

# **Azores Trail Run® as a sustainable vehicle of promotion and local development**

Tiago Valente

Access Azores

tiago.inacio.valente@gmail.com

## **Abstract**

The themes of sustainable local development and sports tourism are present in several presentations and communications, as well as their close links and connection. These issues have major importance in rural areas and islands such as the Azores, Portugal. The Azores are considered by international organizations as a sustainable territory, and the region is currently applying for certification as a sustainable destination in accordance with the criteria of the Global Sustainable Tourism Council and can be the only archipelago with this recognition. Considering the importance of the tourism sector in the sustainable development of the territory, it is expected that local and regional events and initiatives share the same issues. The Azores Trail Run® (ATR) is a successful case in the region in a perfect symbiosis between nature and local community.

For the study, surveys were conducted by online questionnaire to participants of the ATR - Triangle Adventure 2018 edition. Surveys were sent by e-mail to non-residents of the Azores only. Thus, a total of 124 nonresident participants obtained a response from 46 (37%). Most respondents are male, married and have higher education. Of the 46 participants, 29 were accompanied by friends and 14 by family. The amount spent by the participants from home to the destination was around € 500 and the amount spent on the islands amounted to € 500 per participant; 23 stayed 5 or more nights. We also conducted surveys of Faial island residents in order to understand their perception of the impact of ATR: of the 55 participants, 42 consider the ATR an anchor event in the region and should be created several conditions for more similar events in order to combat seasonality and contribute to the local economy.

## **Keywords**

Sustainable Development, Sports Tourism, Azores Trail Run

## **Résumé**

Les thèmes du développement local durable et du tourisme sportif sont présents dans plusieurs présentations et communications, ainsi que leurs liens et liens étroits. Ces questions revêtent une importance majeure dans les zones rurales et les îles comme les Açores, au Portugal. Les Açores sont considérés par les organisations internationales comme un territoire durable, et la région présente actuellement une demande de certification en tant que destination durable conformément aux critères du Conseil Mondial du Tourisme durable et peut être le seul archipel avec cette reconnaissance. Compte tenu de l'importance du secteur touristique dans le développement durable du territoire, on s'attend à ce que les événements et initiatives locaux et régionaux partagent les mêmes enjeux. L'Azores Trail Run® (ATR) est un cas de réussite dans la région, avec une symbiose parfaite entre la nature et la communauté locale.

Pour l'étude, des sondages ont été effectués par questionnaire en ligne aux participants de l'édition 2018 d'ATR - Triangle Adventure. Les enquêtes ont été envoyées par e-mail aux non-résidents des Açores seulement. Ainsi, un total de 124 participants non résidents a obtenu une réponse de 46 (37%). La plupart des répondants sont des hommes mariés et ont fait des études supérieures. Sur les 46 participants, 29 étaient accompagnés d'amis et 14 de membres de la famille. Le montant dépensé par les participants de la maison à la destination était d'environ € 500 et le montant dépensé sur les îles s'élevait à € 500 par participant; 23 ont séjourné 5 nuits ou plus.

Nous avons également mené des sondages auprès des résidents de l'île Faial afin de comprendre leur perception de l'incidence de l'ATR sur les 55 participants, 42 considèrent l'ATR comme un événement d'ancrage dans la région et devraient créer plusieurs conditions pour des événements plus semblables afin de combattre la saisonnalité et de contribuer à l'économie locale.

**Mots-Clés:** Développement Durable, Tourisme Sportif, Azores Trail Run.

## **Introduction**

It is widely studied that sports tourism contributes to the local development of territories and their communities, and that should be considered when defining policies and subsequent decisions, since sports tourism, in its most diverse forms, has a preponderant role in the exploration of existing endogenous resources. In rural and island territories, such as the Azores, micro, small and medium-sized events are the most representative, as we have seen in Silva's study (2016) and the larger events are carried out in the main cities. Considering that rural and island territories are more susceptible to the impacts generated by tourism activity and sporting events, it is extremely important that the organizers of these activities are fully aware of the importance of sustainable local development in these places (Ferreira, 2017). Incidentally, to speak of local development we must talk about local agents, and the latter are, in the first instance, the local community itself (Valente, 2012).

Sporting events in rural and island locations, such as the Azores, should be in line with the guidelines adopted by public bodies, especially the Regional Government, in affirming the Region as a sustainable tourist destination. The Azores archipelago, which is in the process of being certified by international entities to obtain this recognition, namely by the Global Sustainable Tourism Council, is a constant case of awards and recognitions in the themes of sustainability and development. Considering the importance of preserving and defending the natural and cultural heritage while at the same time creating equitable and lasting wealth; from the international imperatives of climate governance towards a low carbon global economy; and increasing population pressure on the planet and the region, it is essential to “reinforce the Azores a tourism strategy with a clear orientation towards sustainable tourism, adapted to the local reality and resilient to the global challenges” (GRA/IPDT, 2016).

In this sense, it is necessary that events organized in rural and island territories, where the impacts generated by them must be carefully thought out, have a preponderant role in defining strategies, actions and measures with the objective of reducing or mitigating these impacts.

This article fits in depth the ATR, demonstrating how this event contributes in a sustained way to the local development of the Azores.

## **Sport Tourism and Sustainable Local Development**

Tourism is an increasingly important economic sector in the development of regions, territories and communities. If this is an acquired fact, it is still the most in rural and island territories where the local agents are often considered the only way for development (Mourão, 2000; Silva, 2016). It is indeed tourism, as a motor of rejuvenation of the social and economic fabric, which makes many of the rural areas today known and recognized nationally and internationally. In recent years we have been witnessing a clear commitment to the implementation of national and community policies for local development with greater incidence in rural areas. These policies have the main objective to minimize the effects of a *desruralization* of the territory, seeking to promote the development that is intended to be sustainable.

It is widely studied that tourism and sport as sectors of activity contribute positively to the development of territories, places and communities (Chalip, Ritchie, & Adair, 2004). Sports tourism, as a structured segment under the most diverse forms, is a means of promoting and disseminating existing endogenous resources, assuming a preponderant role in the promotion and dissemination of territories and communities, with greater incidence in rural and island areas.

In this last ones that are environmentally sensitive and socially exposed to the impacts caused by the arrival of visitors, and regardless of their motivation, it requires the organization of events, initiatives and activities to have a sustainable, equitable and accessible development in these events so that their assessed and predicted (Turco, 2008).

The importance of the sector to sustainable local development has led UNESCO to declare 2017 as the International Year of Sustainable Tourism for Development. This commitment clearly demonstrates the importance of the sector and all its tourist products and respective segments for the local development that is intended to be sustainable. In this sense, the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) itself has launched an official website (2017) on this and other related issues on the theme of sustainable tourism and development. In addition to these public commitments to the tourism sector, we also find in Agenda 2030 that it is present in 3 of the 17 objectives outlined: Goal 8: promote sustainable and inclusive economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all; Goal 12: Ensure sustainable production and consumption patterns; and Goal 14: conservation and sustainable use of the oceans,

seas and marine resources.

Although the theme of sustainable development is mainly related to environmental issues (Borges, 2016; European Commission, 2016), it is assumed by tourism agents as related to the economic issues of an industry that moves people, products, goods and services and respective currencies. Indeed, in spite of the different positions adopted by the most diverse authors and researchers of the theme, tourism as the engine for sustainable local development is no more than tailoring the activities of the sector to the latest principles and objectives of human, environmental, economic, natural development, social, political, institutional and cultural issues (Garcia, 2011; Oliveira & Manso, 2010).

The theme of sustainable tourism and development is not new: as early as 1993, UNWTO had announced a set of measures and principles that the sector should take in terms of its sustainability and its contribution to development. Affirming sustainable tourism means applying new expressions and concepts of development, adopting new technologies and working methods in various domains and introducing new activities and tourism products, favoring the contact of man with nature and valuing the history and culture of places (Mourão, 2000). Local and regional organizations and institutions will be responsible for the planning and management of the territory as well as the definition of development actions, objectives and strategies, keeping in mind the specificities and constraints of its territory. The sustainable development of tourism is therefore based on its own deontological principles, which are broadly based on the main objectives of economic and social development, spatial planning, nature conservation, protection of the environment and natural resources. improvement of education and the standard of living of the population (SREAT/DRT, 2019).

Considering all the aforementioned assumptions, it is then strictly necessary that tourist-sporting events (or of other nature), even more so when they are carried out in low-density (rural and island) territories, quite sensitive to the impacts caused by them, have a perspective and a tripolar vision of sustainability and development when planning and organizing the event itself.

The sustainable development of the tourism sector is simply achievable through the definition of a clear and objective legislative scope, with concrete planning guidelines, actions and measures, as well as effective and feasible mechanisms for monitoring and managing activities in close connection ambitious and financially robust strategies and programs.

## **Azores: Sustainable Tourism Destination**

The Azores are located in the Atlantic Ocean and are made up of 9 islands of volcanic origin, being one of the two autonomous regions belonging to Portugal. In the immensity of deep blue ocean, the Region, known for its landscapes and natural beauty, for the culture and hospitality of the residents, are also recognized for their importance in terms of sustainability and development policies. Just a few examples of these recognitions are the National Geographic, the Quality Coast Platinum Award, and most recently in Berlin where it was awarded, for the fifth time in a row, by Green Destinations as one of the 100 most sustainable tourism destinations in the world, and with Jeju in South Korea, one of the two regions in the world to hold all the distinctions awarded by UNESCO.

The existing links between environment and sport are clear and unequivocal, the pleasure and satisfaction offered by the practice of sport is enhanced through the sporting activity in the natural environment.

The sporting activity in nature is a way to environmental awareness, since the characteristics of the natural environment acquire a special highlight during the period in which the sports practice is performed. The growth of cities and the stress caused by daily life provoke a social need for access to nature that sport shares and intensifies, with a strong relationship between environment and sport. The Azores has exceptional conditions and natural resources for the practice of nature sports.

If the Azores are recognized by international organizations with respect to both sustainability and development, it will then be expected that the events held in the region will all take into account the premise of sustainable development. For these national and international awards and recognitions of a sustainable tourist destination, there are policies, strategies, actions and measures of a cross-sectoral nature promoted both by public bodies and private institutions. In this sense, was adopted the Strategic Marketing Plan for Tourism of the Azores (PEMTA), where nature tourism is defined as the strategic product of the Azores destination where we find, besides many others, the organization and capture of sporting events in nature direct contact.

Considering that one of the transversal problems of the tourism sector is seasonality, it was defined in the PEMTA that the sporting events should be realized mostly during the season with lower rates of visitation, commonly dubbed low season. For this to be possible, the Regional Government supports, logistically and financially, the events with

the highest level of notoriety and media exposure and of the impacts for local development, in addition to increasing those that fit the perspective of sustainability.

The destination of the Azores is undoubtedly a world reference in terms of sustainable development as a result of the participation of both tourist agents working directly and indirectly in the sector and the policies adopted by public organizations. In this way, the tourism development of the Azores will have to pass, according to what is stipulated in the booklet for sustainability, "for an unequal environmental supply, allied to energy sustainability, in a concerted strategy to safeguard natural resources, which will enhance the tourist activity of the archipelago of the Azores as a destination of nature" (SREAT, 2017, p. 11).

Tourism has been playing an increasingly important role in the regional economy, not only at the level of the product generated, but also in terms of the employment and entrepreneurship opportunities it has provided. The decision by the regional government to assume tourism as a sector of sustainable local development, along with other economic and sectoral activities, is a clear commitment and a unique opportunity to project the Azores to the international panorama of sustainability, at the same time as reinforces the region's internal recognition of its potential as a sustainable tourism destination (SREAT/DRT, 2019).

As mentioned previously, if there are policies in the area of sustainable development adopted by the active agents of the sector, on the other hand, the events organized in the Region must take this clear commitment to the sustainable development of the destination. In fact, if nature is undoubtedly the Azores' reference to sustainable tourism development and an integral part of existing policies, it would not make any sense that the events created and organized in the archipelago did not take this care to create the necessary conditions for the objective to affirm, more and more the Azores a world-class tourist destination in the area of sustainability. In this sense, both PEMTA (2016, p. 32) and the new Tourism Planning Program of the Autonomous Region of the Azores (POTRAA) state that:

"The lush nature and uniqueness of the landscape, combined with the authenticity of the history and traditions of its people, allow the Autonomous Region of the Azores to assert itself, in the national and international context, as a European tourist destination in the middle of the Atlantic, nine volcanic islands, recognized as environmentally preserved. "

In addition to these singularities, in recent years, the destination of Azores has strengthened its identity matrix, as a tourist region strongly based on the active nature and has been able to position itself favorably to satisfy the segments of demand on natural, cultural and experiential resources. This identity, embodied in both documents mentioned, as a strategic bet for the tourism sector, became evident both in the scope of the various tourism products offered or to be offered, or in the context of the promotional actions carried out and to be developed by the entities, institutions and organizations.

All this development and resource framework of the Region determined that the tourism sector in the Azores should be one of the driving forces of the economic development of the Region and that the political orientation for its growth strategy, assumed by the Regional Government of the Azores, be based on the concept of sustainability, combining, in a profitable way, the environmental, economic, social and even cultural dimensions (Moniz, 2006; Valente, 2012).

### **Azores Trail Run ® - A Brand for Regional Sustainable Development**

As the name implies, this is a tourist-sport event connected to the trail-running. Currently this is one of the most notorious events and media exposure going through 6 of the 9 islands, and its main event is organized on the Faial island titled ATR Whalers Great Route; the ATR Triangle Adventure that crosses the São Jorge, Pico and Faial islands; the ATR Columbus Trail on the Santa Maria island; the ATR Extreme West Atlantic Trail on the Flores island; and very recently was presented the ATR Windmills Trail which will have its first edition in November 2019 on the Graciosa island. The ATR was born by the initiative of the Independent Club of Athletics of the Blue Island and the Faial island Natural Park, having its first edition occurred in 2014 in the Faial island, counting on the logistical and financial support of various public bodies and private entities. Over the years, the ATR has evolved, making it an integral part of the Portuguese Trail Running Association, Ultra Trail World Tour and the International Trail Running Association, creating new ATR events throughout the Region, making the name of the Azores and ATR recognized internationally. In every year, any of the ATR events reaches a new record of enrolled participants and a greater number of partnerships and partners, both in the public and, mostly, in the private sphere.

**Illustration 1: Flyer ATR 2018/2019**



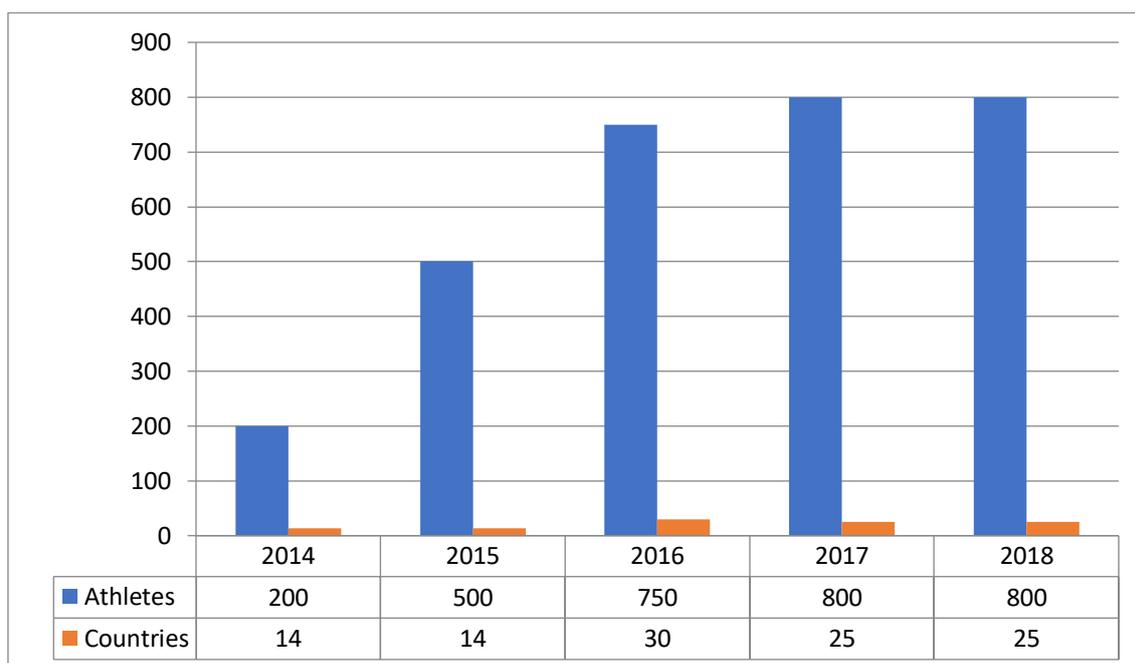
**Source: Azores Trail Run**

It should be noted that for the main event of the ATR, which takes place on Faial Island in May 2019, participants from more than 30 countries are already registered. The ATR is an example of good practice about the segment commonly known as sports tourism: it combines sport in direct contact with nature and the community for harmonious, sustainable, fair and equitable development. The organization of the event has its vision to combine sports in a relaxed environment where sustainability is present during the days of the race. In its program and since its first edition, the organization creates several mechanisms in order to minimize the impact caused: planting of native species in places duly authorized by the competent environmental and forest authorities; use of recycled material and, where possible, biodegradable; the non-use of plastic either in the route markers or in the filling places; general cleaning of trails run by athletes after the end of the event among other initiatives in order to minimize, as much as possible, the impact caused.

The ATR, which started in 2014, was the great novelty in the national and international

Trail Running event calendar, and is currently a benchmark in the promotion of the Azores in the national and international panorama, with regard to nature and sports tourism, marking always present in numerous regional, national and international media, and it is estimated that it has already reached a multi-million-person (ATR, 2014).

**Illustration 2: ATR Evolution (Main Event in Faial Island)**



**Source: Azores Trail Run**

The organization of the event has always wanted this to be considered a factor of dynamism of nature and sport tourism in Faial Island, with the particularity of opposing the seasonality of the sector, since this type of sports can be practiced at any time of the year, in addition to the evident dynamism of the local economy, which is a priority and a fact. The impact of this event has been very significant in the promotion of the Region through the general and specialized media, and the hotels occupation, rental cars, restaurants, bars, museums, interpretation centers and a significant increase in the number of visitors outside the peak season. The organization affirms that it is very difficult to quantify the impact of events in their true expression: both the contribution to the local economy, seasonality, promotion and external dissemination of the region, as well as other direct and indirect impacts.

The capacity of these events in valuing the different types of heritage of the territories

where it is carried out, especially the natural and cultural heritage is also very important. In many cases this same heritage is also unknown to the locals themselves, promoting pride, raising the self-esteem and protection of environmental and cultural values by local populations.

## **Methodology**

For the present study we used two questionnaire surveys and an interview with the ATR coordinator during the 2018 edition of the Triangle Adventure. The first survey was sent by e-mail to the athletes enrolled in the race and only to non-residents in the Azores. A total of 124 nonresidents received a response from 46 participants, which corresponds to a total of 37%. For the construction of this survey we have used other similar investigations and related to the modality in question and adapted the survey to the local reality and the objectives of our investigation. The second survey was applied in person to residents of the Faial, Pico and São Jorge islands during the event, with the objective of evaluating their perception of the event and the impact of the ATR. In order to complement the information gathered through the two mentioned surveys, we conducted an interview with ATR director and general coordinator Mário Leal. In addition to the previously defined issues we were, throughout the interview, getting more information about the event, about the organization, impacts, investments, financing, strategies and new projects.

It should be noted that the surveys of the participants were sent electronically after a week of the end of the race by the organization, due to the confidentiality of the data of the athletes, through a link that led the participant to fill it. Surveys for residents of São Jorge, Pico and Faial islands were applied during the ATR Triangle Adventure 2018, as a significant number of visitors were present at the main points of passage of the athletes, especially in the start and finish line. Finally, the interview with the director and general coordinator of the event was held after the logistic closure of the same at the organization's headquarters located in Faial island.

Considering that there was no need to resort to any information processing software, since this is not too exhaustive, we have chosen to manually analyze the data collected by creating a spreadsheet for its analysis.

## **Main Results**

Regarding the survey applied to non-resident participants in the Azores, we obtained a response from 46 of the 124 non-resident participants. Of these 46, 29 were accompanied by friends and 14 by family members. It is important to mention here the multiplier effect that this type of events has repercussions in the territories to the extent that the participants travel accompanied.

The average amount spent per participant during the 4 days of the test was approximately € 500, which makes a daily average of € 125. Now with this value obtained and knowing that the total number of participants in the ATR Triangle Adventure 2018 was 140, we were able to calculate an estimate of the value that the participants inject in the local economy.

In addition to these results, it should be mentioned that 23 of the respondents stayed in the region 5 or more nights, taking advantage to know, discover and explore these 3 islands belonging to the central group of the Azores. Regarding the satisfaction of the participants, 40 consider the event to be excellently well organized and 42 of the respondents believe that this event contributes to the sustainable development of the territory since it is a modality of reduced environmental impact. We refer here to the policy of the ATR organization to minimize and mitigate the impacts caused by the event itself, eliminating the use of plastic, planting native species in places duly licensed for this purpose by environmental and forest authorities, enabling the residents participation for free, promoting volunteerism and entrepreneurship, among other initiatives. One of the negative aspects that the interviewed participants refers to is the price of air travel to the destination as well as the price charged by the organization for the entry to the competition.

Regarding the survey applied to the residents of São Jorge, Pico and Faial islands, the population's satisfaction with the ATR event and its contribution to the development of the territory is well known. Of the 55 respondents, 42 consider that the ATR is a very important event for the region and for these islands and that other conditions should be created and fostered to capture other events that contribute to the development and combat of seasonality.

The interview with the director and coordinator of the ATR, Mário Leal, complemented the inquiries applied, since it allowed the direct contact with the organization of the event. Something that was always present throughout the speech was the expression

"contribute to the sustainable development of the Azores as a whole". This event is the only one in the Azores that crosses several islands with the same goal: the practice of trail running. Mário Leal affirms that "since the first edition of the ATR and the subsequent editions and events related to the ATR brand, it has always been clear that this event had to contribute positively both to the development of the islands where it takes place and to the local population." This has been and continues to be a responsibility assumed by the organization and shared by partners and public and private partnerships of ATR events. In fact, it would not make any sense if it were not so, since, as mentioned earlier, the Azores are recognized exactly for their policies in the area of development and sustainability.

If the first edition of the ATR in 2014 had 12 entities, the 2019 edition has the support of about 60 local, regional, national and international entities: "there is an effort to attract new partners and to continue with existing ones", says the director and coordinator of the ATR.

**Illustration 3: Trail Marking Tapes**



**Source: Azores Trail Run**

If in the first edition plastic marking tapes were used to mark the paths, the latest editions count on the organization's investment in environmentally friendly and reusable material, as can be seen in Illustration 3 (last page).

The evolution of the ATR event is quite significant and significant, both in terms of the number of participants enrolled in the various tests that make up the ATR, the number of partnerships and partners, and issues related to environment, natural, social and cultural.

### **Final Considerations**

Tourist-sporting events play a major role in the revitalization, promotion and dissemination of territories and regions, aiming at local development that is intended to be sustainable. The Azores and the ATR event are, unconditionally, a success story both policies adopted and their decisions and of the promotion of sports tourism as the identifying link of the territory and its community.

Considering that rural and island territories are more susceptible to the impacts generated by tourism and sporting events, it is extremely important that the organizers of these events are fully aware of the importance of sustainable local development. While in the Azores this theme is recognized by the various organizations and international entities, through the various acknowledgments, awards and recommendations, the organizations of the events must fulfill this same design.

The organization of the event involves the local community and makes adjustments, for the benefit of individuals and society. The ATR is a good example of the large social and economic benefits that this kind of events, well managed and developed can provide, and it can serve as reference model for other destinations in order to achieve sustainable tourism, according to their specific characteristics and characteristics, considering their vision and mission: to contribute to a sustainable local development of the Azores, promoting the Region, contributing to the economy and revitalizing the natural, environmental and cultural spaces where the various tests take place.

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