



TOURISM IMPROVEMENT ON EGUZON RESERVOIR (FRANCE)

Zoubida QSAIR, Laurent TOUCHART, Pascal BARTOUT

EA 1210 CEDETE Geographical Laboratory (Research team n°2 "lakes, ponds, wetlands and river corridors"), University of Orleans, France

Email: zosma.2013@gmail.com, laurent.touchart@univ-orleans.fr, pascal.bartout@univ-orleans.fr

Abstract

Eguzon reservoir, built in the 1920s as the greatest dam in France, submerged a portion of the Creuse Valley and shocked population and famous artists who painted here the natural landscape. Later, the reservoir was accepted and became a pole for tourism, well equipped in the 1980s. At the present, tourism facilities have aged and the site needs new ideas for developing the country. That is why 200 quantitative questionnaires with tourists and 25 semi-structured interviews with officials and tourism professionals were conducted during six months of 2013 for producing a territorial assessment. The majority of the visitors come from the local region, the north of France and the north-west of Europe. They are satisfied with the cultural and yachting offerings and with hosting accommodations. But they are unsatisfied with commercial services, gastronomy and websites. They regard the reservoir as a natural lake, so that they decided to visit the region for the beautiful "natural" landscape and the possibility of water skiing. The tourists are willing to spend money above all for boating activities. Local officials deplore the lack of coordination between the municipalities and the joint associations. It would be opportune to make a better use of the regional gourmet products and to go new websites on line, for meeting expectations of tourists.

Keywords: rural tourism, land management, reservoir, lake, Creuse Valley.

INTRODUCTION

Watering eighty years ago for hydroelectric power generation, the Eguzon reservoir then drew tourism development, in an isolated land located on the borders of two regions suffering from demographic decline, rural exodus and abandonment of the countryside, i.e. Limousin and Berry.

Sailing, water skiing, swimming and other activities needed the building of infrastructures and tourism amenities and the program has indeed been executed during the 1980s and 1990s. But, thirty years later, tourism facilities have aged, upgrades have been deferred and the clientele has been shifting. How to meet the expectations of the new customers? Is the old artificial reservoir regarded as a natural lake by the tourists? Hence, the Eguzon reservoir is it an extraordinary chance for the land management?

In attempting to address these questions, we produced a territorial assessment on the shores of the reservoir, based on a methodology of quantitative questionnaires and semi-structured interviews, in order to bring forward constructive suggestions and proposals for country planning in the Creuse Valley.

1. Study site: the oldest great reservoir in France

In the Loire basin, the Creuse Valley is dammed by the Eguzon reservoir since the 1920s, which is the most north-western waterbody in the French Central Massif (Vivier, 1961). It was at that time the biggest reservoir in France and even in Europe; its inauguration was a highly significant national event (Berthonnet, 1998) and the generated electricity was consumed by the city of Paris and the railway line from Paris (Berthonnet, 2003). Also named Chambon reservoir, this body of water spreads over 312 ha and its storage capacity is of 57 millions cubic meters (Vivier *et al.*, 1956, Chartier, 1960). It drains a hydrographical basin of 2,400 km². The arch-gravity dam, built between 1922 and 1926, is 61 m high (Thibaudeau *et al.*, 1988). The annual hydroelectric output is of 107 millions kWh, including the generation of the subsidiary dams.

The construction of the dam and the watering of the reservoir, which submerged a section of the Creuse and Sedelle valleys along 16 km, overturned the picturesque landscape and caused a cultural trauma in the local population and among the numerous artists, painters and writers installed here in the beginning of the 20th century (Rameix, 2002). Even some scientists criticized the size of the dam and the power of the station, because of the very low mean discharge of the Creuse River (Garenc, 1952).

Then the passage of time has rendered the new landscape acceptable and even beautiful. The reservoir was gradually considered as a lake, the name “Chambon Lake” has become a frequent occurrence. For the past forty years, local officials, developers and planners have invested and relied on the tourism on the Eguzon reservoir as a driving factor for local development. The dam and the power station belong to the French company

EDF, whereas the water and the beaches are divided into three municipalities (fig. 1).

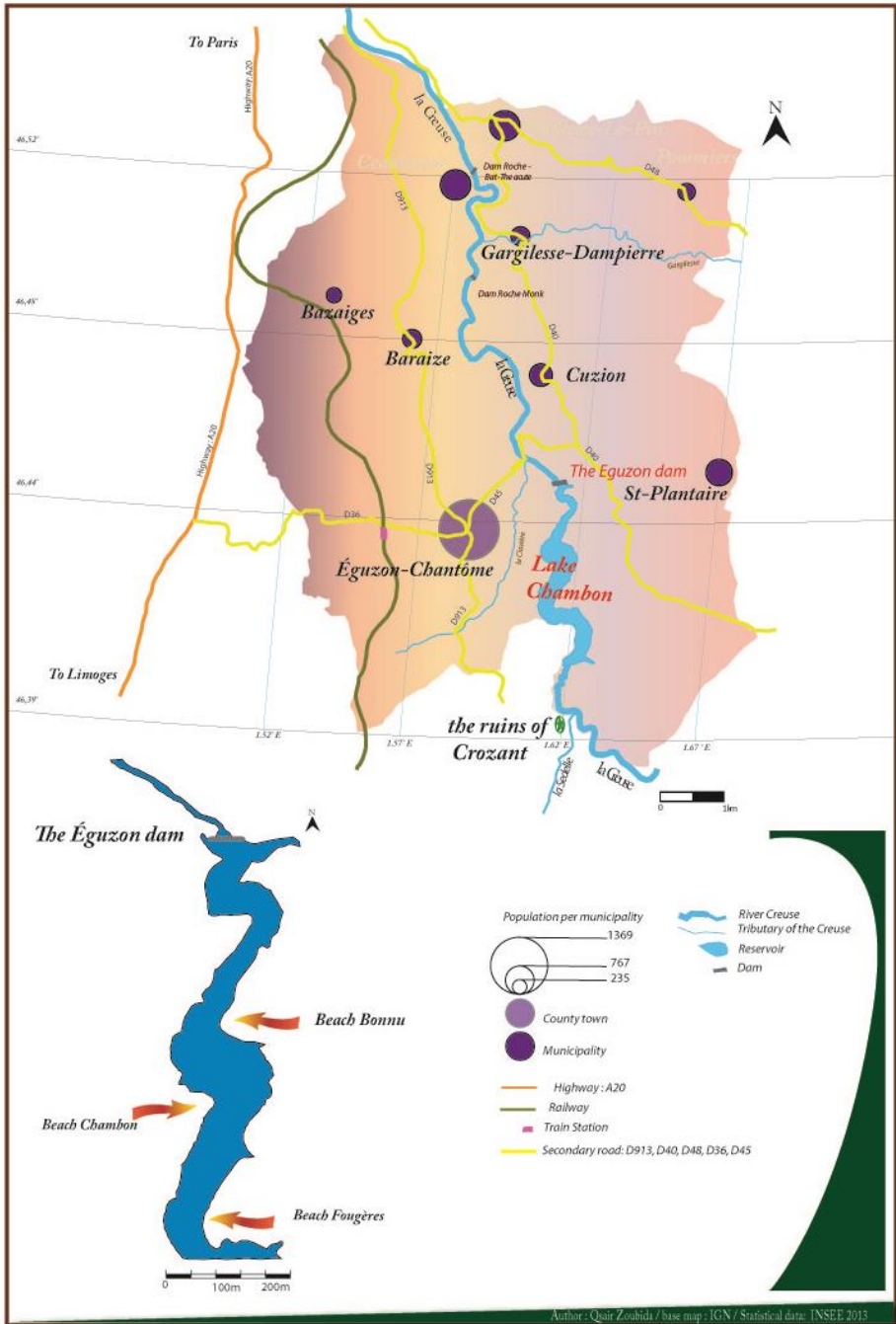


Fig.1 Map of location of Eguzon reservoir and tourism poles of attraction in Creuse Valley

According to the tourism board located in the municipality of Eguzon, about 6,000 tourists ask information every year (2010, 2011, 2012) at the office, half of whom in July and August. 85 % are French tourists, 15 % are foreigners. But other characteristics are not known. According to the Creuse Valley museum located in Eguzon, 40,427 tourists visited it from 2007 to 2012, i.e. 6,738 persons per year. In comparison, the “Community of Communes of the Country of Eguzon – Creuse Valley” has 4 418 inhabitants in 2009.

2. METHODOLOGY

Within an attempt of inclusion of those operating at different level and geographical scales on the complex system of the study site (Le Moigne, 1990), our research used classical methods about field surveys and enquiries (Blanchet *et al.*, 1985, Beaud & Weber, 2003, Singly, 2012), in particular the semi-structured interview, which is the most common way in sociology and social geography (Duchesne, 2000), but also quantitative questionnaires and statistics.

During six months, from April to September 2013, one of the authors (Z. Qsair) has conducted 25 semi-structured interviews with officials and tourism professionals (restaurant owners, hotel managers, shopkeepers) and 200 quantitative questionnaires with tourists. The three authors have conducted some additional interviews with the president of the “Community of Communes of the Country of Eguzon – Creuse Valley”.

In greater detail, 9 interviews among local officials were conducted from April to June in the two municipalities of Eguzon and Ceaulmont, 11 among tourism professionals from April to July in the eight municipalities of the “Community of Communes of the Country of Eguzon – Creuse Valley” and 5 among the managers of (administrative Centre region, tourism development agency of the Indre department, tourism boards of Eguzon and Gargilasse municipalities) from April to May. 200 questionnaires were completed by tourists from July to August in the nine municipalities of the study site: Ceaulmont, Badecon-le-Pin, Pommiers, Bazaiges, Baraize, Gargilasse-Dampierre, Cuzion, Eguzon-Chantôme and Saint-Plantaire.

3. RESULTS

3.1. Results about quantitative questionnaires

The new and unpublished results of our completed questionnaires show that the French tourists in 2013 came to a vast majority from the two

administrative regions where the reservoir is extending, i.e. Centre and Limousin (61 %). The second origin is the region Paris-Ile-de-France (26 %), the third the Nord-Pas-de-Calais (12 %). The foreign tourists came from the Netherlands (32 %), the United Kingdom (25 %), Ireland (19 %), Germany (14 %), Belgium (8 %). It means that almost all the non local tourists went from the north of France and the north of Western Europe (fig. 2).

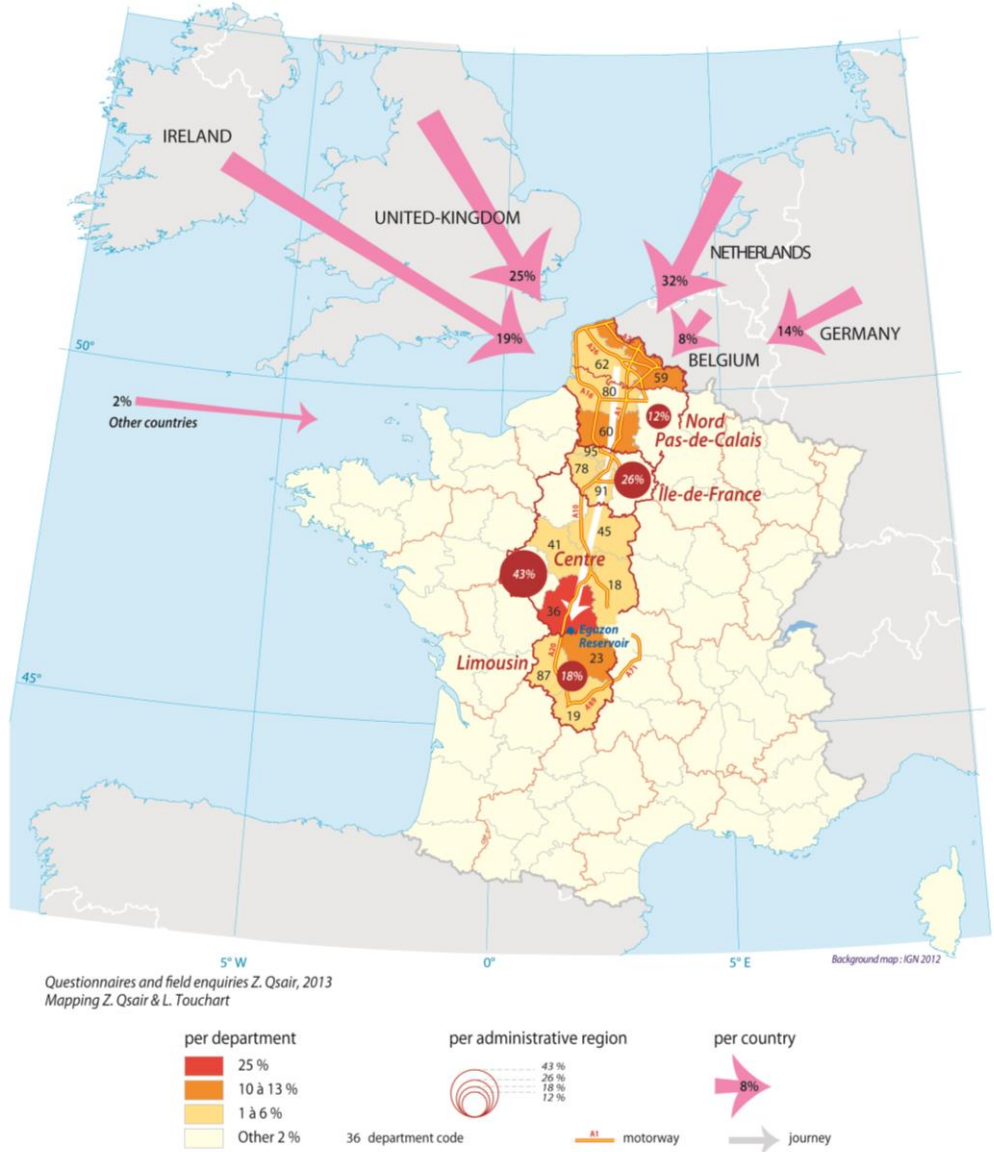


Fig. 2 Map of the origin of tourists visiting the Eguzon reservoir

100 % of the interviewed tourists are satisfied (38 %) to very satisfied (62 %) with the cultural offerings, 87 % (30 % satisfied and 57 % very satisfied) with the hosting accommodations, 79 % (32 % satisfied and 47 % very satisfied) with the yachting and water skiing. But 39 % are satisfied (22 %) to very satisfied (17 %) with the local gastronomy, and only 20 % with the websites about the Creuse Valley and 15 % with commercial and marked-related services (**fig. 3**). The worst figure of the category “very unsatisfied” is with the websites (60 %).

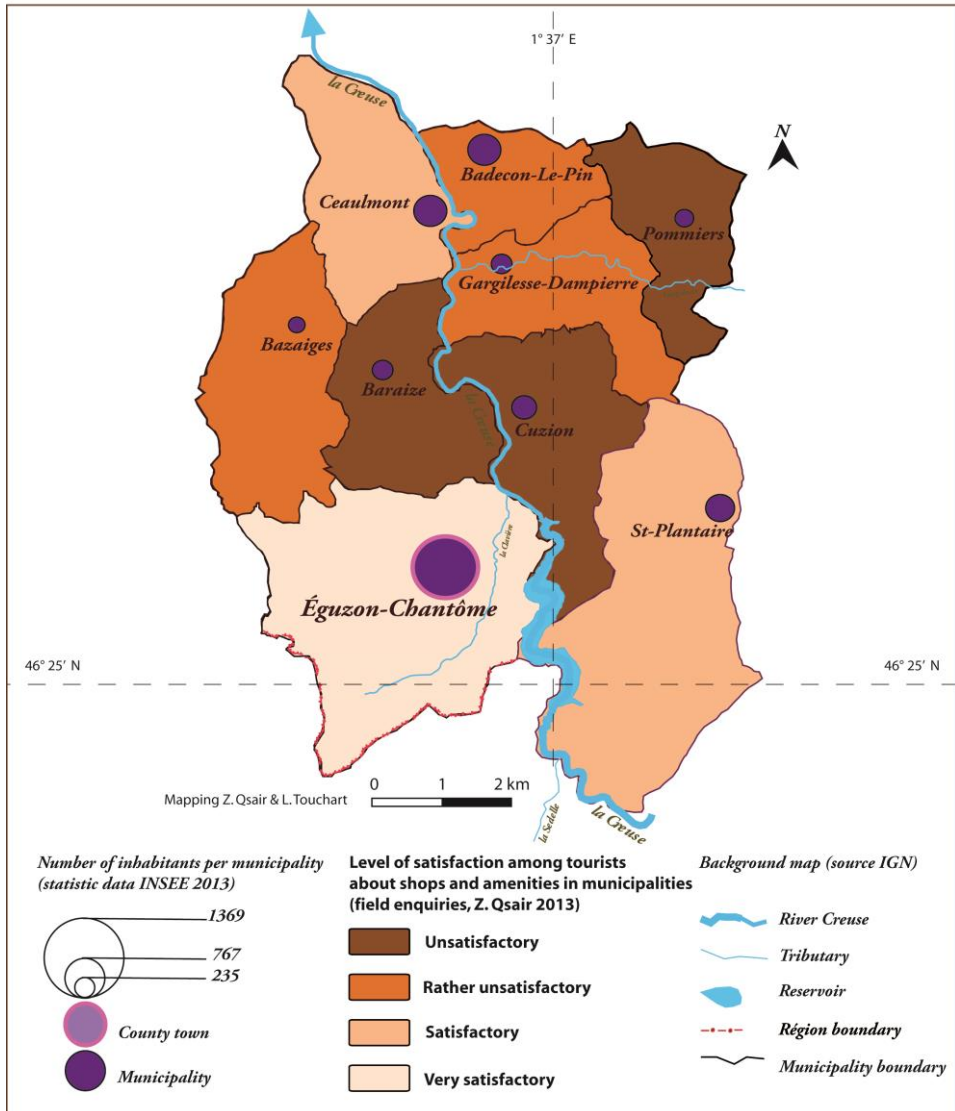


Fig. 3 Map of level of satisfaction of tourists about commercial and marked-related services per municipality

The main reasons why the tourists came in 2013 were, according to them, the beautiful landscape (28 %), boating and water skiing on “the lake” (21 %), the cultural site of artists painters (19 %), the architectural heritage of the village Gargilesse (ranked among the “most beautiful villages in France”) where resided the writer George Sand.

The tourists who do boating and water skiing spend 50 euros per person, but only 30 euros for cultural activities and 20 euros for outdoor recreational activities in nature. We have to note that, since six years, the Sailing Club of Eguzon organizes a very popular ski race. In July 2013, 12,000 spectators attended to this event, which highlighted to the last round of the European Cup. It is important for promoting the image of “the Eguzon lake” and the Creuse Valley.

3.2. Results about semi-structured interviews

Private developers insist that the tourism facilities and offerings must diversify and be broadened. It would favour long-term and regular stays year after year.

Local officials think that the coordination between the municipalities members of the “Joint Syndicat of the Eguzon lake site”, which was established in 1984, and the “Community of Communes of the Country of Eguzon – Creuse Valley”, which was created in 2005, needs to be enhanced. They give preference to public investment as the main lever of economic development.

4. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Our unpublished territorial assessment highlights some points that can be used as a basis for proposals. At first, the great success of the tourism on Eguzon reservoir consists in the water skiing and yachting. The media communication and the promoted image based on dynamism and youth are national and even international. At the opposite, the websites are lacking and the tourists complain not to have the opportunity to prepare their journey through the use of internet.

The tourists unanimously appreciate the cultural offerings of the Creuse Valley, but they sometimes regret the lack of relationships between the three major tourism poles of attraction : “the Eguzon lake”; the castle ruins of Crozant in the submerged confluence of the Creuse and the Sedelle rivers, where is born the impressionist school of the painter Armand

Guillaumin and his followers, and where the world famous artist Claude Monet painted numerous canvases; the village Gargilesse where the famous writer George Sand came for holiday and where she wrote a part of her chonical “Promenades autour d'un village”.

This lack, highlighted by the tourists, mirrors the administrative problems emphasized by the officials between the Joint Associations. We may add the problem of the subdivision of the reservoir in two administrative regions, Centre and Limousin.

The displeasure about gastronomy is not nor a small point neither an innocuous question. It reveals a lack of ambition, a mistaken perception of the wishes of the tourists and of their need of local specificities. However the goat cheese named Gargilesse, which is produced within the study site and is a registered trademark, might be available without difficulties.

Taken together, all these suggestions form a group of possibilities for developing and renewing the rural region of Eguzon reservoir. It is interesting to conclude about a paradigm shift : the most artificial part of the landscape, i.e. the dammed waterbody itself, which was regarded as a disaster by artists and population eighty years ago, is now considered by tourists as the most natural part of the environment and the symbol of piece and quiet.

Aknowledgments

This research has received a financial support of the “Community of Communes of the Country of Eguzon – Creuse Valley” (France). We express our gratitude to the president J.-C. Blin.

REFERENCES

- Beaud S. & Weber F., 2003, *Guide de l'enquête de terrain*. Paris, La Découverte, 356 p.
- Berthonnet A., 1998, *Chagnaud (1860 à nos jours): le développement d'une entreprise moyenne familiale dans les travaux publics*. Université Paris-Sorbonne, thèse de doctorat en histoire, 888 p.
- Berthonnet A., 2003, « L'électrification rurale ou le développement de la 'fée électricité' au cœur des campagnes françaises dans le premier xxe siècle, *Histoire & Sociétés Rurales*, 19(1) : 193-219.
- Blanchet A., Giami A., Gotman A. & Léger J.-M., 1985, *L'entretien dans les sciences sociales: l'écoute, la parole et le sens*. Paris, Dunod, 289 p.

- Chartier M.-M., 1960, “Remarques limnologiques à propos du lac d'Eguzon” *Annales de Géographie*, 69(371) : 97-99.
- Duchesne S., 2000, “Pratique de l'entretien dit 'non directif’” in Bachir M., Dir., *Les méthodes au concret. Démarches, formes de l'expérience et terrains d'investigation en science politique*. Paris, PUF, coll. “Curapp” : 9-30.
- Garenc P., 1952, “Les aménagements hydroélectriques du Bassin de la Vienne” *Annales de Géographie*, 61(324) : 106-122.
- Le Moigne J.-L., 1990, *La modélisation des systèmes complexes*. Paris: Dunod, coll. “AFCET systèmes”, 178 p.
- Rameix Ch., 2002, *L'Ecole de Crozant, les peintres de la Creuse et de Gargilasse 1850-1950*. La Geneytouse, Lucien Souny, 196 p.
- Singly F. de, 2012, *L'enquête et ses méthodes: le questionnaire*. Paris, A. Colin, 3ème éd., 128 p.
- Thibaudeau J.-P., Guibaud R. & Blondeau P., 1988, *Le barrage d'Eguzon, un grand chantier au début du siècle*. Châteauroux, CDDP Indre, 56 p.
- Vivier P., 1961, “Les lacs de barrage artificiels du Massif Central français » *Verhandlungen der internationale Vereinigung für theoretische and angewandte Limnologie*, 14 : 625-632.
- Vivier P., Dussart B., Nisbet M., Lefevre M., Wurtz A., Wurtz-Arlet J. & Bertrand H., 1956, “Le lac d'Eguzon” *Annales de la station centrale d'hydrobiologie appliquée*, 6 : 15-230.