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## **Can equestrian tourism be a solution for sustainable tourism development in France?**

Sylvine Pickel-Chevalier

Geographer, Associated Professor

Engineering Faculty of Tourism, Building and Service Industries, University of Angers

ESO Angers (UMR CNRS 6590)

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### **Abstract**

Horse-riding in France has become big business, as the third biggest sports federation with around 700,000 members (FFE, 2013). If the number of riders in France is the third highest in Europe, after the United Kingdom and Germany, France is considered as the number one equestrian tourism and outdoor destination with an institutional network at every administrative level in the country (national, regional, departmental), and around 1,600 businesses specializing in equestrian tourism (and/or stabling) and 60,000 km of equestrian trails (Atout France, 2011). In this context, horse-riding and equestrian tourism had been promoted by official bodies (National Resource Center for Outdoor Sports; Equestrian French Federation) as an important agent for sustainable development. The purpose of this study is to analyze whether equestrian tourism including outdoor riding, can really be a vector for sustainable development in France, corresponding to the “sustainability trinity” (Farrell, 1999) by integrating economy, society and the environment : contributing to a viable economy, social cohesion, protecting and educating people about the environment and environmental management. In order to question the equation of equestrian tourism to respond to sustainability criteria, we will analyze the involvement of local communities, capitalizing on the image of horses and equestrian tourism for the sustainable development of their regions, focusing on economic, social and environmental aspects. We’ll also focus on the motivation of equestrian tourists themselves, by using numerous surveys conducted between 2005 and 2012 at both national and regional scales, combining quantitative and qualitative data.

### **Key words**

Sustainable development, equestrian tourism, natural parks, involvement

### **Introduction**

Horse-riding in France has become big business, as the third biggest sports federation with around 700,000 members (FFE, 2013). If the number of riders in France is the third highest in Europe, after the United Kingdom and Germany, France is considered as the number one equestrian tourism and outdoor destination with an institutional network at every

administrative level in the country (national, regional, departmental) and around 1,600 businesses specializing in equestrian tourism (and/or stabling) and 60,000 km of equestrian trails (Atout France, 2011).

Simultaneously with this increase, horse-riding in France was defined by the National Resource Center for Outdoor Sports (*Pôle Ressources National des Sports de Nature*) as a sport that takes place outside. Such sports are characterized, according to the Ministry of Health, Youth and Sports (*Ministère de la Santé, de la Jeunesse et des Sports*), as being "a set of sporting activities which allow people to discover the natural environment in the best possible way, be it on land, on water or in the air. Their growing importance is an answer to the constantly changing concerns of modern society" (<http://www.sportsdenature.gouv.fr/docs/superdoc/brochure-sports-nature.pdf>). In addition, these sports are readily promoted by official bodies as important vectors for sustainable development with an impact on economic, social and environmental issues. In fact, the National Resource Center for Outdoor Sports insists that they are "factors influencing regional planning decisions as they contribute to the emergence, and/or the strengthening, of a viable economy and promote job creation. Outdoor sports are also a powerful vector for education about environmental and sustainable development challenges, social cohesion and health promotion". (<http://www.sportsdenature.gouv.fr/docs/superdoc/brochure-sports-nature.pdf>)

In light of these official definitions, the purpose of this study is to analyze whether horse-riding, and more especially equestrian tourism including outdoor riding, can be a vector for sustainable development, corresponding to the "sustainability trinity" (Farrell, 1999) by integrating economy, society and the environment – contributing to a viable economy, social cohesion, protecting and educating people about the environment and environmental management. Can equestrian tourism be a way of promoting sustainable development which will help revitalize fragile areas, often in rural sectors, as other recreation and touristic activities (Johnston, Twynam & Haider, 1998 ; Hall, Kirkpatrick & Mitchell, 2005; Fleischer and Felsenstein, 2000) and especially sports (Butler, Hall, Jenkins, 1997; Mounet, 2000; Jagemann, 2004 ; Bessy & Olivier, 2005) have done? Are outdoor riders and equestrian tourists aware of the environmental and social issues surrounding their activity? Should we believe that the identification of equestrian tourism as a vector for sustainable development comes more from official bodies or from industry-professionals, keen to associate their activity with contemporary issues?

To answer these questions we first need to go back to the definition of sustainable development (Wall, 1997; Hunter, 1997; Butler, 1999; Farrells, 1999; Liu, 2010; Knafo & Pickel, 2011; Buckley, 2012), and the definition of equestrian tourism (Ollenburg, 2005; Torkkola, 2013; Atout France, 2011; Castejon and Rodríguez, 2012; Vaugeois, 2014). With this in mind, we will focus on their compatibility by analyzing cases in France, where horses and equestrian tourism have been used as vectors for economic, social and environmental development in several areas. We'll study the involvement of local communities and associations, capitalizing on the image of horses and equestrian tourism for the sustainable development of their areas, especially in certain Regional Natural Parks.

After analyzing the equation between sustainable development criteria and equestrian tourism through the activities of local communities, it will also be necessary to study, the involvement of equestrian tourists and outdoor riders themselves. Are they highly motivated as a result of their riding activity, by a "sustainable" sensitivity (to discover and contribute to the protection of natural and cultural heritage) or are they dominated by other interests, such as conviviality, relaxation or adventure? Do they define, as is the case with official bodies and local authorities, equestrian tourism as a sustainable activity contributing to good environmental management? Or do they provoke, on the contrary, negative impacts especially on fragile areas, and create lots of conflicts of interest with other nature users?

## Methodology

Our methodology is based on a combination of diverse methods of data collection and analysis. In order to determine if equestrian tourism is a discipline that corresponds to the complex definition of sustainable development, we'll proceed with a dialectical approach based on the confrontation of international scientific literature about the definition of sustainable development and its ambiguities, and the definition of equestrian tourism.

In order to question the equation of equestrian tourism to respond to sustainability criteria, we will analyze the involvement of local communities, capitalizing on the image of horses and equestrian tourism for the sustainable development of their regions, focusing on economic, social and environmental aspects. These studies used the Case Study Methodology (Yin 2009) which allowed them to access data, using a wide variety of tools, combining secondary documents including strategic plans associating tourism and horses, and official annual reports. We focus more especially on natural parks associating their communication with horse and equestrian tourism, such as:

- the Natural Regional Park of the Camargue (Camargue Horse) – South of France ;
- the Natural Regional Park of the Cevennes (Przewalski Horse) – Center of France;
- the Natural Park of the Marquenterre (Henson Horse) – North of France.

Additionally, we proceeded with an interpretative analytical approach through interviews with the President of the International Federation of Equestrian Tourism (*Fédération Internationale du tourisme Equestre*) in February 2013; with the founder of *Espaces Equestre Henson*, also involved into the association for local territorial development - *Association du Syndicat Mixte pour l'Aménagement de la côte Picarde* - in May 2012; with the President of the Regional Committee for Tourism (*Comité Régional du Tourisme*) of the *Region Pays de la Loire* in September 2013; and the President of the Regional Committee for Equestrian Tourism (*Comité Régional du Tourisme Equestre*) of the *Pays de la Loire* in February 2014.

Finally, we'll focus on the motivation of equestrian tourists and outdoor riders themselves, by using numerous surveys conducted between 2005 and 2012 at both national and regional scales, combining quantitative and qualitative data.

At a national scale we'll analyze more specifically:

-A survey conducted by the National Committee for Equestrian Tourism (CNTE-FFE), with 1,080 riders, about their profiles, activities and motivation in equestrian tourism (*Bouhaouala and Albertini, 2005*);

-A qualitative survey conducted by Claude Lux in 2012, with 20 experienced outdoor riders, both individuals and professionals as well as journalists from the specialist-press, across the country, for the specialist revue *Randonner à Cheval*. Even though Claude Lux is a specialist journalist, the research protocol was certified, with well-identified questions posed.

At a regional scale, we'll focus more particularly on the *Region Pays de la Loire* (West France) because it is one of the French regions which is the most involved with the equestrian economy and equestrian tourism development (number one region in France for the number of race-courses; number one region for the number of race horses trained; number one region for the number of equestrian events; number two region for the number of breeders; number two region for the number of horses. The *Pays de la Loire* is also the region where the *Cadre Noir de Saumur* is located and two important national studs (in *Lion d'Angers* and *La Roche-sur-Yon*). The local government of the Pays de la Loire Region invested 3 millions of Euros per year between 2006 and 2013 to support tourism and agriculture linked with equestrian activities (*Atout France, 2009*). In this context, we'll analyze:

- a survey conducted in 2008 by the SEM (*Sociétés d'Economie Mixte*) of *Pays de la Loire* Region, with 135 outdoor riders in better understand the practices of equestrian outdoor activities (tourism or leisure) ;

- a survey conducted in 2010 by the SEM of *Pays de la Loire* with 19 riding schools that offer opportunities to discover outdoor riding for new consumers (a product developed with the help of the *SEM Pays de la Loire*) with 320 new riders.

Additionally, we have undertaken an interpretative analytical approach through a qualitative survey that we conducted with stakeholders in both the tourism and equestrian fields. We conducted interviews (in collaboration with IFCE –*Institut Français du Cheval et de l'Equitation*) in 2012 with business operators, in order to better understand the profiles of equestrian tourism riders. We specifically interviewed the directors of three of the most important Tour Operators specializing in Equestrian tourism in France:

- Christophe Lesourd, director of *Cavalier du Monde*, a new Tour Operator specializing in equestrian tourism with a focus on sustainable development;

- Sabine Grataloup, director of *Rando-Cheval*, which is the biggest Tour Operator specializing in equestrian tourism in France;

- Anne Mariage, director of *Cheval d'Aventure*, which is the oldest Tour Operator specializing in equestrian tourism in France.

## **From sustainable development to sustainable tourism development**

In 1987 the Brundtland report defined the concept of sustainable development as “a development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.” (WCED, 1987: 43). The originality of the concept is not to oppose development in favor of preservation, but also has the goal of creating a fairer world, where wealth would be more equally spread. The concept became a key principle at the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, and concerned up to that point tourism, which particularly stems from the quality of an environment that, like every human activity, it changes by definition (Hunter, 1997; Knafou, 1998; Pickel-Chevalier, 2014a). Nonetheless, difficulties arise in the adaptation of tourism to the more global concept of sustainable development. It has generated, since the 1990s, critical debate about the complexity of the

paradigm, defined either as a specific autonomic case of sustainable development or only as a part of the global concept. Indeed, the paradigm of “sustainable tourism” has been criticized by some as being too parochial or tourism-centric, whereas as it must on the contrary contribute to the goals of global sustainable development in their complexity: “The remit of sustainable tourism is extended to consider the role of tourism in contributing to sustainable development more generally” (Hunter, 1997: 860). This means that sustainable tourism must be understood as a motor for global territorial integration, associating economic and social stakes but also the preservation of nature and culture heritage (Sharpley R., Telfer D., 2002). Cater (1993) looked at it from a different perspective, by adapting the global concept, and identified three keys for sustainable tourism: “meeting the needs of the host population in terms of improved living standards both in the short and long term; satisfying the demands of a growing number of tourists; and safeguarding the natural environment in order to achieve both of the preceding aims.”

In this general context, the authorities of the European Union, which is very concerned by tourism development as it is one of the world’s foremost holiday destinations, developed their own Agenda 21 for tourism, based on the objectives linked to Carter’s definition, to generate economic prosperity, equity and social cohesion for the host population, to protect the local environment and culture, but also to provide a positive experience for local people, tourism companies and the tourists themselves.

Nonetheless, it seems unreasonable to believe in the ability to create development without also creating or increasing disparity in human well-being. The question will be more about the conception of *acceptable* equity, or on the contrary inequity, particularly in access to natural resources, distribution of cost and benefits and satisfaction of human wants both intra and inter-generational (Hunter, 1997). But how can we define the *acceptability* when it depends of the complexities of the historical, social, economic and political issues of each society. How can a concept integrate universal and local definitions and issues? Furthermore, we observe frequent opposition, aside from general consensus about the definition of sustainable development, between a paradigm that favors environment preservation and one that favors socio-economic growth (Turner, Pearce and Bateman, 1994). Some argue that the first can even lead to *eco-fascism* where the poorest societies or population can’t access their needs in order to preserve nature (Pepper, 1984). Others, on the contrary, argue that destroying natural resources cannot bring about durable development for any society, especially the most vulnerable. Munt (1992) recognized that different interpretations of sustainable tourism may be appropriate for developed and developing countries, according to their variable economic growth. Whereas developing countries can give priority to their economic imperative, developed countries can favor environment issues (Munt 1992). But behind different economic situations also lie different interpretations of relationship between society and the environment (Pickel-Chevalier, 2004; 2014a).

Liu and John (1996) claimed, from their standpoint, that sustainable tourism can be applied to all types of tourism, in conventional or alternative forms, as long as they can contribute to sustainable development. It means that, contrary to some researchers, they don’t necessarily oppose “mass tourism” in the sustainable context, if it is well organized in terms of environmental management and social issues. In addition, we can observe in France that it is often the biggest resorts (La Grande Motte, Saint-Jean-de-Monts, La Baule etc.) that invest the most in environmental management (Blue Flag, ISO 14001, European Eco-label etc.) because they need them to compensate for an image of a “concrete” resort (Pickel-Chevalier, 2014a). To involve the local population in the tourism dynamic it is also very important to favor its sustainability. As Hitchcock (1993) explains “a greater level of local involvement in the planning and development of tourism is an essential prerequisite of sustainable tourism”

(Hitchcock and al, 1993: 23-24). Indeed, the local residents must gain from tourism to be motivated to protect the natural and cultural richness, to support their tourism activity and to “appropriate” them as their own heritage. Nonetheless, we must not forget that the needs and interests of the local communities are not homogeneous, because the local population also contains deep divisions of class, status and power that are sometimes difficult for the researcher to see (Tosun, 2000). Finally, we must also remember that “tourism development is both supply-led and demand-driven” (Liu, 2010: 462), whereas the demand issues have often been ignored in the sustainable tourism debate, with the exception of a few writers (Butler, 1999b; Middleton and Hawkins, 1998). According to Liu (1994: 21) “Tourism development is a dynamic process of matching tourism resources to the demands and preferences of actual or potential tourists”. Their motivation, satisfaction and sensitivity to preservation and local wealth are also key aspects of sustainable tourism development.

According to all those aspects, we can define sustainable tourism development as a tourism that can contribute to global territorial integration, associating economic and social stakes but also the preservation of a natural and culture heritage. It means a tourism participating in:

- improving the welfare and livelihoods of local communities by supporting their local economies;
- involving host populations and maintaining or enhancing their social cohesion;
- allowing intercultural meeting and understanding;
- providing a positive experience for local people, tourism companies and the tourists themselves
- promoting environmental awareness with local population and tourists, conserving and protecting the environment, respecting wildlife, flora, biodiversity, ecosystems and cultural diversity.

This is the reason why we’ll focus our analysis first on the host population, through three experiences of local communities and associations using equestrian tourism as a key to their sustainable development – improving their economy, enhancing their social cohesion and contributing to the environmental awareness and the protection of their environment. Then, we’ll study more specifically the expectation of equestrian tourists and outdoor riders themselves: motivation, satisfaction, and awareness of sustainability through their riding activities. We’ll also analyze the actions of the French Equestrian Federation (FFE) to try to make equestrian tourists more aware of real sustainability issues, notably to avoid conflicts of interest which remain numerous, especially in fragile natural areas such as forests.

## **Equestrian tourism: a wider definition for a growing activity in the world**

If the phenomena of equestrian tourism started in Europe, North America and Australia during the 1950s-1960s (Delambre, 2011; Konyves & Suta, 2009; Cochrane and Daspher, 2014), the discussions about the definition are more recent. Dialogue between researchers, providers and institutions is beginning to give a usable definition of the concept. Whereas the first definitions reduce equestrian tourism to a tourism activity on the back of a horse – a trail ride of over 24 hours for pleasure (Delambre, 2011) -, the definition is now open to contemporary practices, combining the diversity of equestrian activities and the global definition of tourism (WTO). Since 2002, AFIT - Atout France (*Agence de développement touristique de la France* – the agency for national tourism development) defined equestrian tourism as: “all kinds of leisure linked to horses, ponies or donkeys practiced by a person outside their normal place of residence for more than 24 hours and less than four months” (Atout France, 2011, p.15). It means that equestrian tourism is no longer only a trip on horseback for more than 24 hours, but every equine-oriented tourist activity. The market is wider, including tourism *on* horseback (trails) but also linked to the horse, *for* the horse as an attraction (shows, events,

racings, museums, sites like national studs becoming heritage centers etc.). In addition, equestrian tourism includes tourism where the main motivation is the horse – long trails over several days, traveling motivated by the fact of attending a special equestrian show or event – but also secondary – outdoor riding or going to an event or a show, as one of the many activities undertaken during one's holidays (Atout France, 2011).

As a result of this diversity, equine tourism can be viewed as part of several sub-sectors of the tourism spectrum, including nature-based or outdoor tourism, adventure tourism, rural tourism, sports tourism, tradition and heritage tourism, and event tourism (Ollenburg, 2005; Torkkola, 2013; Castejon and Rodríguez, 2012; Vaugeois, 2014). The first two of these are significant because the fields of outdoor/adventure tourism and nature-based/tourism, are among the fastest growing sub-sectors of tourism business globally (Bessy & Mouton, 2004; Kuenzi & McNeely 2008). In this context, equestrian tourism can become a real economy, especially supporting the development of rural areas in several countries, more particularly in Europe, North America and Australia (Ollenburg, 2005). Indeed, according to Evans and Franklin (2008), small farms which are unsuitable for operation within the large-scale agro-industrial system can be particularly appropriate for re-development as equine businesses, which are essentially small scale farming, due to their existing environmental, manufactured and human assets. This is also claimed to offer better welfare opportunities for the horses and to allow operators to maintain multiple activities on the farm (Evans and Pickel-Chevalier, 2014).

This situation is especially well-developed in Iceland, where equestrian tourism represents between 15 to 18% of foreign visitors (Helgadóttir and Sigurðardóttir, 2008). The equestrian tourism activity is also far wider since it has been estimated that less than 40% of all riders come from outside the country (Sigurddóttir 2011). The majority of riders are Icelandic families. Thus, equine tourism offers some of the sustainability benefits of domestic tourism – affordability in local currencies, more frequent but shorter duration visits, exchanges in local languages and shorter journeys to reach the tourism site.

Equine tourism is also becoming important in Spain. According to Castejon and Rodriguez (2012), there were 157,965 horse farms and centers with a total of 683,645 animals in Spain in 2011 (MARM, 2011). The number of companies whose principle business is equestrian tourism is about 500, although there is no exact census or list of the direct or indirect employment they generate. Castejon and Rodriguez claimed that the most frequent equestrian activities are: rural accommodation including horseback riding (30.4%), or unique equestrian activities for traditional fairs, pilgrimages or sports gatherings (25.3%). Only 6.5% are relatively long equestrian treks. As in Iceland, most of those tourists are domestic (only 25% are foreigners). Again, almost 90% of the businesses are family operated or individually operated which makes it difficult to know the number of people employed, although it is estimated that 11% of the companies' income is paid out in salaries (Castejon and Rodriguez, 2012).

At smaller scale, this situation also exists in Hungary where equestrian culture is an important part of the national heritage. Nonetheless, according to Obádovics and Kulcsár (2014), the development of equestrian tourism and the horse industry suffered as a result of the nation history. The number of horses dramatically decreased due to historical events from the beginning of the 20th century when there were nearly 900,000 horses in Hungary, to the 1980s when they had declined to under 100,000. This decrease had been caused by the two World Wars but also by the forced political priorities that changed agriculture into supporting cooperatives and abolished private farms (Obádovics and Kulcsár, 2014). Since then, the equestrian industry started to increase again. Even if, according to Obádovics and Kulcsár, Hungary is far behind the EU average proportion for equine to human populations - 6 for



every 1,000 inhabitants while the European Union average is 12 - ventures dealing with equestrian tourism make up 6% of the rural tourist businesses in Hungary (Panyik, Costa and Rácz, 2011). In addition, there are also development opportunities through the association of natural and cultural attractions around horses with registration on the provisional list of UNESCO World Heritage sites in 2000 of the State Stud-Farm Estate at Mezöhegyes. Founded by Emperor Joseph II in 1784, this stud has been a major center and organizational example of the highest standards of horse-breeding and animal husbandry (Nonius, Gidran and Mezohegyes). The registration values the species of horses bred there, but also the rich architecture of the complex.

The increase of equestrian tourism in the global economy has also characterized North America. Evans V. (2011) claimed that the Canadian equine industry contributed more than \$19 billion to the economy annually and supported more than 154,000 jobs. Vaugeois (2014) underlines the fact that in the province of British Columbia the largest increase in horse ownership, according to the 2009 Horse Council BC Equine Study, has been in the recreation sector. Nowadays in the province, approximately 22,000 households own 95,000 horses on a total of 145,000 acres of farmland (HCBC, 2009). According to Vaugeois, the equine industry in British Columbia generates \$740 million in economic activity including 7,200 full time jobs, and \$73 million in direct government tax revenues. As in Spain and Iceland, we can see that the number of horses and farms has increased over the last decade with a movement of more owners onto small-holdings with an interest in recreational pursuits (Vaugeois, 2014).

A similar situation can be seen in the United States of America, but at larger scale. Nicholls (2014) reported that the equestrian sector in the United States (US) directly contributes \$39 billion to the US economy and supports 1.4 million full-time jobs (American Horse Council, 2005). She focus more especially on the state of Michigan, where direct annual expenditures on equine activities by the 35,000 equine operations in the state exceeded \$485 million in 2007 (United States Department of Agriculture National Agricultural Statistics Service, 2008), including both competitive and pleasure riding across the full range of disciplines, one of which is trail riding.

Finally, the equine industry and equestrian tourism has also become an important phenomenon in Australia (Ollenburg, 2005). According to Buchmann (2014), the horse industry has made an estimated yearly contribution of \$10 billion (Australian Horse Industry Council, 2009; Gordon, 2001). The Australian Horse Industry Council (2012) defines the industry as including thoroughbred racing, standard-bred racing, equestrian activities, tourism, retail activities, education activities, breed societies, recreational activities, administration and support services and research and development. The impact for rural destinations can be substantial. According to Bell & Drury-Klein (2011), the size of the domestic horse tourism market reaches more than 5,000 riders travelling with their horses per week. At a national scale there would be about 100,000 horse riders (Cripps, 2000). Of course horse riding, in arenas or outdoors, for competition or health and leisure purposes is a popular activity in Australia. Buchmann (2014) claimed that: "Exact numbers are challenging to establish but the Australian Stock Horse Society, Australia's largest equine recreational and pleasure association, alone has 9,500 individual members and an excess of 170,000 registered horses (Australian Stock Horse Society, 2011).[...]. The EI (Equine Influenza) data has shown how many people are travelling with their horses (at times substantial distances) for recreational and leisure purposes."

Whatever the diversity of the equestrian cultures (from Northern, Southern, Eastern and Western Europe, to North America and Australia), equestrian tourism has become a real specific activity, defined by its plurality, and supporting the local and global economy of the regions and countries involved. Before analyzing how this increase can fit with sustainable

tourism development issues, we still need to focus on the characteristics of the French case of equestrian tourism development.

## **Equestrian tourism in France: in a restructuring process from a national to a local scale**

Equestrian activity is relatively popular in France, and has become the 3rd biggest sports federation. It took off in the 1950s but did not really become well established until the 1970s (Tourre-Malen, 2009) with the development of pony clubs, which have only officially been recognized in France since 1971, and which have made riding accessible to more socially diverse population groups. The proliferation of pony clubs in France (there were more than 1,700 clubs in 2012 - FFE, 2012), has resulted in considerable growth in the number of members, increasing almost five-fold between 1984 (145,071 club members) and 2012 (706,449 club members). The number of active riders is in fact estimated to be much higher, because owner-riders who stable their horses at home very often do not apply for club membership, as well the number of occasional riders (which increases greatly during the holidays). According to an estimate by Sofres-Fival, it is calculated that the number of horse-riders is around 2.2 million, with one third of these being regular riders and two thirds casual riders. The number of horses registered with IFCE-SIRE is around 930,000 (IFCE, 2011).

Of the 8,000 equestrian structures in France, 80% of such facilities specialize in training, therefore in indoor and outdoor arenas (FFE, 2012). Only 20% of such businesses specialize in stabling and/or equestrian tourism. However, half the companies specializing in training also offer outdoor pursuits so as to diversify their economic model. Club member riders who work in "tourism", and who specialize in outdoor riding, represent a minority. In 2011, there were 88,642 out of 706,449 representing only 12.5% of riders (FFE, 2013). Their number is, of course, in reality higher because they are primarily outdoor riders who do not need to be club members as they often own their horses. Equestrian tourism and leisure have grown in popularity in line with the expansion of other leisure activities in France, including horse-riding, since the late 1950s and early 1960s (Terret, 2007; MIT, 2005). As such, the first official gathering of sixty outdoor riders, which gave birth to the *Equirando* trend, took place in August 1961 at the *Château de Polignac* in the Auvergne. This event has been repeated every one or two years since then and is a lively three-day camping festival attracting between 800 and 1,500 horses and their riders to a site which changes location every time.

This interest in outdoor activities also led to the creation of the National Association for Equestrian Tourism (*Association Nationale pour le Tourisme Equestre*) in 1963, but still over forty years after the creation of the French Federation of Equestrian Sports (*Fédération Française des Sports Equestres*) in 1921. The three disciplines (Equestrian Sport, Tourism and Pony-riding) have been grouped together by the French Equestrian Federation (*Fédération Française d'Equitation*) since 1987, while the ANTE has become the National Confederation for Equestrian Tourism (*Délégation Nationale au Tourisme Equestre*). A further reform in 2000 transformed it into the National Committee for Equestrian Tourism (*Comité Nationale du Tourisme Equestre*). We should also note the desire for international coordination with the creation in 1975 of the International Federation for Equestrian Tourism (*Fédération Internationale du Tourisme Equestre*), greatly influenced by the French federation through economic support (Delambre, 2011).

Therefore, nowadays, every region in France benefits from a well-structured organization, from the national scale (National Committee for Equestrian Tourism) to the regions (with one Regional Committee for Equestrian tourism – CRTE - for each of the 27 French regions), and departments with 94 Departmental Committees for Equestrian tourism – CDTE - out of 101

administrative areas. Their aims are to organize and maintain the marked trails (France has 60,000 km of equestrian trails of which 20,000 are marked - Delambre, 2011), but also special events, training and even specific competitions. In 1987 the Equestrian Excursion Techniques for Competition (*Technique de Randonnées Equestres de Compétition*) was created which it groups together events designed to assess the ability of the horse and rider in exercises inspired by the challenges that may be encountered during riding trips (orientation, regularity, crossing natural obstacles etc.). At the same time, other sporting activities have developed such as endurance riding which is a sort of horseback marathon on marked trails, where time and the horse's heart rate are taken into account. Because of the small number of participants, *TREC* and endurance are covered by a single sporting commission.

These practices therefore today require a homogenized knowledge which has resulted in diplomas being created: in 2000 the *Galops de pleine nature* awards appeared. These follow the format of traditional horse riding examinations (*les Galops*), but focus on controlling the horse while outdoors and on a detailed knowledge of the environment. The intrinsic relationship between these *galops* and the natural environment is clearly displayed by the *FFE* which defined them by the fact that they "offer riders who appreciate fauna and flora the opportunity to increase their knowledge of horses and nature, while giving them the independence to go out on riding trips".

The development of outdoor riding has also led to it becoming more professional in the field of tourism. First, the *FFE* created the label "Equestrian Tourism Center", which aims to give credibility to companies which link this activity to a high quality welcome and choice of horses. This label today covers 300 schools. The Federation has also introduced the "*Cheval Etape*" label to identify and promote high quality accommodation which can accept horses, particularly in the context of equestrian tourism. The label certifies the presence of a welcome which offers comfort, safety, the appropriate food (hay, water), information on the activities available nearby and maps of local trails.

In addition, private specialized Tour Operators have also appeared. Henri Roque was among the pioneer, organizing in 1961 one of the first organized paid-for horse-riding trips. His idea received intense media interest thanks to the invitation of journalists and celebrities to ensure the general public were made aware of these trips. This offer was formalized ten years later, with the creation of specialized Tour Operators: *Cheval d'Aventure* was set up in 1972, followed by *Rando-Cheval* in 1998, *Cavalier du Monde* in 2005 and *Caval and Go* in 2009. These agencies offer all-inclusive packages for different ability levels on all five continents.

So, even if equestrian tourism remains a minority activity, it benefits from the establishment of a well-structured organization and an increase in professionalization. Nonetheless, can we imagine that this increase of equestrian tourism, through tourism activity *on* the horse or *for* the horse as an attraction (around the horse), may lead to sustainable tourism development? In order to start to answer this question we'll focus on three different situations in France, of areas which associate the sustainable development of their region with equestrian tourism.

## Discussion and debate

### ***Equestrian tourism, as a vector of sustainable development in protected areas: the examples of Natural Regional Parks***

To be considered as "sustainable", tourism must, according to the previous definition, contribute to:

- improving the welfare and livelihoods of local communities by supporting their local economies;

- involving host populations and helping strengthen their social cohesion;
- allowing intercultural meetings and understanding;
- providing a positive experience for local people, tourism companies and the tourists themselves;
- promoting environmental awareness, conserving and protecting the environment, respecting wildlife, flora, biodiversity, ecosystems and cultural diversity.

According to Atout France (2011), equestrian tourism can, within the framework of good governance, contribute to the double-headed process of regional organization, involving the cooperation of local communities - as other outdoor activities do (Butler, Hall, Jenkins, 1997; Buckley, 2000; Jagemann, 2004 ; Bessy & Mouton, 2004; Bessy & Olivier, 2005; Mounet, 2000) - and that of boosting local identity. In France, there are several examples of regions using horses and equestrian tourism as ways of developing tourism in both the land-management and cultural sectors of the industry. This capacity was officially recognized by the agency for national tourism development (Atout France) in 2011, which claimed: “The horse is a part of our heritage, a symbol of its ecosystem, of its history, of the local and regional traditions of its area, and is considered a tool which helps people appreciate the land” (Atout France, 2011: 14). Nonetheless, behind this official declaration, it is important to check if those different examples of local development, through equestrian tourism, actually answer the criteria of sustainable tourism. In this context, we’ll focus on three cases studies where the tourist development of local protected areas (natural Regional Parks) is associated, through deep historic or/and geographic links, to horses and equestrian tourism, such as:

- the Natural Regional Park of the Camargue (Camargue Horse) - South of France ;
- the Natural Park of the Marquenterre (Henson Horse) – North of France.
- the Natural Regional Park of the Cevennes (Przewalski Horse) – Center of France;

The Natural Regional Park of the Camargue, created in 1970, stretches from the Rhone to the Mediterranean Sea. We can see there the use of the Camargue horse as a component of economic development and as a unifying element of cultural identity, particularly visible in the village of Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer. This village is an area famous for its ranching – the breeding of semi-wild Camargue horses in the wetland marshes - and for its rearing and training of bulls for fighting. Saintes-Maries is also a pilgrimage site for European gypsies. Today, horses are associated with all of the village events as an important part of its identity. For example, the pilgrimage on the 24th and 25th of May consists of a big procession, followed by the herdsmen on horseback leading the statues of the two village saints (Marie Jacobé and Marie Salomé) down to the sea to be blessed by the Bishop. In July there is the Horse Festival which takes place over three days in the village, including various equestrian activities: working-horse displays, parades and the presentation of breeding-stock which takes place in the village streets and so involves the local population. Ranching in Saintes-Maries-sur-mer is also highlighted in November with the Abrivado festival, which has become famous due to the spectacular cattle-drive on the beach when two hundred herdsmen on horseback from all over Provence guide their bulls towards the village arena. So, the equestrian culture is still very much alive in the village, which is one of the last places in

France where the streets still have hitching points for herdsmen who continue to use their horses as a means of transport or for their work (illustration 1).

**Illustration 1. Les-Saintes-Maries is one of the last villages in France where horses and riding are still deeply associated with today’s way of life and work for many of**



**its inhabitants –the herdsmen. Photo, Lux, 2012.**

This traditional way of life would be obviously threatened by modernization and globalization which have made it increasingly obsolete. But developing equine tourism gives the inhabitants the possibility to protect, and even strengthen, their individuality by awarding the horse the status of a live heritage symbol and as such is a key part of their cultural identity. All the festivals with horses are part of the tourist calendar and are widely publicized by the local Tourism Office. The village has also opened a special museum focusing on Gardian culture (Musée Baroncelli). With this, horses and equestrian tourism are helping to strengthen social cohesion and maintain the local heritage. In addition, it also helps, according to the definition of “sustainable”, to favor intercultural meetings and understanding. Indeed, several events bring together villagers and tourists through shared activities such as free breakfasts organized for all the participants on the beach during the shows. Some events, such as the Equestrian Literature and Film Show, attract also locals and tourists for a film and literature festival about equestrian cultures around the world. So equestrian tourism in Saintes-Marie illustrates an example of co-development of tourism and culture, where tourism participates to maintain and enhance the heritage (Sharpley R., Telfer D, 2002; Lazzarotti and Violier, 2007; Lazzarotti, 2011), by also supporting the local economy.

In fact, this equestrian culture is also used to create tourism packages based on horse-riding: trips and visits are available for those wanting to accompany the cattle-drive, to be initiated in the ways of life of the traditional cowboy (called the “herdsman”), to discover the herdsman’s horse skills, to help sort of the cattle while on horseback, and of course to discover the local culture. In this way, equestrian tourism favors dynamic regional cooperation and perhaps even co-opetition (Brandenburger and Nalebuff, 1996). It contributes in these areas to a vertical quasi-integration of a network of small and medium-sized firms maintaining relations which are as competitive as they are cooperative (Torre, 2006). Indeed, this co-petition model could be particularly well adapted to equestrian tourism which requires, as we have seen, an image of the “Horse” associated with an area linked to the presence of a set of activities (equestrian culture, shows, sports events, tourism on horseback) but also to the way they are networked (marked equestrian routes, accommodation, sites, shows etc.).

Nonetheless, if it seems to work in specific small areas such as the village of Saintes-Marie-de-la-Mer (Saintes-Marie represents more than 80% of the camping places available of the whole Natural Regional Park of Camargue<sup>1</sup>), it has difficulty in spreading further afield because of problems of coordination between public and private bodies, and professionalization. According to surveys with local associations for equestrian tourism in the Natural Regional Park of Camargue (Fischer, 2013), the local public and private bodies don’t work closely enough with national institutions (FFE, CDTE, CRTE). In addition, the private bodies (riding schools) still have difficulties in developing cooperation between each other. The model of co-petition still needs to replace the old model of concurrency. To try to remedy this, the authorities in the Natural Regional Park of the Camargue have been involved in preparing a “charter for equestrian tourism” based on the brand values of a “Regional Nature Reserve” owned by the Ministry of the Environment. It respects the aims of sustainable development by promoting the region, protecting the environment and benefiting local businesses. However, only 5 out of 28 horse-riding-centers in the Natural Regional Park of the Camargue have so far signed up to the charter (2010). The sensitivity towards environmental issues especially is still not very strong among the owners of local riding-centers.

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<sup>1</sup> Schéma de tourisme durable du Parc naturel régional de Camargue 2010 – 2015, Version actualisée mai 2010.

The Natural Park of the Marquenterre, is another French example of using equestrian tourism as an agent for integration and sustainable local development. The authorities in the park, in association with local breeders, have worked to redefine the promotion of the natural park, as a tourist destination, notably through the creation of a new breed of horse, the *Henson*, produced by continuous cross-breeding since 1973 and with qualities particularly suited to tourism and the outdoors (hardiness, endurance, docility and maneuverability). The way they developed this little horse, with its single-color coat – Isabelle – echoes that of the *Camargue*, identifying its open wetlands with its small white horses, bred in the wild. Like the *Camargue* horses, the *Hensons* are used as mediators for the overall development of the area, including with the "*Henson Equestrian Areas*" which have been up and running since 1993 and include horse farms dedicated to trekking and tourism. The combination of sustainable development issues (sensitivity towards the preservation of natural habitats, local development) and equestrian tourism works here due to clear communication and good presentation – a natural park situated between the coast, forested dunes and wetland marsh areas and extensive ranching over many hectares.

According to Dominique Cocquet, founder of Hensen Equestrian Areas, people using these facilities, who are not necessarily regular riders, come looking for a change of scenery for between half a day and two days, where the feeling of a change is enhanced by the horse's movement. The horse therefore carries the dream associated with a tourist's stay through a collective imagination, situated somewhere between the western and *White Mane* (*Crin Blanc* in French) myths, in a safe environment (while avoiding urbanized areas). In this context, equestrian tourism is staged through events, such as the "*Trans' Henson*" which consists of the movement of more than 100 mares and foals, thanks to more fifty riders, towards their winter meadows. The event, widely covered by the press, is very popular with tourists because all the owners of *Hensons* are invited to join in (figure 2).



**Figure 2. The popular tourist event of the “Trans’Henson”, organized every year in October. Photo C.Lux, 2011.**

Dominique Coquet claimed: "the image of the horse is thus associated with the image of the land, promoting a new type of adventure tourism, in perfect harmony with its sensitive natural areas and fully in line with the values of sustainable development which have today become essential criteria for any tourist-related innovation." (Coquet, 2012, p117).

The strategy for sustainable territorial development works better than in the *Camargue* model (outside Les-Saintes-Maries), based on fragmented services where local participants have shown themselves to be reluctant to work together and with the authorities due to the logic of competition. Conversely, in the *Marquenterre* model the effort is more concentrated and involves decision makers at all levels - the *Association du Syndicat Mixte pour l'Aménagement de la côte Picarde* in particular developed the riding trails; agreements were signed with both coastal settlements for the reopening of marshland and the *Conservatoire du*



*Littoral* and its local management to make use of the polders in the *Parc ornithologique du Marquenterre* (annual summer pastures used by horses). Ultimately, communication is just as important with public bodies – *FFE*, *CNTE*, Regional Natural Parks.

In addition, the breeders of the “*Espaces Henson*” areas have been obliged to adopt an “agro-environmental territorial measures” status since 2009. This includes limiting the applications of fertilizer on the land, whilst maintaining sward regeneration and biodiversity (Evans&Pickel-Chevalier, 2014). Contrary to the Camargue example, in the Marquenterre case, the sustainable development is deeply based on economy and environmental issues, more than on heritage, since the Henson breed has recently been created. Nonetheless, the attractiveness of the *Espace Henson Areas* (geographically not far from Paris, which can provide lots of tourists during weekends) use imagination and myths, inspired by other equestrian cultures (Western and Camargue).

A final original example which deserves our attention is the reintroduction of *Przewalski* horses in the Natural Regional Park of the Cevennes, in Lozère. We need to remember that the *Przewalski* horse, which is named after the Russian explorer who discovered it in 1879 in the Gobi Desert, is the world’s last wild horse and is distinguished from domestic breeds by the number of chromosomes in its DNA (66 compared to 64 for domestic horses). It is not the source of today’s domestic horses but is a closely related species, descended from a common ancestor (Boyd, L. & King, S.R.B. 2011). Very rustic, small (between 1.20m and 1.30m tall) and with an erect mane and stripes on its legs, it has the distinction of never having been tamed. Its population was decimated by Mongol hunters and completely disappeared from the wild in 1970. It therefore owes its survival to breeding in captivity in zoos (there were 300 individuals in the world in 1977). Since then, various reintroduction projects have been attempted. The Foundation for the Preservation and Protection of the Przewalski Horse, which was created in 1977 in the Netherlands, reintroduced captive-bred horses to Mongolia in 1992. In France, the *Association pour le Cheval de Przewalski Takh*<sup>2</sup> (Association for the Przewalski Takh Horse) aims to associate the policy of reintroducing the horses to Mongolia to their introduction in natural areas in Lozère, on the plateau of Causse-Mejean. Located at a high altitude (between 800m and 1,300m above sea level) this area is covered with extensive dry grasslands, unsuitable for agriculture and where only sheep can graze. This protected area within the Natural Regional Park of the Cevennes is not very attractive, and as such is sparsely populated, and has a harsh climate - very hot in the summer and very cold in the winter.

However, these natural conditions are also found on the Mongolian steppes which prompted the *Association pour le Cheval de Przewalski* to select the site for the reintroduction of the horse. In 1993, eleven horses were reintroduced in the village of Villaret. Their integration, which has required them to readapt to life in the wild and form social relationships within a herd, has been a success and resulted in horses being sent to Mongolia in 2004 and 2005. In 2012 Villaret had 37 horses divided among 5 families. This program is part of a policy of sustainable development, certainly promoting the preservation of biodiversity, but also local economic development as the Przewalski horse helps to focus attention on, and provides an identity for, the "desert" which is the *Causse-Mejean*. It also generates a sense of compassion among visitors as they feel they are contributing to the preservation of the world’s last wild horse. The association, with the support of the local government of the Department of Lozère (*Conseil Général de Lozère*) and local partners, is trying to make them a tourist attraction by offering 5-day courses in wilderness tourism and observation of the horses in the village during the spring and summer months as well as welcoming visitors to the hamlet of Villaret<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> *Takh* is the Mongol word for horse

<sup>3</sup> [http://lozere.fr/sites/default/files/upload/documents/cl\\_prewalski.pdf](http://lozere.fr/sites/default/files/upload/documents/cl_prewalski.pdf)

every day throughout July and August. Thus, in this third study case, we can also see the possibility of using the horse as an agent for sustainable development, which is different from the two first cases. As the other, it supports the local economies, involves the host population, allows intercultural meetings, promotes environmental awareness, but also contributes to the conservation of biodiversity. It also brings a positive experience for local people and tourists, but this time not on horse-back – these horses are not tame - but to discover a wild horse. This equestrian tourism around the Przewalski horse is more linked to nature or even eco-tourism defined as "responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and improves the well-being of local people" (TIES-*The International Ecotourism Society*- 1990), than adventure tourism. The public are not necessarily riders themselves.

These three study cases represent three different typologies of equestrian tourism. They are all involved in sustainable development, but by favoring different aspects. In the Camargue, equestrian tourism associating tourism for horses (around events with horses) and on horses, favors economic development, social cohesion and strengthens local culture and heritage. In the Marquenterre case, economic and environmental issues prevail over cultural issues, whereas the main attraction is tourism on horse-back, even if events around horses are developing. And lastly, the original case of the reintegration of the Przewalski horse in the Cevennes can be defined more as ecotourism activity based on environmental objectives but also allowing local economic development through tourism. We observe three cases of equestrian sustainable tourism, but one more in link with *cultural tourism* (Camargue), second more in link with *nature and adventure tourism* (riding in wide natural place in Marquenterre) and the third with *ecotourism* (Causse-Mejean), which show the diversity of equestrian tourism activities.

Finally, the interest of the equestrian tourists must also be taken into consideration, whereas the issue of demand has often been ignored in the sustainable tourism debate (Butler 1999a; Liu, 2010). Are they, above all, motivated by the sustainability stakes? Are they looking, through riding, for a specific contact and respect of a natural and cultural heritage?

### ***Are the equestrian tourist, good agent for sustainable tourism development? Practices and motivations***

In order to better understand the practices and motivations of the riders, we have cross-analyzed the results of several surveys. It seems that the relationship between equestrian tourism and sustainability, widely promoted by official bodies, is less obvious to the participants. In fact, the results of different surveys conducted with riders (Julien, 2007; SEM Pays de la Loire, 2008) identify common centers of interest, which concentrate on comfort, safety and conviviality. Indeed, the first criteria declared by the equestrian riders are:

- The reliability of trails for horses;
- The quality of accommodation available for horses, their location on the trail and the prices charged;
- Places to eat out or stops accessible for horses;
- Friendliness;
- Safety.

They are not insensitive to the quality of the landscape or the presence of tourist, cultural or natural sites, but these attractions only come after the more practical criteria which ensure the comfort and safety of the excursion. These results are also confirmed by a study designed to identify the key criteria for a successful horse-riding trek, led by *Randonner à Cheval*



magazine in 2012. In this context, interviews were conducted with 20 experienced riders, both individuals and professionals as well as specialized-press journalists, from across the country. However, the essential criteria for the last group consisted of: the presence of a network of guest-houses, guaranteeing the comfort and safety of the horses, situated every 25-40km; recognized trails, which should if possible be marked, between guest-houses; a guidebook or maps to help identify routes (it should be noted that the use of new technologies is a bonus); and if possible, a person with specialist knowledge in each guest-house to help and advice riders. The quality of both the natural and cultural heritage is of course appreciated, but it is not essential as it is deemed to be naturally present in all French regions (Lux, 2012).

Therefore, the comfort and safety of both trails and accommodation are at the heart of what experienced riders want. However, it is interesting to note that a similar phenomenon also appears with less experienced customers at horse-riding-centers offering organized tourism products. In fact, according to a 2004 survey by the National Committee for Equestrian Tourism (*Bouhaouala and Albertini, 2005*) the factors which influence their purchasing decisions are:

- Contact with the horse and the welcome received at the riding center (the two criteria were chosen by more than 80% of riders surveyed);
- Relaxation (chosen by 75% of riders surveyed);
- The reputation of the center (chosen by 60% of riders surveyed);
- The wish to get away from it all (chosen by 57% of riders surveyed)
- The beauty of the site only appears in fifth place, chosen by only just over half the riders surveyed (55%).

Certainly, the criteria differ somewhat from those mentioned by trail-riders. They do not express the importance of the contact with the horse, which for many is a daily occurrence (they are mostly horse owners) and their concerns are more pragmatic as they organize their own excursions. Meanwhile, customers for organized tours allow themselves to be guided without any material worries, as these are supposed to be the responsibility of the service provider. However, beyond these differences linked to the knowledge and practice of horse-riding, there is still the importance of friendliness and safety (the welcome offered by the riding-center and its reputation).

The search for friendliness and safety also concerns equestrian tourism, organized by specialist Tour Operators such as *Cavalier du Monde*, which runs trips for 350 riders every year. Satisfaction questionnaires posted online by this Tour Operator suggest that clients consider the main criteria which determine the success of a trip are "the personality and the qualifications of the guide". Of course, the beauty of the landscape and local cultural and historical heritage are also key factors, but no more so than the quality of the animals, the equipment and the support provided<sup>4</sup>.

The particularity of the TO *Cavaliers du Monde* is that it is a member of Act Now for Responsible Tourism (*Agir pour un Tourisme Responsable*) which for now is rarely noticed by its customers who ask very few questions about the label<sup>5</sup>. Their satisfaction stems mainly from a change of environment, a safe adventure, beautiful landscapes and contact with the horse, but very little from the association of tourism with sustainable development. This is despite the commitment of the company towards both reducing its environmental impact or local development issues. *Christophe Lesourd* explained that he chose to join ATER through personal conviction rather than a desire to stand out in the market, given the fact that it is by

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<sup>4</sup> Results obtained from the analysis of questionnaires posted online by *Cavalier du Monde*

<sup>5</sup> See above

no means certain his customers are really aware of its role<sup>6</sup>. So if the equestrian tourists are interested into enjoying nature, they are less necessary concerned about sustainability issues.

Outdoor riding and equestrian tourism fall once more into the patterns of outdoor sports, particularly when focusing on the desire for a safe adventure. This is either by seeking to minimize risk-taking, even in adventure tourism (Weber, 2001; Carter, 2006) by organizing an excursion or trip via a registered agency – riding-centers, specialist TOs – or by searching for reliable routes and accommodation. Indeed, according to Carter: “The most successful adventure tourism operators are those that have reduced their actual risk levels whilst effectively promoting the thrills involved. Thus the responsibility of the commercial operator to minimize the opportunity for loss to as low a level as possible is not only an ethical one, but also ensures long-term business sustainability”(2006:317).

According to the survey conducted with 135 riders by the regional *SEM* in the *Pays de la Loire* in 2008, 70% of them even prepare their own trips in advance on the internet, a third download their routes directly and print them on paper while 18% of them copy the directions to their GPS device (*Atout France*, 2011). Safety and technology are what people want. Indeed, equestrian tourism is not different from today’s characteristics of soft “adventure tourism”, which is based on calculated risk, but more on excitement, challenge and stimulation and induces preparation and anticipation (Page, Bentley and Walker, 2005). As for other outdoor sports activities and nature or adventure tourism, the relation with natural and cultural landscapes is important, but not necessarily the main motivation of the consumers. Even the NEAT (nature-eco-adventure tourism) products “do not necessarily incorporate best-practice environmental management, nor an educational component or a contribution to conservation. Some do, some do not.”(Buckley, 2000:438-439). So the sensitivity of equestrian tourists to nature and protection exists but remains secondary compared to those aspects which ensure the comfort of the trip.

Regard for economic and social issues (local development, social cohesion) does not seem to characterize the collective consciousness of riders. They are more looking for friendly relationships with other enthusiasts. Are we seeing the emergence of a different profile for outdoor riders and equestrian tourism customers when compared to the dominant activities of the riding-school model? The analysis of customers at the Tour Operator *Cavalier du Monde* reveals that an outdoor rider profile does exist, but which is different from the riders in clubs. It is dominated by female riders, but at a lower level than we would typically observe (70% women compared to 80% for the sport in general). Their customers are also much older since the average age is 36 years, compared with 62% under 17 years of age (*FFE*, 2011) for horse-riding in general. This client base comes from the middle and upper classes, with a generally modest level of horsemanship - *galop 4* and *galop 5* under the French system (while *galop 7* is the competition standard). The *galop 4* and *galop 5* levels correspond to the ability to control the horse, especially when outdoors, but not the technical expertise required at a high level when jumping or participating in dressage<sup>7</sup>.

Thus, it appears that, if not primarily driven by social sensitivity (the issues of development favored by equestrian tourism, mobilizing local accommodation and catering services) or environmental sensitivity (an activity out "in the wilds" having a minor impact on the environment), then outdoor riding and equestrian tourism cater primarily for those who need an *alternative* choice. This corresponds to the wish of adult riders with average skill levels,

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<sup>6</sup> From an interview with *Christophe Lesourd* in May 2011

<sup>7</sup> “*Les itinérants à cheval*”, the result of an interview with *Christophe Lesourd* published in: *Atout France*, 2011, *Tourisme et cheval*.

and a certain purchasing power, to escape from very technical riding abilities and a performance objective, for free riding in the country, with the objective being a change of scenery, but with real requirements for comfort, safety and ease of use. In those aspects, outdoor riders and equestrian tourism completely fit in with the outdoor sports and activities which in France are: practiced essentially by the urban middle and upper class, most of time during holidays, for recreational and relaxation reasons (Ministère de la Jeunesse des sports et de la Vie Associative & INSEP, 2005).

This characteristic leads to the fact that whereas equestrian tourism can be an agent for sustainable development, sometimes the lack of interest or the miss-information of riders, often leads to conflicts of interests, especially in protected areas, such as public forests. The French Equestrian Federation (FFE) tries to strengthen the sensitivity of the riders through riding-schools. In 2010 the FFE got together with the Ministry of Ecology, Energy, Sustainable Development and the Sea and encouraged clubs to organize events during Sustainable Development Week, in particular for children. However, only 40 clubs took part out of more than 8,000 riding-schools throughout France. Professionals have so far not yet understood the advantages for them and their club-members of such associations and do not automatically register their activities within the tenets of sustainable development. Nonetheless, the *FFE* continues to work towards this objective and in 2012 signed an agreement with the *ONF* (*National Office of Forest*). Because the national forests are so frequently visited by horse-riders, both partners decided it was necessary "to establish a welcome and provide information for riders in forested areas in line with the challenges of sustainable development, the protection of environment and public safety." (<http://www.ffe.com>). This agreement is based on mutual commitments, in particular:

- guaranteeing development designed to accommodate and ensure the flow of riders and carriages in forested environments (with permanent and temporary signposting);
- ensuring riders respect fragile environments;
- establishing partnerships for training, leadership and communication programs.

The program is national and needs lots of local agreement between municipalities, local representatives of the ONF, local representatives of the FFE and riding schools. Nonetheless, nowadays conflicts are still very frequent with other users (when walking or biking) accusing horses of causing soil compaction and other impacts with their hoof prints, but there are also other aspects such as seeing or smelling muck (interview Dauge C., director ONF in Pays Marenne-Oléron, 2013). If it appears that some equestrian tourists don't respect the specific horse trails and cause a real impact on protected areas (Pickel-Chevalier, 2014b), it does however seem that the criticism of equestrian tourism, which has been observed in different countries (Whinam and Comfort 1996; Newsome and al, 2001), also comes from perceptions and prejudices, rather than facts, in many cases (Newsome et al, 2008; Beeton, 2001; 2006). More communication between equestrian tourism authorities (riders, companies and schools) and civil society would seem to be a necessity.

## Conclusion

These results testify to the capacity of equestrian tourism to play a role in sustainable tourism development, especially in rural and protected areas. Through these different examples, we can see the potency of equestrian tourism to reach sustainable criteria, even though according to the kind of equestrian tourism which covers several different activities but also the social, cultural, historical and environmental background of the local society, it will favor some

issues over and above others. In fact the three study cases represent a typology of three kinds of sustainable equestrian tourism:

- Economic, social and culture oriented equestrian tourism, around horses and secondary to horses –in link with *culture tourism*.
- Economic and nature oriented equestrian tourism, on horses and secondary around horses -in link with *nature tourism*, even “*soft*” *adventure tourism* (riding in wide natural places) but with environmental management.
- Environmental and economic oriented equestrian tourism, around horses as a biological heritage –in link with *ecotourism*.

If the three cases generally fit the sustainable criteria (local economic development by increasing the number of tourists; social cohesion by involving the host population; intercultural meetings by bringing a positive experience for local people and tourists; environmental awareness and policy of environmental protection), they cannot reach all of them at the same level. This fact is not unique to sustainable equestrian tourism, but characterizes almost all forms of sustainable development, since the ability to create development covering all the issues is hardly possible because of the historical, social, economic and environmental local differences (Turner, Pearce and Bateman, 1994; Hunter, 1997; Liu, 2010; Knafo and Pickel-Chevalier, 2011; Buckley, 2012) even in the same country.

Nonetheless, the success of sustainable equestrian tourism is based, as for other kinds of tourism, on the capacity of stakeholders to work together to avoid conflicts of interest (Wahab and Pigram, 1997). To become sustainable a tourist project need to associate various kind of stakeholders, at national and local levels, but also from business to ecological and territorial representatives (Butler, 1999b). The vertical quasi-integration of a network of small and medium-sized firms maintaining relations which are as competitive as they are cooperative (Torre, 2006), could be particularly well adapted to equestrian tourism which requires, as we have seen, an image of the "Horse" associated to an area linked to the presence of a set of activities (equestrian culture, shows, sports event, tourism on horseback) but also to the way they are networked (marked equestrian routes, accommodation, sites, shows). But if we can see some success at local levels, it seems still difficult to develop these model in larger areas, whereas competition logic still prevails over the co-petition model.

Therefore, we see that if the correlation between equestrian tourism and sustainable development exists, it is essentially at the request of the local authorities, associations and institutions. As such, participants in outdoor riding and equestrian tourism are more drawn to sustainable development by the policies (projects, communication) of their elected representatives than by their own initiative. Nonetheless, their motivation and satisfaction are essential to the success of sustainable tourism development (Liu, 2010; MIT, 2011). That's the reason why the analysis of their needs is important. In light of our results, we can identify the emergence of a distinct client profile compared to the usual trend, one which is still mostly female but less dominated, older (an average age of 35), coming from the upper and middle classes and having a reasonable riding ability (*galops 4* and *galops 5* levels). As with other natural sports, outdoor riding and equestrian tourism also stand out by offering the possibility of a safe adventure, which might seem contradictory, since "to go on an adventure" and "off the beaten track" suggest a lack of preparation. But the reality of equestrian tourism, as with other forms of “soft adventure tourism” (Carter, 2006; Page, Bentley and Walker, 2005) is very different: excursions and holidays are carefully prepared beforehand with great professionalism (services are organized by riding-centers or specialized Tour Operators) or

with the skills of experienced riders (planned several days in advance, using up-to-date technology: downloading maps and routes, and the increasing the use of GPS).

Outdoor riding and equestrian tourism are part of the way in which, as with other outdoor sports, people do not try to simply “*return to nature*” but invent new relationships with the environment, reworked as a place to play, where the risk is more imagined than experienced (Carter, 2006). It is an immersion in an environment which appears to be natural but is really very safe and managed, a sort of utopia, as painted by the French artists of the seventeenth century (*Poussin, Le Lorrain*) and like the way English gardens of the eighteenth century were laid out (Pickel, 2004; 2014a). So if the interest for nature exists, the sensitivity to sustainable development doesn't seem to be a determinant for equestrian riders, looking more for conviviality and a safe adventure.

With regard to conflicts of interests that are increasing with the development of equestrian tourism practices in fragile areas such as forests, the national institutions such as the FFE and the ONF have tried since 2010 to organize a common charter to award the riders on environmental and sustainable issues, but also to project a different image of horses to other users when a part of the accusation seems to also come from prejudices in France as in other countries (Newsome et al, 2001;2008; Beeton, 2006; 2010). These initiatives for better communication and common effort are still new in France, but can strengthen the capacity of equestrian tourism to support sustainable development, not only through the involvement of the authorities and riding-schools, but also the riders themselves. Further research needs to be undertaken in the future to see the effect of these developing initiatives but also to better understand the individual person-place relationship of horse riders with their environment and their evolution.

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