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Costa Blanca: Urban Evolution of a Mediterranean Region through GIS Data

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Riassunto

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Abstract

This paper investigates the international retirement migration from elderly northern Europeans into Spain and its influence on expansion of urban sprawl there. Key themes analyzed in this paper include the urban sprawl expansion during the Spanish housing bubble, and the link between lifestyle migrants and urban sprawl development. This paper considers the reasons for moving to Spain, which are chiefly related with the climate and lifestyle. It also explores the benefits and drawbacks of these en masse lifestyle migration and the environmental and landscape impacts on Mediterranean Spain. In order to visualize better this international migration we have created some GIS maps from a GIS project (CORINE Land Cover) dataset or from the official Spanish Census data. The map design program used to create the maps in this paper has been ArcGIS by ESRI

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Keywords

Lifestyle migration, Urban sprawl, Housing bubble, Mediterranean Spain, GIS data

1. Introduction

The migration of Northern European elderly people into Mediterranean Spain is one of the most significant flows of International Retirement Migration (IRM) over the entire world during the first decade of the twentieth century. This paper explores the effects of such vast migration on the huge expansion of urban sprawl on Mediterranean Spain, and discusses both the economic benefits and the environmental drawbacks on this territory. This development was favoured by the Spanish government, promoted by public authorities and large construction companies, with foreign capital involved, and mostly driven by retired lifestyle migrants.

Among the more than 5 million expatriates migrated into Spain during the last two decades, around 20% did so from higher GDP *per capita* countries than Spain's. Most of these latter migrated into Spain mainly with the expectation of achieving a better way of life through residential mobility. This kind of mobility – called *lifestyle migration* (Oliver, 2007; Benson and O'Reilly, 2009) – has recently experienced a significant worldwide expansion (Janoschka & Haas, 2013). We can find the roots of lifestyle migration in Spain in the mass tourism boom initiated in the 1960's. The remarkable growth in both wealth and life expectancy that took place in Northern Europe from the 1960's on resulted in a swell in the numbers of Northern European elderly who could afford to holiday abroad, preferably in the Mediterranean region, after the end of their working lives (Russell *et al.*, 1998). From the 1990's on many of the usual tourists in sunny Spain – especially senior citizens – decided to take up permanent residence in the Mediterranean region and became *lifestyle migrants* (Rodríguez *et al.*, 1998, 2004, 2005; King *et al.*, 2000; O'Reilly, 2000, 2007; Williams *et al.*, 2000; Casado, 2006; Gustafson, 2009; Huete, 2009; Mazón *et al.*, 2009).

In the Spanish Mediterranean coastal areas where senior migrants have settled, all the land-use planning that has been done in the last decades has aimed to serve real estate and tourist interests (Vera and Ivars 2003; Mazón 2006; Huete & Mantecón, 2011). This was particularly so during the global economic expansion of the late 20th century and the early 21st century, when elderly migrants (over 55) arrived in Spain *en masse* in order to stay: their numbers went from 60,000 in 1991

to almost 450,000 in 2012. This IRM was triggered, as regards Spain, by a combination of causes such as low-cost airlines, relatively low housing prices and cost of living, and global technological improvement.

If we analyze the use of artificial land during the last twenty years in Spain, we can see that urban land uses experienced a strong rise in this period, chiefly due to the Spanish housing bubble (1997–2007) (Burriel, 2008 and 2009; Gaja, 2008; Romero, 2010; Rullan, 2011); and also that among urban land uses, it was *urban sprawl* that grew the most in those years. Local developers contributed to the expansion of sprawling development patterns in the Spanish Mediterranean area by constructing thousands of single-family homes that were largely bought by Northern European migrants. It must be pointed out that urban sprawl – a kind of development pattern studied by Gillham (2002), Richardson & Chang Hee (2004), Hogan & Ojima (2008) or Brody (2013) – had been scarcely present in Spain, or in the whole Southern Europe region, before the economic expansion of the late 20th century and the early 21st century (Muñoz, 2003; Pumain, 2004; Roca *et al.*, 2004).

The aim of this paper is thus, first, to examine the massive retirement lifestyle migration from Northern Europeans into Mediterranean Spain; second, to explore and discuss the effects of such migration on the huge expansion of urban sprawl in there; and third, to analyze the consequences of the urban sprawling in the Spanish Mediterranean coast, with all the short-term benefits for local economies and all the long-term drawbacks for the territory.

2. Data and Methods

In order to study the numbers of population, construction and IRM in the Spanish Mediterranean region, we have analyzed data from the INE (*Instituto Nacional de Estadística*) Spanish Census. So as to distinguish lifestyle migrants living in Spain from those who are not, we have taken into account their age (55 and over) and country of origin: whether immigrants came from higher GDP per capita countries than Spain's (and so could be regarded as *lifestyle migrants*) or from lower GDP *per capita* countries than Spain's (and in this case, they

could be seen as labour migrants). We assume that not all the over-55-migrants coming from richer countries than Spain are lifestyle migrants, but most studies agree that the number of cases deviating from this mentioned distribution is not significant.

We have taken data from two GIS projects to study the urban sprawl in the Spanish Mediterranean area. The first is CORINE Land Cover (CLC), started in 1985 as an initiative of the European Commission with the aim of gathering environmental data about the European Union and incorporated in the European Environment Agency (EEA) since 1994. The EEA is the institution responsible for providing information on Europe's environmental and territorial policies – to achieve this aim it uses CLC. Its first version dates from 1990, and it was updated in 2000 and 2006. Although the first version of CLC is from 1990, in the maps where CLC information is used (e.g. fig. 8 & 9), we specified that the urban sprawl refers to 1987, because orthophotos used in Spain for creating CLC90 come from 1987 and not from 1990. The CLC nomenclature consists of 44 land uses, 11 of which are labelled *artificial uses*. Among these 11 artificial uses can be found the so-called *Discontinuous urban fabric*, which is defined as a use comprising *residential areas around the edge of urban district centres, and certain urban districts in rural areas* – this is, therefore, the CLC's land use which best describes the sprawling development pattern, and we have employed it to draw our maps of urban sprawl evolution in Spain. A second GIS project on land use evolution that we have taken into account, even though only for statistical purposes, is SIOSE (*Sistema de Información de Ocupación del Suelo en España* or 'Spain's Land Cover Information System'), a project promoted in 2005 by the Spanish *Instituto Geográfico Nacional* (IGN, 2006, Membrado, 2011) and updated in 2009 and 2011. SIOSE's nomenclature is formed by simple and composed land uses. One of the composed land uses is *mixed urban*, which in turn is divided into *casco* (old city), *ensanche* (new city), and *discontinuo* (urban sprawl). In order to distinguish urban sprawl areas from compact cities, we have taken the class *discontinuous mixed urban* as the equivalent of urban sprawl.

The map design program used to create the maps in this paper has been ArcGIS by ESRI (Environmental Systems Research Institute). In order to create our maps

of Spain we have used provincial-level data, which are more disaggregated than those at a regional level, and less disaggregated, but easier to read, than those at a municipal level. To create our maps of Costa Blanca we have used as a reference the *comarca* level, which is smaller area than a province but bigger than a municipality (and rather similar to a county). Throughout this paper, we repeatedly use the place name *Mediterranean Spain*, meaning Spain's sunniest, warmest, and most touristic areas. For statistical purposes, under the name *Mediterranean Spain* we include all the Mediterranean coastal provinces (including the Balearic Islands) and also the Atlantic coastal provinces (i.e., Atlantic Andalusia and the Canary Islands), which have a Mediterranean climate too. Whenever we do not have province-based data but only region-based data, we use the term *Spain's Mediterranean regions*, which, for statistical purposes, refers to all the regions by the Mediterranean Sea (i.e., Catalonia, València, the Balearic Islands, Murcia and Andalusia) and also to the Canary Islands.

3. Background

3.1. The Spanish Housing Bubble

Between 1997 and 2007, economic growth in Spain was mainly based on the construction sector, a fact which was particularly striking all along the Mediterranean coast. This housing boom can be explained by two main factors. The first is that Spain, as a member of the Euro zone since its creation in 1999, enjoyed the benefits of being part of a currency regarded as strong and safe (Romero, 2010: 24). It was thus easy for Spanish banks and companies to get credit from abroad. The second is the approval in 1998 of a new Land Law which established that any non-protected piece of land could be built on (Rullan, 2011: 182). The conjunction of both factors led to considerable investment of private capital (both Spanish and foreign) in the housing sector, offering quick, substantial returns. Town councils began to promote urban expansion so as to use it as a source of revenue (via taxes). The lack of a proper regulatory framework allowed non-public developers to build as much as they wanted. Neither national nor regional au-

thorities were able, or willing, to control this development promoted by municipalities and private interests, or to attenuate its impact on environmental sustainability (Burriel, 2008).

This development process was reinforced by cheap credit, thanks to the low interest rates that banks charged on loans to buy a house. This, in turn, led to more people buying houses as opposed to renting them. Thanks to the construction fever, unemployment in Spain went from 21% in 1997 to 8% in 2006. The rising employment increased many families' disposable income, and also attracted many immigrants, whose number went from 1% of the whole population living in Spain in 1995 to 12.2% in 2010. This increase of the immigrant population also implied that even more people now wanted to buy a house in Spain.

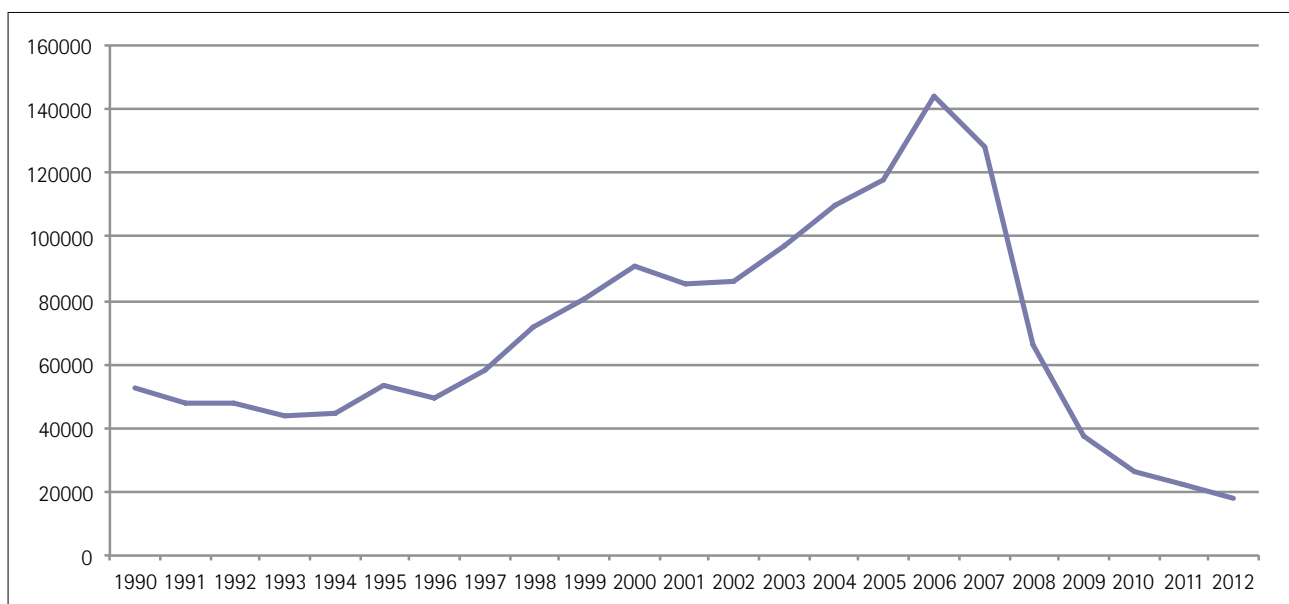
Because of land speculation, the average housing price multiplied by three between 1997 and 2007. That led to a growing housing bubble that eventually burst in the 2007 global financial crisis (figure 1). The credit lines were cut, causing the collapse of the construction-dependent economy. Since then, housing price has fallen in Spain by a third and housing construction has descended to levels of the early 1960's.

3.2. Expansion of urban sprawl. Characteristics of this development pattern

Urban sprawl is a pattern of low-density settlement which has been the prevailing urban development pattern in Spain for the last 20 years. According to CLC data, in the period 1987-2006 urban or other developed land uses increased significantly all over Spain, especially in Mediterranean Spain, where 134,280 new hectares were developed. Among these developed land uses, it was *urban sprawl* that grew the most (46,406 new hectares) (fig. 2). If we take into account only a 10-km-deep coastal strip, developed land uses increased by 83,496 hectares, and *urban sprawl* alone grew by 35,653 (+68%). According to CLC, in 2006 4.2% of land along a 10-km-deep coastal strip in Mediterranean Spain was occupied by urban sprawl, a percentage that reached 40% in some resort towns.

Urban sprawl was developed in the USA particularly after the Second World War, when large suburban residential areas were created there. The spread of urban sprawl to Europe began first in the northern countries (by the 1960's), then it reached France (where suburbanization multiplied fivefold between 1969 and 1999)

FIGURE 1 – Spain: land (thousands of sq. m) to be built on (1990-2012)
SOURCE: Ministerio de Fomento (2013)



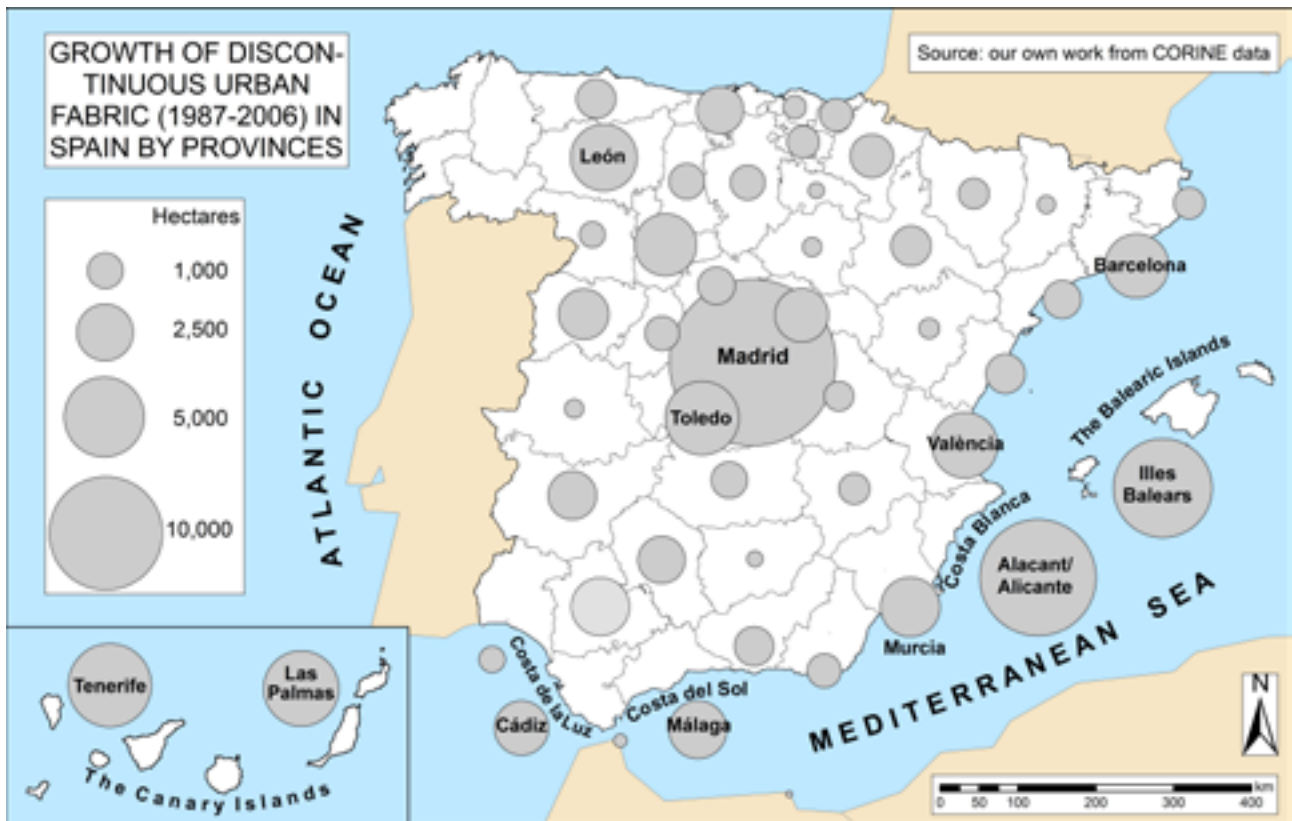


FIGURE 2 – Spain: urban sprawl growth by provinces (1987-2006)
SOURCE: CLC

(Pumain, 2004: 137), and finally it affected Spain, Italy and other southern countries. Before the remarkable recent urban sprawl development, the Mediterranean coastal regions had traditionally been a paradigm of high-density cities, urban complexity and social diversity (Muñoz, 2003: 381; Roca *et al.*: 2004).

Although there is not a universally accepted definition of *urban sprawl*, there are several common characteristics that can help us describe it, according to Brody (2013). First, the most frequently noted feature of sprawl is that low-density, single family dwellings consume large amounts of previously natural or farm land. Second, the development of homogeneous sprawl neighbourhoods lacking a mixture of land uses (residential, commercial, amenities...) forces residents to rely on automobiles even for short distances. During the 2000's, car use grew faster in Europe than in the USA, a fact which can be linked to the growth, despite

some European pro-compact city policies, of urban sprawl in the old continent. Nowadays 'there is more convergence than divergence between the United States and Western Europe' as regards suburbanization (Richardson and Chang Hee, 2004: 7). Third, sprawl housing grows outward from more compact urban cores. Approximately 80 percent of the land for new housing in the US during 1994-1997 can be found outside compact cities (Heimlich & Anderson, 2001); according to CORINE, during 1987-2006 73% of land for new housing in Spain was for sprawl outside urban cores. Fourth, development is dispersed, which favours the development of land situated further out in the countryside. This leapfrogging growth creates a chaotic development pattern consuming large amounts of natural and farm lands. Fifth, sprawl residences are often placed along the roads extending outward from urban centres, which creates a *ribbon* development that increases traffic jams.

And sixth, urban sprawl often encroaches on natural and agricultural lands and thus tends to blur the division between urban and rural areas.

Those who support urban sprawl believe that living in a suburban area increases contact with nature and reduces traffic congestion and air pollution. Furthermore, they argue that suburban houses are cheaper than those closer to the city centre and that, when asked, most people prefer to live away from the compact city (Gillham, 2002: 72). Opponents of urban sprawl regard it as undesirable since it devours a huge amount of valuable land resources (including farmland and wetlands) and devastates landscapes. Moreover, it consumes unsustainable amounts of energy and water. Its dependence on the use of private vehicles causes not only air pollution but also traffic congestion, obesity and stress for drivers. Besides, it destroys community life and segregates people according to their status (*Ibid.*).

Among the causes which attract people from compact cities into suburban areas we can name the cost of housing: those who want to buy a large house can find less expensive options in suburban areas. Choosing to live in a sprawling residential area, however, is not only linked to the cost of housing but also to some new values (environmental awareness, global communication technology) as well as to the expansion of globalized patterns of production and consumption (Hogan & Ojima 2008: 205).

4. Connection between Lifestyle Migrants and Urban Sprawl in Spain

4.1. Lifestyle migrants in Mediterranean Spain

Thanks to the temporary wealth created by the Spanish housing bubble, Spain attracted over 5 million immigrants, a fact which made Spain's ratio of immigrants to the whole of the country's population (12.2% in 2010) one of Europe's highest. Due to the current economic crisis, nowadays Spain is not only losing a part of those immigrants, but many young and competent Spaniards have also been forced to resort to emigration.

We must distinguish between two main types of immigrants in Spain. First, there are those who come from

a country poorer (i.e., with a lower GDP per capita) than Spain. These are the *labour* migrants; and most expatriates (80%) living in Spain belong to this type. They mainly come from Eastern Europe, Southern America and Northern Africa, and they came into Spain looking for a better future, expecting to find work (if they find one it is as an employee) and better living conditions (figure 3). Second, there is a noteworthy minority of immigrants (20%) whose origin are countries richer (with a higher GDP per capita) than Spain. Typically these come from the United Kingdom, Germany, the Benelux or Scandinavia. For the most part, they decided to settle all along the Mediterranean coast, in search not only of sunny, dry weather (Membrado, 2012: 139), but also of a different lifestyle. Many of them are retirees, who rely on their pensions and savings to make a living. Those who are not retirees are usually self-employed, often providing services for same-nationality, retired migrants (figure 4). We will call them *lifestyle* migrants, since they are not *residential tourists*, who are usually identified with second-home users. They are people who live all the year or most of the year in the Mediterranean coast, most of them owning a property and registered there. They do not consider themselves as tourists anymore, although most of them were tourists in Spain before they decided to move here. They are people trying to redefine their daily life in a place different from the one where they used to live and work (Huete & Mantecón, 2012: 161). The complexity of this new type of mobility led Benson & O'Reilly (2009: 609) to use the notion of *lifestyle migrants*, i.e. "relatively affluent individuals of all ages, moving either part-time or full-time to places that, for various reasons, signify, for the migrant, a better quality of life".

Although the goal of every immigrant is finding a better life, the weight of economic factors is greater among migrants coming from countries with a lower GDP than their host country (i.e., labour migrants) than it is among migrants from countries with a richer GDP than their host country (i.e., lifestyle migrants), because the latter are supposed to have a purchasing power comparatively higher than labour migrants, which allows them to enjoy more freedom of movement in the host country. Lifestyle migrants are attracted more by the idea of "achieving a better quality of life through a

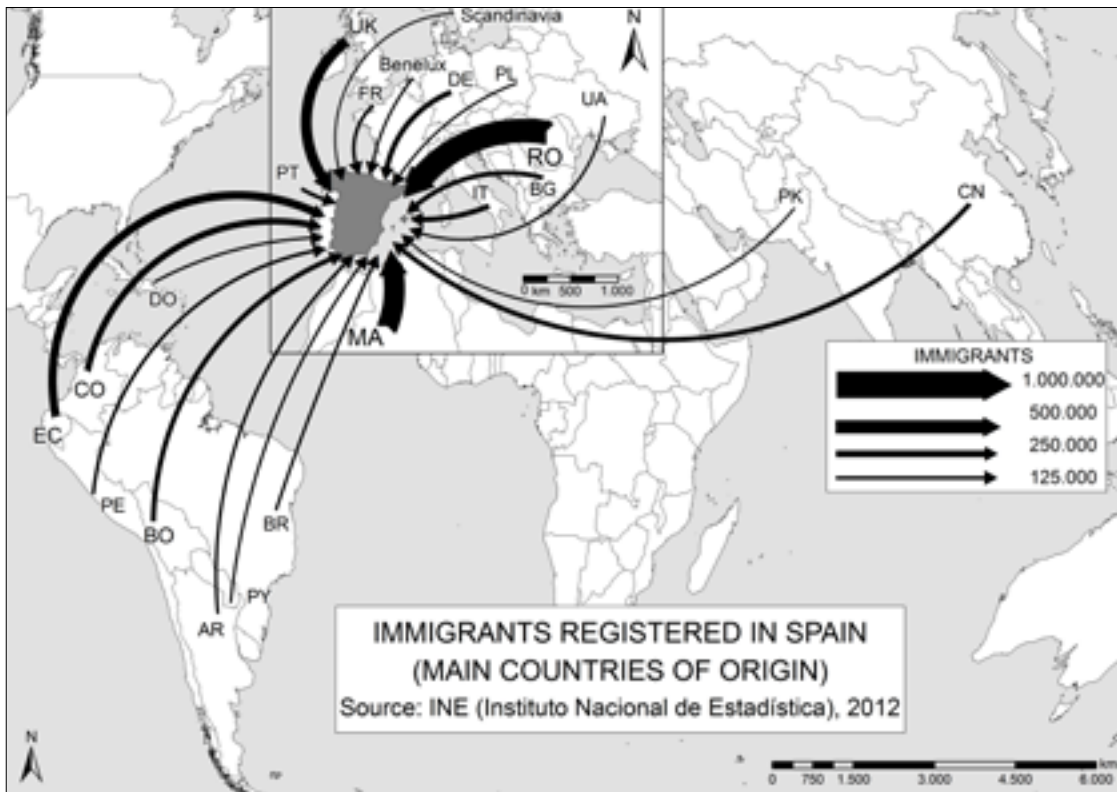


FIGURE 3
Spain: main countries of origin of registered immigrants (2012)

SOURCE:
INE (2013)

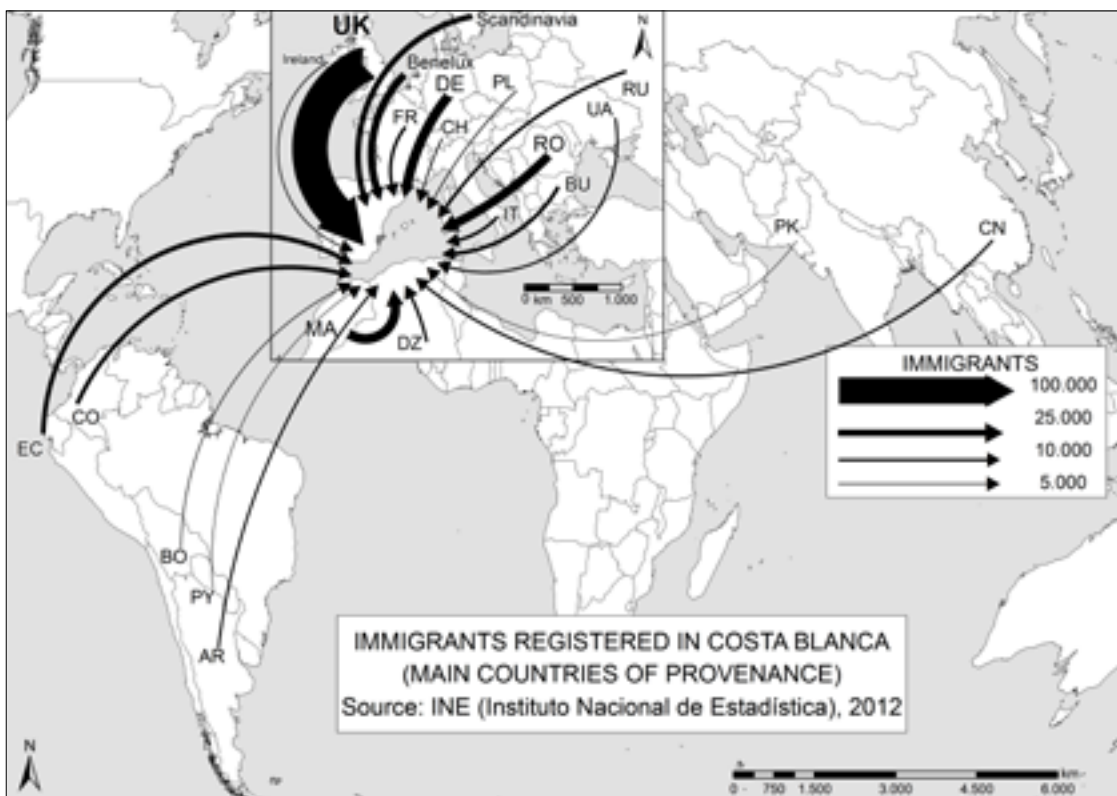


FIGURE 4
Costa Blanca: main countries of origin of registered immigrants (2012)

SOURCE:
INE (2013)

change in lifestyle” (Torkington, 2012:72-73) than they are by purely economic causes, although it must be admitted that economic causes, such as the difference in the cost of living and housing costs between the country of origin and the host country, are also a factor behind lifestyle migrants’ decision to move (Huete *et al.*, 2013:333).

Usually, in order to distinguish among *labour* and *lifestyle* migrants, researchers have tended to identify lifestyle migrants with those belonging to certain nationalities (i.e., countries whose GDP per capita is higher than that of the host country). This has led to the conclusion that all Northern Europeans expatriates in Spain are lifestyle migrants. However, Huete *et al.* (2013: 334) consider that the concept of lifestyle migrant in the strict sense should refer only to those migrants whose daily life in Spain is linked to leisure experiences – basically, the retirees. Indeed, retirees are the most clearly identified group of lifestyle migrants, since they can enjoy their free time rather than doing a job. As far as Spain’s senior migrants are concerned, it must be noted that almost half of the expatriates coming from countries with a higher GDP per capita than Spain’s are 55 and over, and that 95% of these senior migrants have settled in Mediterranean Spain (see figure 5).

In this paper we will deal mainly with retired lifestyle migrants, who, as we have explained, can be regarded as the only lifestyle migrants in the strict sense (see fig. 5 and 6). Retired lifestyle migrants choose to live in the Mediterranean Spain for various reasons, among them the housing cost, the cost of living, the climate and the sea, but also what they regard as the Mediterranean lifestyle – a lifestyle that implies a better quality of life, and a healthier life, thanks to its slower pace and its outdoor activities. It is also important to take into account the role of the Spanish and foreign promoters, and also of the Spanish political authorities, in supporting mass tourism and attracting the attention of potential buyers abroad to the Spanish coastal areas. Spanish and foreign promoters are also responsible for the concentration of expatriates of the same nationality in certain areas. In order to achieve optimization of resources and costs, promoters tried to sell each development in just one country, thus creating colonies of people from the same country. These settlements by

nationality were particularly sought by the elderly, who found it safer to move abroad if they could live among people from their own country (Huete, 2005).

Therefore, as those colonies of retired lifestyle migrants settled, they formed social groups with a common language and culture. Each group of expatriates grows and creates huge colonies of Englishmen, Germans, Dutchmen, Norwegians, etc., and each colony becomes a piece in a multicultural mosaic (Piqueras, 2011: 202-203). As these colonies of lifestyle migrants become numerically more important, their influence is bigger. They participate in Spain’s social and political life, at least at a municipal level. Many lifestyle migrants have been included in Spanish parties’ lists, and even some local parties have been founded by lifestyle migrants in dozens of coastal towns and villages. Foreign councilors are now a common part of the political stage in coastal Mediterranean Spain (Janoschka & Durán, 2013: 61 & 66).

Whereas *labour* migrants can be found all over Spain, their number depending on the population and the GDP of each province, *lifestyle* migrants are mainly concentrated in Mediterranean Spain. Costa Blanca (the tourist name for the province of Alacant/Alicante) is the area with the highest percentage of lifestyle migrants on the total local immigrant population (35% of all immigrants living in Costa Blanca are lifestyle migrants). If we observe the origin of immigrants (of all kinds) living in Costa Blanca (figure 4), and compare it with the origin of immigrants living in the whole of Spain (figure 3), we notice significant differences. Whereas in Costa Blanca the biggest group of expatriates come from the UK, in Spain as a whole they come mostly from Romania, Morocco and South America.

4.2. Europe's most popular place for lifestyle migrants to live in

Spain is, by far, the Mediterranean country with the highest number of lifestyle migrants. The number of registered inhabitants coming from European countries richer than Spain to this country in 2012 was around 1,125,000 (INE, 2013). If we compare this number with the amount of lifestyle migrants living in other Mediterranean-climate European countries, we can see that

Italy (150,000) (ISTAT, 2013; data from 2010), Portugal (60,000) (SEF, 2013, data from 2010) and Greece (50,000) (EL.STAT, 2013; data from 2001) lag far behind Spain.

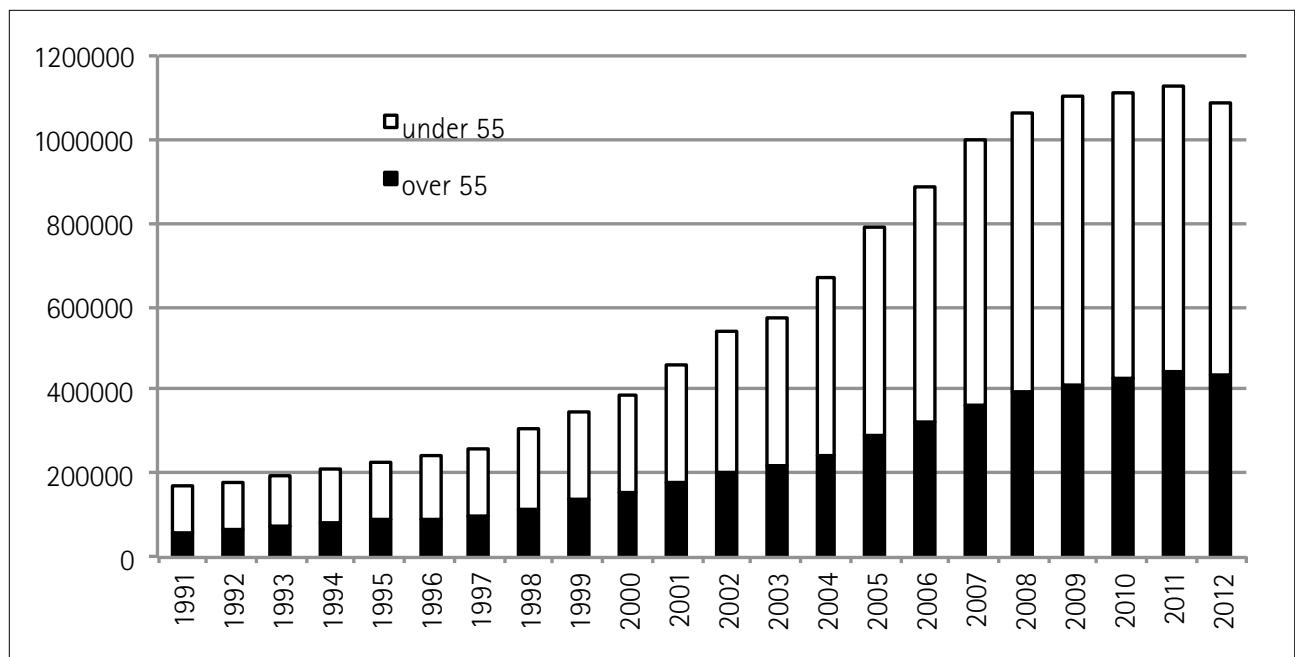
As regards retired lifestyle migrants, 60,000 of them lived in Spain in 1991, whereas in 2012 their number was almost 450,000 (figure 5). Despite the economic crisis (which started in 2007), this number did not cease to grow until 2012 – that year, according to INE data, the number of retired lifestyle migrants living in Spain fell (by 8,880) for the first time since official records began to list immigration data. In figure 6 we can see the geographic distribution of lifestyle migrants 55 and over. 95 of them live in Mediterranean Spain. The areas where they prefer to settle are Costa Blanca (35,5% of all retired lifestyle migrants in Spain live there), Costa del Sol (17,1), the Canary Islands (13,5), the Catalan Coast (7,1%), the Balearic Islands (6,6), Mediterranean Andalusia without Costa del Sol (5), Murcia (4,6), and the Valencian coast excluding Costa Blanca (3,4) (figure 6).

As far as the nationality of lifestyle migrants is concerned, in figure 6 we have distinguished five prove-

nances according to the immigrants' languages: Britons, plus a small Irish colony; Germans, including the small colony of Austrians and the sizable Swiss colony, most of which consists of German speakers; people from the Benelux (Dutchmen, Belgians and Luxembourgers), who for the most part speak Dutch; Scandinavians, where the Swedish and Norwegian colonies are considerable; and speakers of Romance languages (Frenchmen and Italians).

Lifestyle migrants over 55 from France and Italy (60,742; 14% of all lifestyle migrants over that age in Spain) constitute a majority in the entire Catalan coast, due to the geographical proximity of their countries of origin to Catalonia. As for Scandinavians (36,726; 8.4% of all lifestyle migrants over 55 living in Spain), they are concentrated in tourist resorts such as Costa Blanca and Costa del Sol. People from the Benelux (37,844; 8.6% of all lifestyle migrants over 55 living in Spain) are also predominantly concentrated in Costa Blanca, and, in a lesser way, in Costa del Sol. German speakers (95.426; 21.8% of all lifestyle migrants over 55 living in

FIGURE 5
Spain: evolution of lifestyle migrants (1991-2013)
SOURCE: INE (2013)



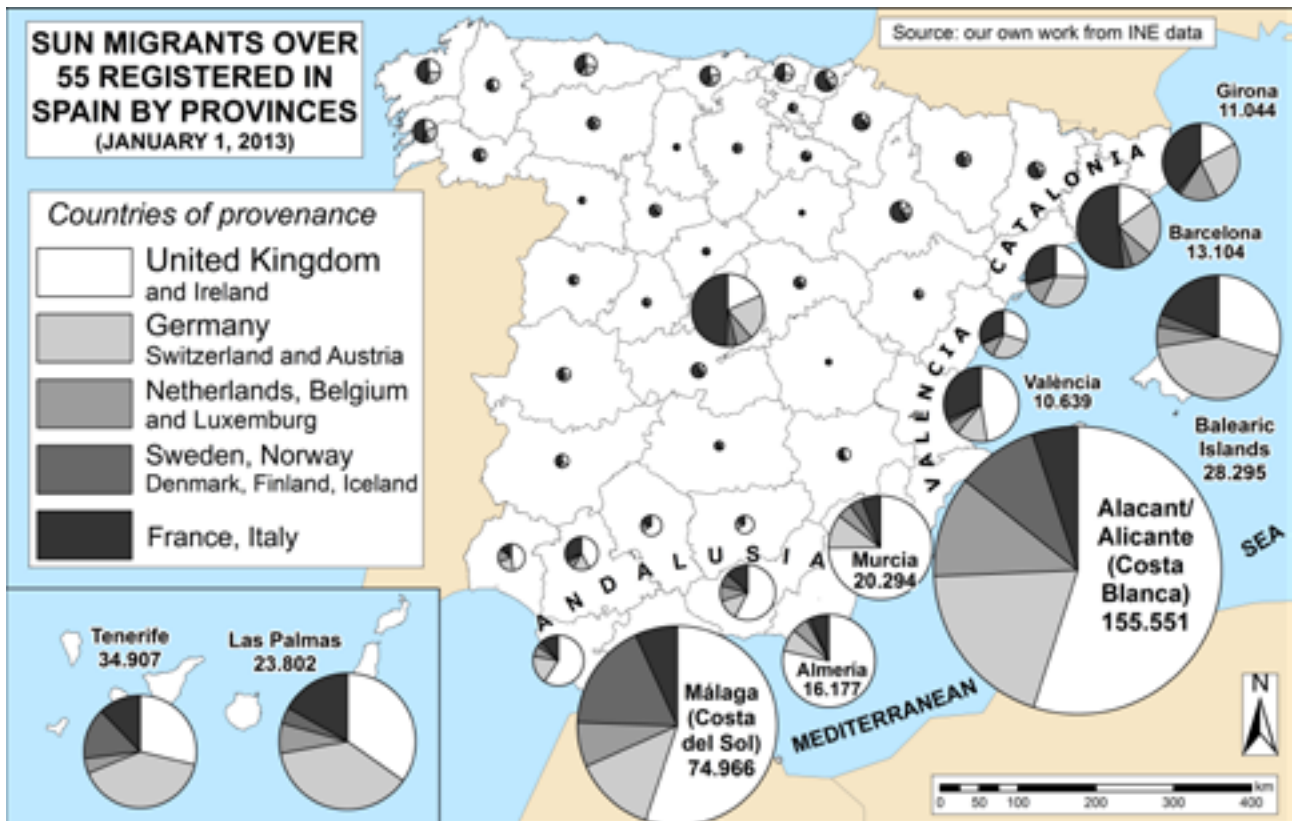


FIGURE 6
Spain: registered lifestyle migrants by nationality and by province in 2012
SOURCE: INE (2013)

Spain), prefer Costa Blanca as well, but there are also big colonies of them in the Canary and the Balearic islands – in both archipelagos German speakers constitute the biggest colony of retired lifestyle migrants. Almost half of the retired lifestyle migrants living in Spain (47.3%) come from Great Britain (with Ireland) (207,274); these people have a preference for Costa Blanca and, in a lesser way, for Costa del Sol; they constitute the biggest colony in the entire southern and eastern Spanish coast, excluding Catalonia and the islands (fig. 6).

4.3. The Contribution of Lifestyle Migrants to Urban Sprawl

When they lived in their countries of origin, most lifestyle migrants now residing in Spain did so in single-family houses, i.e. under a model of urban development

that could be characterized as urban sprawl. Apart from the new lifestyle, the better qualities of life or the 3,000 sun hours per year (1,500 in their home countries), lifestyle migrants were attracted to the Spanish Mediterranean area because of the price of single-family houses there. The cost of such a home was relatively low in the Spanish Mediterranean region, even after the price rise during the Spanish housing bubble. Therefore, a growing number of single-family houses have been built in the Spanish Mediterranean coast in recent years thanks to the solvent demand for them by an increasing amount of retired lifestyle migrants, a fact which has contributed to a huge urban sprawl development in that region.

Thus, with the approval of local authorities, real estate developers promoted and constructed thousands of single-family (detached or attached) houses in the Spanish Mediterranean coast. With this development

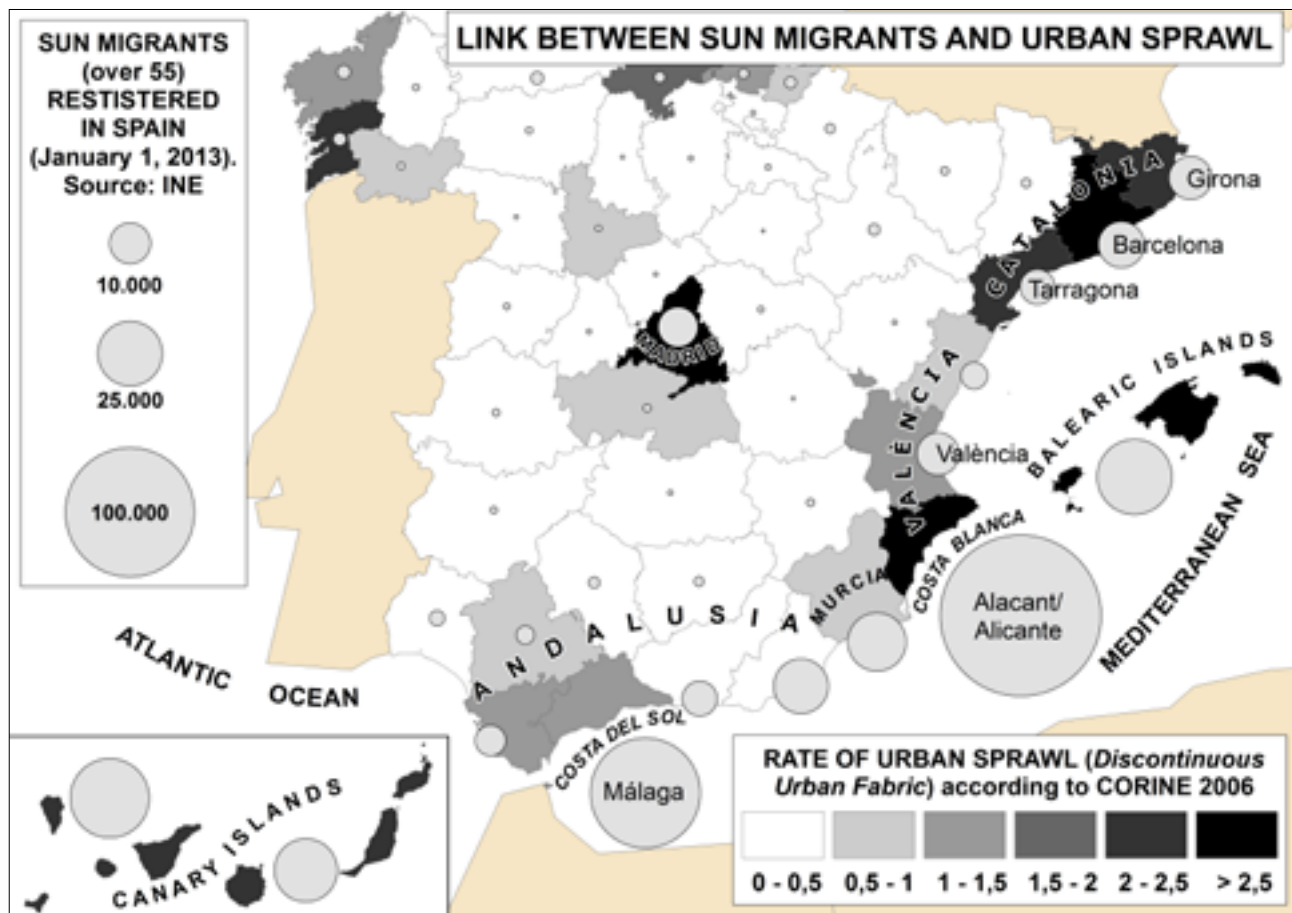


FIGURE 7
Spain: link between urban sprawl and lifestyle migrants by provinces
SOURCE: CLC and INE (2013)

came those drawbacks that are usually connected to urban sprawl: landscape and environmental damage, traffic congestion, flood risk, water scarcity... Unlike the part of Europe which lies north of latitude 45°, in the Mediterranean basin rainfall is low and there is a chronic shortage of water, a fact which is exacerbated by urban sprawl expansion. According to Vera (2006: 166), water consumption in tourist urban sprawl areas such as Torrevieja (in southern Costa Blanca) doubles the water consumption corresponding to tourist compact cities such as Benidorm (in northern Costa Blanca).

There is an obvious connection in Spain between the number of lifestyle migrants in a given territory and the amount of hectares of urban sprawl that can be found there. According to CLC 2006, Madrid and Barcelona are the provinces where the highest percentage of ur-

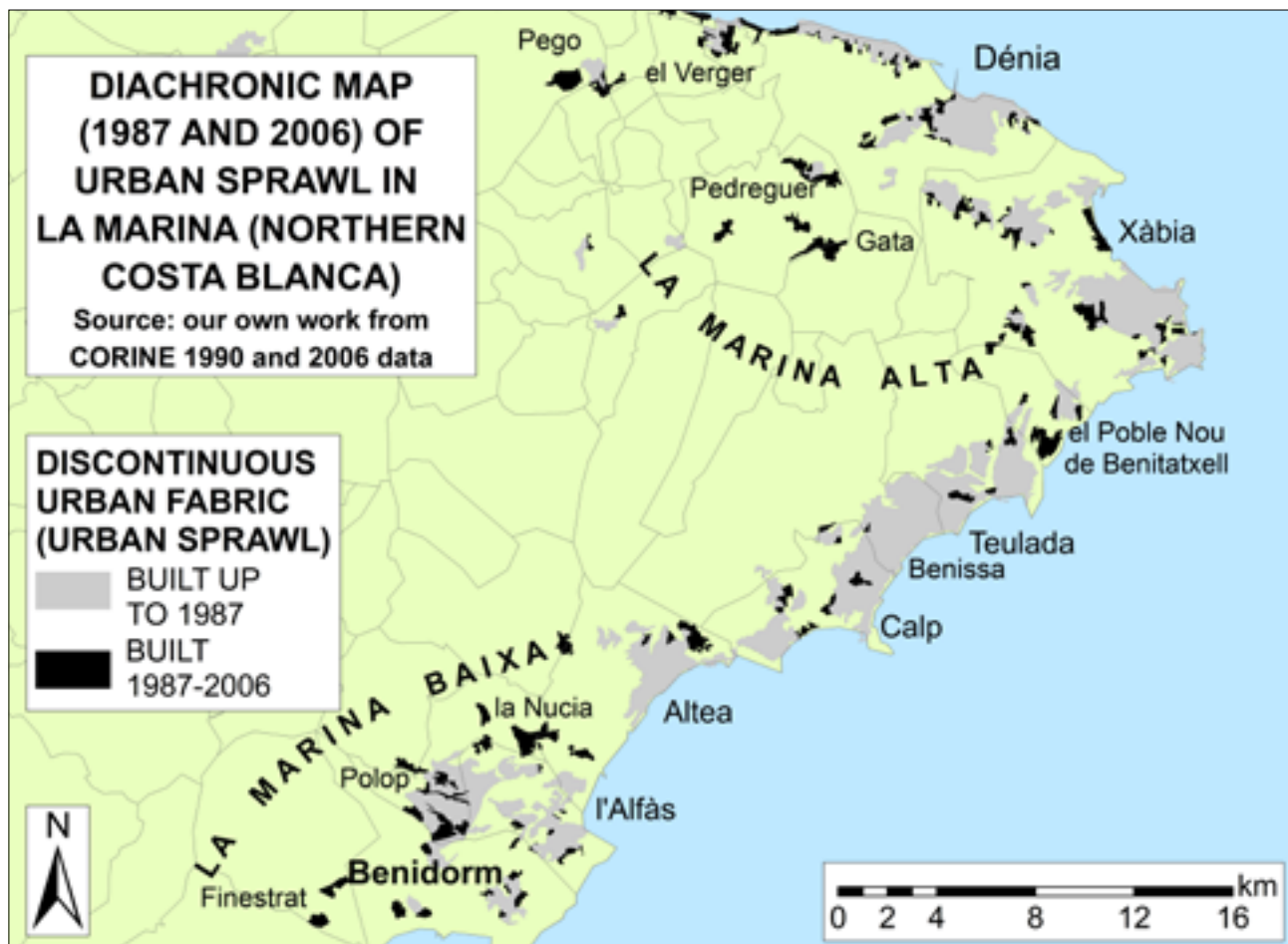
ban sprawl can be found (6.6% and 4.45% respectively of those provinces' territory corresponds to this kind of land use, fig. 7). In both cases this is due to the high population numbers (6.5 million people live in Madrid, and 5.5 in Barcelona) and to the outstanding GDP of both areas, which entails that a sizable number of people living there have enough purchasing power to be able to afford a single-family (detached or attached) house. People living in urban sprawl around Madrid and Barcelona are mainly Spaniards. During the Spanish housing bubble many of them abandoned their former home in the compact city for a new house in a suburban area. As we have explained, they expect to experience there a new lifestyle, linked to modern phenomena such as environmental awareness, new communication technologies and global patterns of consumption.

After Madrid and Barcelona, the highest rates of urban sprawl can be found mainly in tourist coastal provinces. In Alacant/Alicante (Costa Blanca), which, as we have seen, has more lifestyle migrants than any other province in Spain, urban sprawl constitutes 4.16% of the land. According to SIOSE data (2009), some areas in this province contain an extremely high percentage of urban sprawl: in the coastal district of Vega Baja, urban sprawl took up 8% of the land (and in its main town, Torrevieja, no less than 21%) (fig. 9), and in the coastal district of Marina Alta urban sprawl exceeded 10% of the total surface (in towns such as Dénia and Xàbia this number rose to 25%; in Calp, to a stunning 40%) (fig. 8) (Membrado, 2011: 435-436).

5. Costa Blanca: a paradise for urban sprawl and retired lifestyle migrants in Southern Europe

Mediterranean Spain has become the area in southern Europe where urban sprawl has grown the most and the fastest, thanks to the solvent demand by lifestyle migrants for single-family houses, according to the sprawling development patterns. Costa Blanca, a relatively small territory in coastal South Eastern Spain, contained more (retired or not) lifestyle migrants in 2012 (254,000) than the sum of those in Italy (150,000) and Portugal (68,000). To get an idea of the importance of urban sprawl and of lifestyle migrants in Costa Blanca, it must be said that its five coastal districts, which

FIGURE 8
 La Marina (northern Costa Blanca): urban sprawl diachronic map (1987-2006)
 SOURCE: Membrado (2012)



constitute just 0.68% of the entire Spanish territory, contain 7.7% of the Spanish urban sprawl surface, and no less than one third of all the retired lifestyle migrants living in Spain.

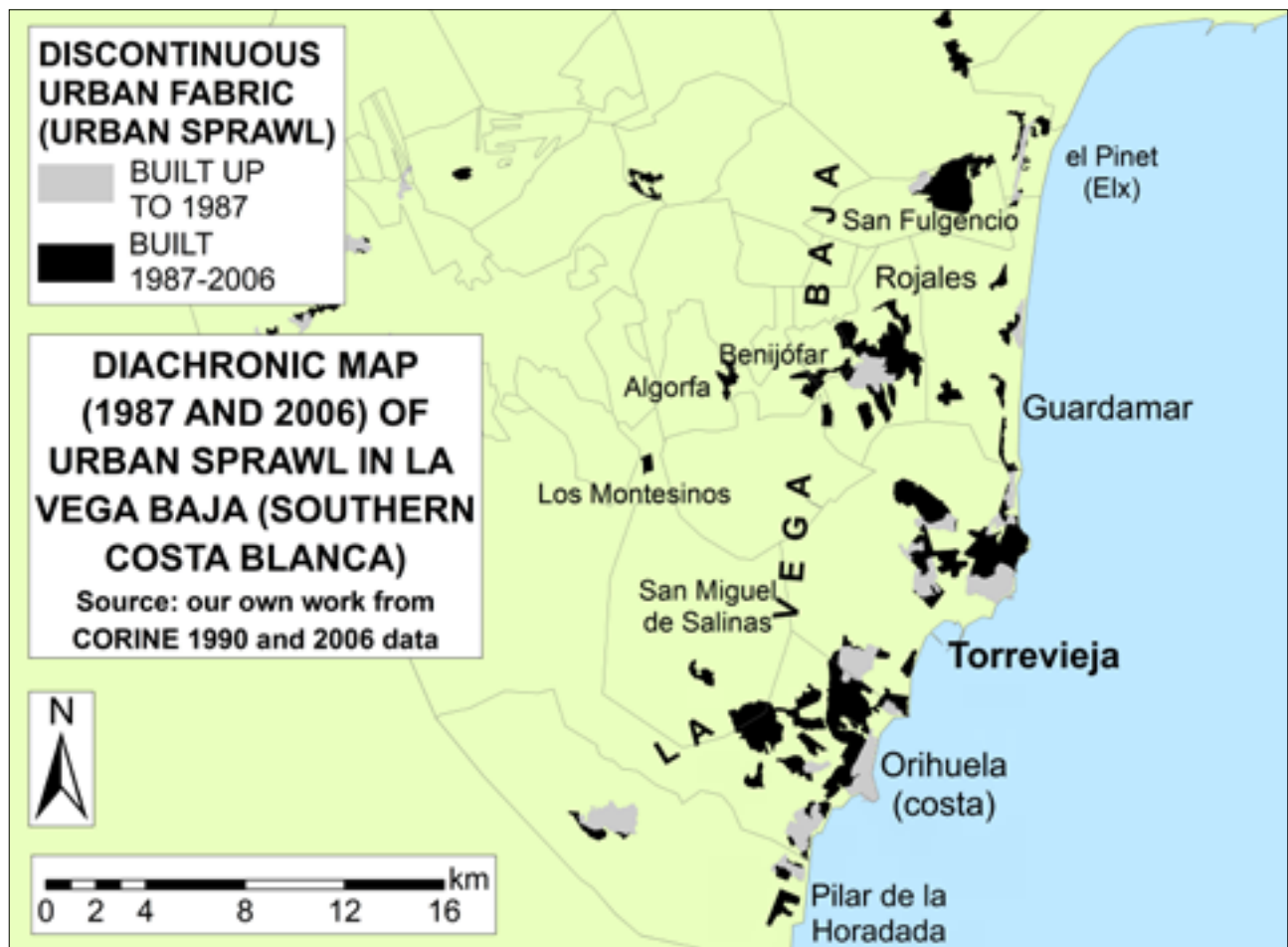
The biggest urban sprawl development connected to lifestyle migrants in Costa Blanca can be found in their northernmost (La Marina, fig. 8) and southernmost (La Vega Baja, fig. 9) districts. Both areas benefit from its proximity to Alacant/Alicante airport, which is very well connected (more than 40 daily flights) with the British Isles and also has regular connections with Scandinavia, the Benelux, Germany and Russia. In fact, many British residents in Costa Blanca usually travel to the UK for medical, work, family or other reasons.

In figure 8 we can see how during the Spanish real estate bubble there was a remarkable expansion of urban sprawl in La Marina. It went from 8,000 hectares

in 1987 to 11.500 in 2006. Urban sprawl development was particularly significant in the pre-coastal area (3-7 km to the sea), because the coastal areas (0-3 km to the sea) were already densely developed before 1987. Thus the pre-coastal fringe acted as a spatial outlet for new growth. The same interior-coast development phenomenon, described by Crawford *et al.* (2013: 236) and by Kambly and Moreland (2009:11), has happened in equivalent areas in North Carolina and Florida.

In figure 9 we observe recent urban sprawl development in Vega Baja. As we can see, a vast increase of urban sprawl took place there in a few years. Urban sprawl surface went from 1,600 hectares in 1987 to 6,300 in 2006. Single-family houses were developed both by the seashore and, especially, in pre-coastal areas. The distance to the sea is compensated by other amenities, especially golf courses. Thus, pre-coastal ur-

FIGURE 9
 La Vega Baja (southern Costa Blanca): urban sprawl diachronic map (1987-2006)
 SOURCE: Membrado (2012)



ban sprawl areas in Vega Baja are typically distributed around golf courses (Mata, 2007: 42). In fact, 7 out of the 14 golf courses existing in Costa Blanca are located in pre-coastal Vega Baja. And in 2012, pre-coastal Vega Baja contained the three Spanish municipalities with the highest percentage of foreigners: San Fulgencio (78% of its 12,522 inhabitants were foreigners), Rojales (77% of its 22,006 inhabitants) and Algorfa (72% of 4,755). Lifestyle migrants constitute more than half the population there. English is spoken there more than any other language, including Spanish. A Spaniard visitor could consider him – or herself lucky if he or she addresses people from San Fulgencio, Rojales or Algorfa in Spanish and is understood.

The large urban sprawl developments in Costa Blanca were driven by the high demand by lifestyle migrants (especially the British), favoured by town councils, and promoted by large construction companies and banks. Some developers, bankers and politicians got rich overnight through land speculation and unlimited urban growth. Many of their companies and banks have eventually gone bankrupt due to mismanagement. Many savings banks bought so much land, intending to build on it, that when the housing bubble burst, they had to be intervened or nationalized. But before the crisis started, much land had already been constructed on. That implied not only environmental and landscape drawbacks, but also the overcrowding of tourist areas.

As for the economic effects of retirement migration to Costa Blanca, we can list some advantageous and some disadvantageous effects. Among the former, retired migrants increase the demand for local services (real estate, trade/consumption, personal, health and elderly care services), thus attracting new labour, which will increase the number of consumers even more (Walters, 2002: 51; Huete & Mantecón, 2012: 163). The economic benefits of the immigrants' influx can be observed in the population increase of the places where they settle. E.g., Torrevieja (30% of lifestyle migrants) has grown fourfold in just twenty years (its population went from 25,000 in 1991 to over 100,000 in 2011); Rojales (75% of lifestyle immigrants) tripled its population in the same period (it went from 5,000 to 20,000). The population of San Fulgencio (80% of lifestyle immigrants) multiplied by 7.5: from 1,600 in 1991 to 12,000

in 2011). Another benefit, cited by Walters (2002:52), is that retirees have incomes based largely on pensions, which are independent of local economy, and recession-proof. However, Britons' incomes (Britons being more than a half of all retired lifestyle migrants living in Costa Blanca) have been hit by the devaluation of the pound. Before 2008, £1 equalled about €1.5; therefore a £1,000 pension equalled €1,500. Nowadays, a £1,000 pension equals about €1,150. Thus Britons can no longer afford to live as expensively as they did before –as a matter of fact, many of them simply cannot afford to live in Costa Blanca any more.

Among the disadvantages of retirement migration, also listed by Walters (2002: 52), we can mention that “rapid immigration carries the danger of local overpopulation – traffic congestion, overdevelopment, and so on. Migration may put unbearable strains on the local physical infrastructure (water, power, sanitation) and on the natural environment.” This fragment by Walters refers to retirement migration to Florida, Arizona, California and other Sun Belt US states, but it also accurately describes the current situation in Costa Blanca. Overdevelopment has been so huge there that some urban sprawl areas have become *densely packed* sprawl areas, a paradoxical category, with all the drawbacks listed by Walters. No less paradoxical is the fact that lifestyle migrants, who moved south in order to increase their quality of life, have to see it eroded as their destinations become overdeveloped and overpopulated with new lifestyle migrants (Benson and O'Reilly, 2009: 621). As a matter of fact, some of the first lifestyle migrants who moved south several decades ago to settle in a rural, isolated location were later deprived of their particular haven of tranquillity when local authorities and developers built on those rural lands. Some of these lifestyle pioneers reported to the European Commission, the European Parliament and the European Court of Human Rights what they regarded as an instance of urban abuse, political corruption, and landscape destruction (Janoschka, 2011:232).

Another drawback is that, even though retired migrants tend to be in good health when they move to their new home, as they age they become increasingly disabled. The long-term cost of sustaining an ageing population may be larger than estimated (Walters, 2002:52).

In the Spanish case, an aged population resulting from the arrival of senior migrants (and senior tourists) causes expenses that local authorities find it difficult to pay (Huete & Mantecón, 2012: 163), even more in the middle of an economic crisis like the current one.

Now as regards the social consequences of retirement migration to Costa Blanca, the huge development of this area, driven as we have seen by lifestyle buyers who wanted to live in neighbourhoods built in the urban sprawl spatial pattern, has created huge suburban areas isolated from the urban centres and the local people. Most of these suburban neighbourhoods have little or no public transportation, a fact which restricts the mobility of many of their residents, who tend to stay inside the suburb, with few entertainment options. Moreover, isolation and the distance to basic services – such as health centers or police stations – increase the perception of insecurity in these suburban areas.

Finally, regarding environmental impact, the consequences of this rapid, unlimited development have been devastating. The damage to the landscape and the environment, especially next to the sea, is irreparable. The Land Law passed by the Spanish government in 1998, which established that any non-protected piece of land could be built on (Rullan, 2011: 182) has had a heavy impact on some areas of the Spanish Mediterranean, such as Costa Blanca. In Costa Blanca there are some coastal protected areas: Montgó-Cap de Sant Antoni, Penyal d'Ifac, Serra Gelada or the lagoons of Santa Pola, la Mata, and Torreveija (figures 8 and 9). Thus it might seem that there is no shortage in this area of places where nature can be enjoyed. The problem is that all those parks are partially or completely surrounded by urban areas. There is no transition at all between the natural parks and the urbanized surfaces. Particularly aberrant was the intervention in the environment of the lagoons of La Mata and Torreveija, which is a paradigm of urban-sprawl-harassment of protected wetlands. These lagoons had been officially protected since 1989, a moment when their immediate environment was scarcely developed. 20 years later the urban sprawl had spread indiscriminately in all directions around both lagoons (Delgado, 2012: 629).

Due to its climate, landscape, culture and atmosphere, the Mediterranean coast is a place coveted by de-

velopers. Governments – at a local, regional or national level – that should have protected this area against any profit-driven building excess, instead chose to allow – either by action or by omission – developers to go on building to the point where a considerable part of a unique Mediterranean landscape has been irreversibly disfigured or lost. This is a serious drawback when competing in a market as dynamic and open as tourism, which increasingly regards the quality of the territory as part of the quality of the product (Mata, 2007: 40-44).

6. Conclusions

The Spanish Mediterranean region has seen an uncontrolled urban sprawl development during the last two decades. This growth was significantly driven by the solvent demand by lifestyle sun-seeker migrants, mostly retired from Northern Europe, who wanted – and were able to afford – a house that would allow them to live in the relaxing Mediterranean atmosphere. Retired lifestyle migrants registered in Spain increased by 7.5 times between 1991 and 2012. A vast majority of them (95%) chose the Costa Blanca and other Spanish Mediterranean regions (Costa del Sol, the Balearic Islands...) or the Canary Islands (which have a Mediterranean climate) to spend their retirement years.

This massive influx of lifestyle migrants created a considerable short-term wealth in Mediterranean Spain and, especially, in Costa Blanca. First, it generated revenues for (local, regional, national) governments via taxes. Second, it benefited the private developers, and also the local people who provided services for the newcomers. Nonetheless, the lack of a suitable urban planning that would have made it possible to control the developers' excesses led to the construction of overcrowded suburban areas. Thus, many of those migrants who had moved south expecting to improve their quality of life – among other things, by living surrounded by nature and tranquillity – eventually saw themselves (partly) frustrated as their new neighbourhoods became too developed. Another consequence of this overcrowding has been the irreversible damage caused to the environment and the landscape through the loss of fields, mountains, and forests.

The economic progress that urban sprawl development generated in the short term can have unpredictable economic consequences in the long term. Some suburban areas have become overcrowded, and many drawbacks derive from this process of densification in the Spanish Mediterranean region. First, those areas have the same disadvantages as any other suburban area: high consumption of water, energy and land per capita; absolute dependence on private vehicles; and destruction of the landscape and the environment. Second, they also have the problems of compact areas (traffic congestion, dense urban land) without any of their advantages (public transportation, public facilities, green areas, shops close to home...). In addition, the increasingly indebted towns can hardly provide basic services, such as cleaning or policing, to these suburban areas.

Given the growing shortcomings of the overcrowded Mediterranean Spain, the retired lifestyle migrants now living there may not have replacement within a few years. If local politicians want to avoid this, they should begin to work in a more rational and sustainable way. For instance, outskirt suburbs should be better connected to the central urban areas through public transportation, pedestrian walks and bike paths. In addition, suburbs should be provided with green areas and public utilities. These measures would improve the territorial and social cohesion among lifestyle migrants, who would thus be more motivated to overcome the barriers of language and culture, and the local people, who should stop regarding lifestyle migrants as mere consumers of services.

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