

# THE TOURISM MODEL IN SPAIN CRITICIZED FOR UNSUSTAINABILITY



Environmental organizations have recently highlighted the severe environmental and social impacts caused by mass tourism in Spain and are calling for consensual limits to be imposed on tourist exploitation.

The NGO Ecologistas en Acción believes that Spain's current economic and social development model is unsustainable. **It exploits ecosystems, creates significant inequality, fosters an unfair distribution of wealth, and leads to excessive dependence on external factors.**

The organization points out that, compared to the substantial revenues generated by companies in the tourism sector, workers often endure poverty wages, long hours, and an excessive workload. The relentless push to increase visitor numbers translates into commodifying public spaces, resulting in uncontrolled urbanization and the continuous development of large-scale accommodation projects. This mass tourism model is harmful to both coastal areas and rural regions.

The pressure on the population and the territory has led to widespread and growing discomfort among citizens. They endure the daily consequences of public institutions' inaction, which have failed to address a situation beyond all limits and increasingly stress people's lives.

The NGO has advocated for measures to conserve protected natural areas and limit mass tourism, which is displacing local communities. Their proposals include eco-taxes, a moratorium on tourism and holidays, urgent regulation and strict limitations on tourist rentals, and restrictions on the acquisition of homes by non-residents.

Experts highlight the serious social and environmental impacts caused by the mass tourism model in Spain and urge various administrations to limit the overexploitation of tourism.

Since the approval of the Coastal Law in 1988, the urbanized coastal area in Spain has doubled, expanding from 240,000 to 530,000 hectares. This has resulted in an urbanization rate of 40.9% in coastal provinces with high levels of mass tourism. Currently, 36.5% of the beachfront is urbanized, and the prevailing production and consumption model has destroyed over a third of adjacent ecosystems.

Furthermore, experts report that 44% of groundwater bodies are already overexploited and polluted. The number of tourists visiting Spain reached 85,056,528 in 2023 (INE), significantly increasing water consumption from both visitors and the infrastructure associated with tourism activities.

As of 2013, global tourism activity had a carbon footprint exceeding 4,500 million metric tons. This figure is four times higher than expected and accounts for 8% of the world's greenhouse gas emissions, directly responsible for climate change.

A notable proportion of these emissions comes from aviation, with 283 million passengers recorded in 2023. Despite this, AENA (the Spanish Airport Operator) plans to expand seven airports in Spain and increase capacity for tourist arrivals. Furthermore, Spanish ports reached a historic milestone in

2023 by welcoming over 12 million cruise passengers. Although cruise ships are marketed as a sustainable mobility option, they are increasingly criticized for being one of the most polluting forms of transportation available today.

Environmental organizations emphasize that, despite the continuous increase in tourist arrivals and the resulting high hotel occupancy rates and revenue, the reality for the local population is starkly different. Many face low wages, poverty, unemployment, and rising living costs. According to the INE's 2021 salary statistics, earnings in the hospitality sector barely surpass the Interprofessional Minimum Wage (SMI). Spain is among the regions in Europe with the lowest wages, where the costs of basic goods and housing have risen, leaving 20.2% of the population at risk of poverty and/or social exclusion.

The unsustainable tourism model carried out by Ecologistas en Acción significantly impacts the right to housing. The proliferation of holiday homes has turned towns and residential neighborhoods into tourist hotspots, disrupting the lives of residents.

This situation, compounded by a lack of regulation and foresight from institutions, has created a **growing social problem: the shortage of affordable housing**. The conversion of these properties into temporary rentals for tourists has led to a severe lack of housing available for residential and long-term use, diminishing the constitutional right to access housing for the local population.

The environmental organization highlights that the current tourism industry relies on an unsustainable model that degrades territories and ecosystems while creating an unfair and unequal distribution of wealth.

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