

The local population and museums. An analysis based on the use of museums in the Alt Pirineu and Aran Region (Catalonia, Spain)

Gabriel Alcalde Gurt¹

Abstract

This paper is based on a study of visitors to the museums in the Alt Pirineu and Aran region (Catalonia, Spain). We describe the characteristics of the museums' users and analyse the relationship between the museums and the local community. We highlight the importance of these facilities for local development, and the need to consider and prioritize their role as culture centres for the region's population.

Keywords: Visitor studies, local community, local museum, High Pyrenees, Aran Valley.

In the Alt Pirineu and Aran region, situated in the northeast of the Iberian Peninsula, the local population is involved in numerous projects to recover and conserve cultural heritage. This has led to the existence of a considerable number of museum initiatives, most of which are promoted and maintained locally (figure 1).

This area, which has a population of 76,800 inhabitants (2009), covers six districts and has a surface area of 5,775 km², there are as

¹ Gabriel Alcalde Gurt, Director Catalan Institute of Cultural Heritage Research & University of Girona (Spain), Parc Científic i Tecnològic de la Universitat de Girona

many as 53 museums and heritage centres (figure 2). Logically, these include a wide range of very different facilities which vary in their subject matter (natural sciences, art, history and ethnology, among others), the way they are managed, the type of model they are based on (for example, museums on single topics, ecomuseums and visitor centres), their budgets, their staff numbers and characteristics, the activities they carry out, and the number of visitors they receive, among other factors (Abella et al., 2008).

Some of these museums and heritage centres were founded in recent years, whilst others have a longer history. However, most of them were opened after 1990. As many of these facilities have now been operating for several years, it was considered a good time study them and analyse their use². We focused on finding out the different ways in which they are used and the characteristics of the people that use them (Alcalde, Castellà, Rojas, 2010). In this context, our analysis was centred on the relationship that is established between these local museums and the communities that live in the regions in which they are located. The results of this analysis are presented in this paper.

Method

One of the main difficulties in carrying out this kind of study is linked to the wide variety of museums and heritage centres and the need to establish analytical parameters that can be applied to all of them.

To obtain data on the use of these facilities, we carried out both quantitative counts and qualitative, survey-based studies in 2008. Individual and group visitors were surveyed in the museums

² This study on the use of museums and heritage centres in the High Pyrenees and Aran has been supported by the Institute for the Development and Promotion of Alt Pirineu and Aran (IDAPA), with the collaboration of the Network of Museums and Heritage Facilities of Alt Pirineu and Aran.

and heritage centres. In addition, surveys were carried out in various tourist offices in the region to obtain an idea of visitors' prior knowledge of the museums. Finally, residents of the towns in which the museums are located were surveyed to find out about the use of each centre by the local community.

The use of Museums in the Pyrenees

The monthly distribution of all visits to the museums and heritage centres analysed in the study followed a pronounced seasonal pattern and coincided with the distribution observed for several of the individual centres. The highest number of visitors was registered in August. Visitor numbers were also high in July and September. This indicates that the centres were used most during the summer months. Apart from the summer period, there was a relatively high number of visitors in May and June. Another peak was observed in March, during Easter week. Therefore, visits to museums and heritage centres are closely linked to holiday periods and to the times of the year with the best weather. Hence, they are associated mainly with trips to the region by people who live in other areas.

The information obtained and the surveys that were carried out showed that the majority of visitors to the museums in the Alt Pirineu and Aran region had a university education (66%). People with primary or secondary education were less represented (9% and 24%, respectively). These proportions are very different from those found in Catalan society, for example. However, most museum visitor studies find that the majority of visitors have a higher education.

Another characteristic of individual visits to the museums and heritage centres is that they were usually made with the family (36%) or with a partner (31%). Fewer visits were made with friends (17%), and solitary visits were not common (6%).

Many of the survey respondents (76%) were visiting the museum for the first time. The majority of people who visited the museums and heritage centres in the Alt Pirineu and Aran region lived in Catalonia (64%). The number of visitors from the rest of Spain was 21% of the total number surveyed and the number of visitors from abroad made up 7% of the total. The population of the region was not highly represented in the surveys that were carried out; only 5% of all respondents lived in districts of Alt Pirineu and Aran.

Visitors found out about the museum or heritage centre in various ways. However, “word of mouth” was the most common of these (28%). The information provided by leaflets, guides or other publications also played an important role in the decision to visit the centre (17%), as did information given by tourist offices (13%). The Internet was also used to find out about centres, but to a lesser extent (6%).

Hotels and hostels were the types of accommodation that were most commonly used (39%) by visitors whose trip involved spending the night away from their homes. Other types of accommodation, such as rural guest houses, were also used to a certain extent (10%).

The characteristics of groups of visitors varied according to the kind of museum or heritage centre in question. In some facilities (for example, the *Centre del Romànic*, the *Museu de la Moto* or the *Ecomuseu d’Esterris d’Àneu*) the commonest type of group was that which we have classified as “other”; i.e. not a senior citizen, school or university group. However, these three centres also received a high number of visits from senior citizen groups. In other facilities (such as the *Museu de les Trementinaires* or the *Museu de l’Urgell*), senior citizen groups were the most predominant, although there was also a notable presence of “other” groups.

The size of the group was frequently small (less than 20 people). The origin of the groups of visitors varied according to the facility. For example, a similar number of groups from Catalonia,

Spain and abroad visited the *Centre del Romànic*. In other centres (for example, the *Museu de la Moto* and the *Ecomuseu d'Esterrí d'Àneu*) most of the groups were from Catalonia.

The type of excursion that was made by the groups was closely related to their origin. Therefore, groups that we can consider to be tourists and those that can be classified as day trippers also varied from one centre to the next. In some of the centres, most of the groups were comprised of tourists (*Centre del Romànic*, *Ecomuseu d'Esterrí d'Àneu*, and the *Museu Diocesà de l'Urgell*). In other centres, almost all of the groups are made up of day trippers (*Museu de la Moto* and the *Museu de les Trementinaires*).

An interesting aspect to consider in studies of the use of museum and heritage centres is how much visitors to the region know about its cultural heritage. The surveys completed by visitors who sought information from the area's tourist offices showed that their knowledge of heritage facilities in the region varied widely. In some offices (for example, that of Puigcerdà or Vielha), most of the survey respondents knew little about the heritage facilities in the area. In other offices (for example, that of Sort or Boí), visitors to the region had a considerable knowledge of the local heritage facilities.

The intention to visit heritage facilities varied depending on the area. The majority of survey respondents in some tourist offices (Sort 84%; Vielha 85%) stated that they were interested in visiting museums and heritage centres, regardless of whether or not they had prior knowledge of these facilities. In other offices, the proportion of people who stated that they intended to visit a heritage centre was lower (Vielha 65%). In one case, there was a slight predominance of people who declared that they had no intention of visiting any such centres (Puigcerdà 57%).

In some tourist offices, the majority of the respondents who stated that they intended to visit a cultural heritage facility had already decided which one they wished to visit (Boí, Sort). In other

offices, visitors expressed their intention to visit a centre, but did not know exactly which one (Puigcerdà, Vielha).

The Relationship between the Local Population and Museums and Heritage Centres

Up to this point, we have addressed all of the visitors to museum and heritage centres together. Most of these visitors were day trippers or tourists who visited the centres as part of their trip to these districts of the Pyrenees. However, we are particularly interested in increasing our knowledge of the use of the centres by the local population. To achieve this objective, we can use information from the analyses carried out in the museums and heritage centres. However, the number of residents of the towns in which the centres are located represented a very small proportion (5%) of the survey respondents, as discussed above. Therefore, the information that can be gathered in this way does not fully describe the relationship between the local population and the museum. As a result, we considered that further information needed to be obtained from studies of the local population. This was achieved through the use of specific surveys.

The field work was carried out in the towns of Tuixén (141 inhabitants, *Museu de les Trementinaires*), Vall de Boí (1,076 inhabitants, *Centre del Romànic de la Vall de Boí*), Isona (1,150 inhabitants, *Museu de la Conca Dellà*), Pobla de Segur - Conca de Dalt (3,266 inhabitants, *Museu dels Raiers*), Capdella (791 inhabitants, *Museu Hidroelèctric de Capdella*) and Esterrí d'Àneu (946 inhabitants, *Ecomuseu de les Valls d'Àneu*) (the population figures are for 2009. Source: IDESCAT). We surveyed a significant sample of the people who live in these towns. The sample was selected randomly from the respective municipal registers. These surveys provided information on the extent to which the local

population is involved in and uses the museums and heritage centres.

Notably, an analysis of these surveys revealed that the museums are well-known by the people who reside in the respective towns. Overall, 96% of survey respondents claimed that they knew of the existence of the museum in their town. There was a slight difference in distribution: in some of the towns all of the survey respondents knew where the museum was, whereas in others the proportion was slightly lower (87%).

In addition, most of the survey respondents not only knew about the respective centre, but had also visited it (73%). In addition, many respondents had attended activities organized by the centre (60%). In some towns, the knowledge and use of the museum by the town residents was very high (100% had visited the centre and 89% had attended activities).

The third notable aspect revealed by this analysis is the large proportion of respondents who were convinced that the museums made a positive contribution to their respective towns. Thus, the local population made frequent use of the museums and strongly believed that they played a positive role in the life of the community. This was stated by 93% of all survey respondents. In some of the towns, this opinion was held by 100% of the respondents.

The survey respondents explained why they considered that the museum was beneficial to their town and its residents. When asked what the museum contributed to the town, respondents mainly focused on two aspects: those related to the dissemination of information about the area, and the specific benefits for the local population. In relation to the first aspect, respondents stated, for example, that the museum “informed people about the area” “brought tourism into the area” and “led to financial benefits”. In terms of the second aspect, respondents referred, for example, to the fact that the museum “provided work for people in the area”, “increased the

cultural offerings”, “encouraged the participation of the local population” and “was a way to recover and preserve historical memory”.

Many of the respondents identified with the museums in their towns, in addition to having positive opinions about them. Combined figures for the six towns that were surveyed show that 53% of the respondents identified with their respective museum or heritage centre. This percentage varied between 30% and 77% depending on the town, and mainly in relation to the type of museum. If the museum was about a type of work that was traditionally carried out in the area, the local population identified more with the museum than when the subject matter was palaeontology, for example. The reasons respondents gave for this sense of identification with the centre included the fact that it “displays the traditions”, “describes a trade”, “my family used to work in this trade”, “it forms part of the valley’s tradition” and “it forms part of my life”.

The survey respondents knew about and, for the most part, used the museum in their town. In addition, they demonstrated that they were interested in finding out about other museums in this region of the Pyrenees. This was highlighted by the fact that most of the respondents stated that they knew one or two other museums or heritage centres in the area. Some respondents mentioned three or more centres (30%: 1 centre; 16%: 2 centres; 7%: 3 or more centres). A larger proportion (46%) of respondents stated that they did not know of any other museums or heritage centres.

The interest that the survey respondents showed in museums and heritage centres was focused particularly on facilities in the region of the Pyrenees in which they resided. It did not extend to museums in general. Outside of their region of the Pyrenees, these people only visited museums occasionally.

Local Population and Museums

Heritage organizations, which include museums, can participate in the development of a region by adding value to cultural heritage. Although this is just one of the benefits of heritage, it is often considered that the main and most important contribution of museums and heritage centres to a region is based on the fact that they constitute a resource for development. Thus, museums and heritage centres can participate in improving the quality of life and socioeconomic conditions of those who live in a region (Gijón, 2006), while also contributing to a sense of regional pride. In this framework, museums and heritage centres can also help to create jobs directly and indirectly (Vázquez, 1988). These are resources that can create wealth in a region, mainly in terms of their use by tourists.

The evaluation of heritage in terms of economic aspects (Grefe, 2003) is of great importance and interest to society and to the heritage itself. This factor must be taken into account and in no way overlooked in museum management. Clearly, heritage's contribution to the economy is of great importance to the region in question and to the community that lives there. However, local museums should not focus exclusively on their use by visitors to a region to consolidate their function as a resource for local development; they must also be designed for use by the resident population.

This use of museums and heritage centres by the local population is essential and should be a priority objective in their planning. Consequently, museums must draw up programmes that are aimed at the local population. In this context, methods should be established to study the use of centres by local populations and analyses should be carried out to assess this aspect. The use of local museums by the population that lives in the region is a topic on which some studies have already had an impact in Catalonia (for example, Alcalde, 1997; Alcalde & Rueda, 1989).

Museums and heritage centres must facilitate and consolidate their function as culture centres for the local population. The analysis of the use of museums and heritage centres in the Alt Pirineu and Aran region that was carried out in this study shows that these facilities focus on both the local population and visitors from other areas. On the one hand, they are a resource that contributes to the development of the region. On the other, they constitute a cultural resource for local residents. In the area of the Catalan Pyrenees that was studied, most of the residents of the different towns knew about the existence of the museum in their municipality. They visited and participated in the activities that the museum organized and considered that it was an important factor in their historical memory. This use of museums by residents of the region should be taken into consideration and prioritized in the local management of museums and heritage centres.

References

- Abella, J. *et al.* (2008). *Guia de Museus i Equipaments Patrimonials de l'Alt Pirineu i Aran*. Tremp: Garsineu Edicions.
- Alcalde, G. (1997). *Els públics del Museu Comarcal de la Garrotxa (1988-1995). Avaluació de la implicació del museu en la comunitat*. Olot: Museu Comarcal de la Garrotxa
- Alcalde, G.; Castellà, C. & Rojas, A. (2010). La visita patrimonial a las iglesias románicas de la Vall de Boí (Cataluña). *Patrimonio Cultural de España*, 4, 178-191.
- Alcalde, G. & Rueda, J.M. (1989). Els museus i el seu públic: una realitat local i comarcal a considerar. *Congrés Català de Museus Locals i Comarcals*, Aixa, 2, 57-63.
- Gijón, A. (2006). El papel de la cultura en los proyectos de desarrollo rural de Castilla-La Mancha. In L. Abad (Coord.). *El patrimonio cultural como factor de desarrollo. Estudios multidisciplinares*,

69-296. Cuenca: Ediciones de la Universidad de Castilla – La Mancha.

Greffe, X. (2003). *La valorisation économique du patrimoine*. Paris: La Documentation Française.

Rallet, A. (2001). Le patrimoine et l'économie. *Pays d'art et d'histoire et pôles d'économie du patrimoine. La valorisation du patrimoine dans le développement local*: 57-60. Paris: La Documentation Française.

Vázquez, A. (1988). *Desarrollo local. Una estrategia de creación de empleo*. Madrid: Pirámide.

Figures

Figure 1. List of museums and heritage centres in the Alt Pirineu and Aran region, according to Abella et al., 2008.

HERITAGE CENTRES	MUNICIPALITY	COMARCA
Casa del Parc Nacional	Boí	Alta Ribagorça
Col·lecció d'Art Sacre de la Ribagorça	El Pont de Suert	Alta Ribagorça
La Fàbrica	El Pont de Suert	Alta Ribagorça
Centre del Romànic dela Vall de Boí	Erill la Vall	Alta Ribagorça
Centre d'Informació	Senet	Alta Ribagorça
Museu del'Acordió	Arsèguel	Alt Urgell
Fàbrica de Llanes	Arsèguel	Alt Urgell
Museu de la Moto	Bassella	Alt Urgell
Museu del Pagès	Calbinyà	Alt Urgell
Sala Límit KT. Museu dels Dinosaurès	Coll de Nargó	Alt Urgell
Museu dels Raiers	Coll de Nargó	Alt Urgell
Museu Diocesà d'Urgell	La Seu d'Urgell	Alt Urgell

Expo-Trac	Montferrer	Alt Urgell
Museu Antiga Farinera	Montferrer	Alt Urgell
Pou de Gel	Oliana	Alt Urgell
Centre Exposició de les Homilies d'Organyà	Organyà	Alt Urgell
Museu de la Vinya i el Vi de Montanya	Pont de Bar	Alt Urgell
Museu de les Trementinaires	Tuixén	Alt Urgell
Museu del Boscc	Bellver de Cerdanya	Cerdanya
Col·lecció Museu	Das	Cerdanya
Museu Municipal	Llívia	Cerdanya
Museu Casa del Riu	Martinet	Cerdanya
Parc dels Búnquers	Montellà i Martinet	Cerdanya
Museu de l'Esclop	Meranges	Cerdanya
Museu Cerdà	Puigcerdà	Cerdanya
Museu Hidrolèctric	Capdella	Pallars Jussà
Museu dels Raiers de la Noguera Pallaresa	El Pont de Claverol	Pallars Jussà
Museu de la Conca Dellà	Isona	Pallars Jussà
Casal dels Voltors	La Torre de Tamúrcia	Pallars Jussà
Casa Bonifaci	Llimiana	Pallars Jussà
Centre d'Interpretació de l'Antic Comerç	Salàs de Pallars	Pallars Jussà
Casal Manyanet	Tremp	Pallars Jussà
Museu Comarcal de Ciències Naturals	Tremp	Pallars Jussà
Serradora	Alós	Pallars Sobirà
Museu de la Fusta	Àreu	Pallars Sobirà
Casa del Parc Nacional	Espot	Pallars Sobirà
Ecomuseu de les Valls d'Àneu	Esterri d'Àneu	Pallars Sobirà
Quadra de Casa Carma	Esterri d'Àneu	Pallars Sobirà
L'Alfolí	Gerri de la Sal	Pallars Sobirà
Despoblat de Santa Creu	Llagunes	Pallars Sobirà

Ecomuseu els Pastros dela Vall d'Àssua	Llessui	Pallars Sobirà
Era d'Ortega	Peramea	Pallars Sobirà
Museu de les Papallones de Catalunya	Pujalt	Pallars Sobirà
Arquitectura en Miniatura del Pirineu	Ribera de Cardós	Pallars Sobirà
Presó Museu El Camí dela Llibertat	Sort	Pallars Sobirà
Central Hidroelèctrica Subterrània	Tavascan	Pallars Sobirà
Mines Victòria	Arres de Sus	Val d'Aran
Glèsia de Sant Joan	Arties	Val d'Aran
Eth Corrau	Bagergue	Val d'Aran
Era Mòla	Salardú	Val d'Aran
Fabrica dera Lan	Vielha	Val d'Aran
Musèu dera Val d'Aran Tor deth generau Martinhon	Vielha	Val d'Aran
Ecomusèu ço de Joanchiquet	Vilamòs	Val d'Aran



Figure 2. Location of the museums and heritage centres in the Alt Pirineu and Aran region (Catalonia, Spain).

