation and other facilities. Management and financing of the project was to be provided by both public and private institutions.

Unfortunately, the fieldwork carried out in 2019 shows the disappearance of the southern reservoir and the shrinking of areas in the north, middle and west reservoirs by nearly one third their size, because of the uncontrolled, human-made illegal soil dumping by some aggressive farmers during the unstable political situation in the years following the 2011 revolution. In the village of Kotameya, the early 2010s have witnessed the use of water reservoirs for cultivation, implying a loss of environmental assets that would be valuable for sustainable tourism development. To sum up, this is a wasted opportunity for diversifying the economy of the Egyptian countryside.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

This paper attempts to contribute to the gap of rural tourism research in Egypt, although some previous researchers have explored this topic (e.g., El-Barmelgy, 2004; Eraqi, 2007; El-Habaa, 2017). This article shows that rural tourism development readiness is noticeable in overall terms, implying that there are opportunities and potential for the progress in this industry. In parallel, this research has highlighted that there are obstacles, not only in terms of lack of infrastructure development in some governorates and in the specific case-study of the Kotameya reservoirs, but also that political instability and terrorism impact tourism developments in Egypt, especially in rural areas, which are perceived as more unsafe than their urban counterparts. This confirms previous research about tourism in Egypt, highlighting the volatile cycles experienced because of different sources of insecurity (e.g., Ibrahim and Ibrahim, 2003; Cirer-Costa, 2017; World Tourism Organization, 2018). Accordingly, from a theoretical perspective, the current situation of Egyptian tourism still echoes Said's (1978) analysis of the Western over-imposed perspective of several countries considered 'oriental' (Egypt being included), as fascinating, but at the same time, dangerous destinations. Also, Adly *et al.* (2015) warns that in this unstable context, farmlands have massively lost out to urban expansion. Additionally, the research reported in the main section of this paper was carried out prior to 2020 when the COVID-19 began to fiercely impact the Egyptian tourism sector (Salem *et al.*, 2021): this would imply that the current data for rural tourism may be worse.

In any case, the very definition of rural tourism according to the theoretical and conceptual background is contested in Egypt because of four reasons that are derived from the results section of this paper. First of all, the assumption that rural areas have low-density populations (Halfacree, 1993; Woods, 2005; Shucksmith and Brown, 2016), shaping the very definition of rural tourism (World Tourism Organization, 2019), is inapplicable to Egypt. The country has approximate rural densities of more than 1,500, 500 and 2,100 inhabitants/km², respectively for the case-study villages of Tunis, Dahshour area and Kotameya. Rural tourism in Egypt has to take place in a very different countryside to the Western counterparts, so the theoretical models developed in regional contexts of Europe (e.g., Cànoves *et al.*, 2006; Saxena *et al.*, 2007; Paül, 2013; Paül *et al.*, 2016), which specifically attempt to combat rural depopulation, might be meaningless and inapplicable here.

Secondly, the relatively low density of the case of the Dahshour area is caused by the presence of the desert included in this area. This once again brings up the question of what is understood by the countryside in an Egyptian context – the desert? Additionally, the wilderness and the rural are contexts that are somewhat interwoven in Egypt, but assumed as being vastly different by Hall and Page (2006). Moreover, analysis of the Dahshour area and, especially, for the village of Kotameya, shows that the environment is still under pressure. This is in contrast to the situation of the Global North, and makes the desired sustainability of the involved regions particularly challenging – especially in the case of tourism (e.g., Cànoves *et al.*, 2006; Hall and Page, 2006; Saxena *et al.*, 2007). With regard to desert environments, it must be acknowledged that in Egypt a particular form of tourism, not considered in this paper, has been developed by Bedouins (Lew *et al.*, 2008, p. 152).

Thirdly, the case of the Dahshour area shows how rural tourism under development (World Tourism Organization, 2012, 2018) is based not only on obvious potential rural attractions (palm groves, rural villages, etc.) but also on the pyramids, proving that in Egypt, monuments and cultural heritage can be central to rural tourism, while internationally they might be arguably considered more typical elements of cultural tourism (World Tourism Organization, 2018, p. 30). Furthermore, it becomes evident that not all the pyramid complexes receive equal tourism numbers: in the UNESCO World Heritage Site *Memphis and its Necropolis – the Pyramid Fields from Giza to Dahshur*, a distinction can be made between the globally iconic pyramids of the plateau of Giza located in the Greater Cairo metropolitan area (Ibrahim and Ibrahim, 2003; Shetawy and El Khateeb, 2009), and those of the Dahshour area. It must also be said that the conservation of the Dahshour pyramids is challenging for many reasons, including the extension of a neighbouring military zone (see the reports accessible at UNESCO, s. d.), a precarious situation for antiquities that is quite often the case across Egypt (Timothy and Daher, 2009, p. 158).

Fourthly, the overall ranking of rural tourism readiness of the Egyptian governorates reviewed in this paper has shown that the Red Sea governorate scores null because, amongst other factors, it does not include farmlands; however, this governorate is particularly well developed for sun-and-beach tourism (Ibrahim and Ibrahim, 2003), which is not clearly distinguishable from rural tourism in some of the specific coastal locations that experience this type of tourism. In fact, this governorate has very low human densities.

The analysis of the results of the Red Sea governorate undermine the validity of assessment methods of tourism resources based merely on the researchers' perspectives, in line with the inferences of Paül *et al.* (2016). The factors and the elements that are considered in the assessment model of tourism readiness may be different to those explained in the methodological section, as comprehensive models of tourism destination development include (e.g., Buhalis, 2000; Hall and Page, 2006). In fact, El-Barmelgy (2004) considered a particular set of criteria which is different to those in this paper. However, the important point to retain for future rural tourism planning development is the need to promote the real involvement of local communities by means of open participation processes (Paül *et al.*, 2016). The experience of the Dahshour area is a global benchmark in this respect according to the World Tourism Organization (2018), but it must be highlighted that it this has project was internationally funded and limited to a particular place. Conversely, the spontaneous tourism development in the village of Tunis is consistent with the endogenous development model (Galdeano-Gómez *et al.*, 2011; Paül, 2013), but, significantly, it was originally stimulated by outsiders and has kept an exogenous implication across the decades since its beginnings in the 1960s.

A particular absence which can be highlighted in the case of Egypt is farm tourism, despite the theoretical anticipation regarding this type of tourism (e.g., Hall and Page, 2006; Phillip *et al.*, 2010; World Tourism Organization, 2019). This paper contributes to understand this non-existence by proposing two reasons. Firstly, the fact that the farming sector remains strongly focused on agricultural production and seems to be scarcely linked to the tourism sector, as the cases of the Dahshour area and the village of Kotameya make evident. Secondly, the uniqueness of Egyptian culture remains important, given that traditionally rural dwellers do not charge for their hospitality. In this sense, theories on the commodification of rural areas (Woods, 2005, 2011) have a limited application on the Egyptian countryside. Therefore, in the case of Egypt, there is no substantiation that this consumption and tourism-oriented economy dominates the rural landscape, as stated by Woods (2011, p. 93) when referring to "significant parts of the global south".

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