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Research Article

"Healing ourselves, healing nature": Holistic thermalism in Spain as a mutually enriching practice?

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ABSTRACT

Under more sustainable alternatives of tourism, a variety of proposals are encompassed, revolving around resilient and immersive leisure practices in nature. In this context, holistic thermalism stands out as a paradigmatic case of "being-well in nature," relying on the on-site utilization of mineral medicinal waters to achieve an experience that transcends mere recreation, evolving into spiritual and tentacular motivations intertwined with the web of life. Indeed, this is the most significant of its defining qualities, linking thermalism to its most original and ancestral conception. The user must necessarily journey to the location where the health-giving waters reside, engage with their cyclical and ecosystemic components, and their sojourn requires a certain degree of sociability and tranquility, as sensory factors and the environment contribute to creating a therapeutic and healing landscape crucial to thermalism. Simultaneously, the setting where the thermal cure takes place must meet a series of logistical and technical requirements to ensure the success of the treatment, such as providing complementary accommodation, dining services, and other infrastructure dedicated to this slow tourism: paths and trails for strolling through environments of great aesthetic and environmental appeal. In Spain, and given the aforementioned requisites, thermal tourism is typically carried out in areas of high ecological value, within rural areas exposed to depopulation issues and the abandonment of resilient agricultural and livestock practices with the environment. In this sense, the main aim of the research is to reflect on how the use of mineral-medicinal water in thermal places in Spain is linked to the space, natural resources, heritage, population, and landscape, forming a prominent part of the concept of thermalism. At the same time, this represents an opportunity for the conservation of areas of high ecological value.

Management implications:

- The uniqueness of holistic tourism and the fact that it involves non-mass tourism will attract a more concerned user.
- Modern thermal centres create artificial environments indoor with little direct contact with nature.
- The efficient management of the landscape and natural resources in thermal locations is necessary.
- The concept of holistic thermalism should be introduced in thermal centres to position themselves as a health brand.

1. Introduction

Thermalism is a global phenomenon with a distinguished historical tradition. This ancestral relationship between humans and mineral-medicinal waters has created a strong connection between the population and their space and water resources. The history of how these waters have been used for health and well-being has shaped a true thermal culture that is part of the history and identity of Europe. It is a complex phenomenon and a unique way of understanding human health that involves landscape, architecture, heritage, art, culture, urban planning, leisure patterns, and even toponymy.

In its most original conception, thermalism requires the on-site use of a natural resource such as mineral-medicinal waters. Simultaneously, the environment in which the thermal cure takes place must possess certain characteristics to ensure effective balneotherapy. The bath requires a certain degree of socialization and tranquility, as sensory factors

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and the therapeutic environment or landscape are crucial in thermalism (Correia et al., 2013; Navarro-García & Alvim-Carvalho, 2019). Moreover, it requires a close dialogue with the physical, aesthetic, and ecological properties provided by mineral-medicinal waters. Fundamentally, it obliges us to reconsider the utilitarian function of thermalism to adopt a form of being-with nature, turning it into a holistic activity that exemplifies a rethinking of conventional tourism and recreation.

These ancestral origins and desires for a synergistic relationship between humans and nature, materialized in thermal waters, have undergone notable, not always linear, changes. The current state of spa tourism is the result of different traditions that were interested in and mutually influenced the use of mineral-medicinal waters at various points in the past (Alonso Álvarez, 2010, 2012; Van Tubergen & Van der Linden, 2002). Likewise, the interest in the use of mineral-medicinal waters over time has gained unprecedented social, ecosystemic, and territorial relevance, connecting the realm of human health with environmental health. It has served as a means of socialization, allowing the generalization of the thermal phenomenon to broad segments of the population, but simultaneously, its elitization and exclusive component for wealthier strata in more exclusive thermal areas. In this evolution, the concept of thermalism has drawn divergent paths, leading, today, to an alternative recreational practice but succumbing to the peculiarities of the tourist industry in the context of globalization.

Since ancient times, the healing hot waters of Spain have sparked the interest of different civilizations. The roots of Spanish thermalism lie in Roman heritage and the succession of cultural movements, beliefs, and social habits throughout the centuries. Connection with nature, outdoor recreation, and the promotion of holistic well-being have been fundamental elements in the thermal experience throughout Spanish history. Natural settings provide a venue for socially shared experiences but also support retreat behaviors by enabling 'being away' and providing freedom (Puhakka, 2021). The aesthetic and landscape virtues of these environments have fostered a climate of serenity and relaxation for thermal and recreational activities, transcending their recreational component and taking on the form of a spiritual and connective practice with the network of life.

Spain has been identified as a major thermal power, both due to the number of hot springs it contains and its historical relevance, justifying the need for greater scientific attention to the phenomenon. However, thermalism and its intimate relationship with nature have received limited attention in scientific literature. In this regard, the main aim of the research is to reflect on how, in thermal places, the use of mineral-medicinal water is linked to the territory, natural resources, heritage, population, and landscape, forming a prominent part of the thermalism concept. At the same time, it represents an opportunity for the conservation of areas of high ecological value. Thus, the document is divided into: a) a first part where key concepts are defined, and the sense of holistic thermalism in the exceptional moment of ecological crisis is argued (points one, two, and three); b) a second section related to the evolution of holistic thermalism in Spain and the divergences in the configuration of current trajectories (points four and five); and c) a third part outlining how this holistic thermalism can be strategic, uniquely different from tourist practices that have a commercialized view of nature, with its consequent discussion and conclusions (points six and seven).

2. Holistic thermalism as being-well in nature. Key concepts

Holistic tourism defines a recreational experience based on achieving physical and emotional well-being for the user. Unlike conventional tourism, which primarily focuses on conditioned visits to places driven by recreational uses and consumer relationships, holistic tourism is a new alternative to wellness tourism that "provides the visitor with a range of activities and/or treatments aimed at balancing the body-mind-spirit" (Smith & Puczkó, 2009, p. 92). According to Rahmani and Carr (2022, p. 539), "while spiritual tourists focus solely on the spirit and its transcendence, holistic tourists aim at body-mind-spirit balance, with 'spiritual enlightenment' at the center of a holistic journey." This holistic approach in tourism may include activities such as thermal practices, healthy eating, outdoor activities, and deep cultural connections.

In this regard, backgrounding by this alternative approach, holistic thermalism implies a search for integral well-being for both the individual and the natural environment in which the activity takes place, addressing physical, mental, emotional, spiritual, and environmental aspects. In fact, according to the Stress Reduction Theory, developed by Ulrich et al. (1991), natural qualities can activate the parasympathetic nervous system, discharging psychophysiological stress. A combination between vegetation and water features helps to estimulate positive emotions and minimize negative thoughts (Pröbstl-Haider, 2015). Although thermalism is, intrinsically, a practice of deep connection with the elements of nature and, especially, with water, it requires that the user be aware of and actively participate in this notion. Therefore, in the practice of holistic thermalism, the connection with nature, in a cyclical and ecosystemic sense, should be treated as an essential component to achieve comprehensive well-being, understanding the mutual need for synergy and protection between both actors. The idea is for holistic thermalism to be a physical, mental-spiritual, and "natural" experience. In summary, holistic thermalism seeks to provide experiences that nurture all aspects of the individual and nature, creating a balance between the body, mind, soul, and the space that hosts the practice.

Often, the presence of thermal waters and their therapeutic effects is inexorably linked to the aesthetic qualities of the environmental surroundings and the landscape that frames the bathing areas. Connection with nature has significant benefits for mental and physical health (Hägerhäll et al., 2015; Sinatra et al., 2023). Outdoor activity participants can gain, maintain, and enhance their subjective well-being (Pomfret, Sand & May 2023). "Green" and "blue" spaces can alleviate stress, restore attention capacity, reduce tension, improve mood, and promote relaxation (Foley & Kistemann, 2015; Pietilä et al., 2015; Walton, 2021; WHO, 2021; Karolina, Hu & Smit, 2023). This health-promoting component of the environment, where the combination of bodily immersion and aesthetic enjoyment comes into play, allows us to speak of therapeutic landscapes (Gesler, 1992; Bell et al., 2018; Williams, 1998; Wilson, 2003).

The study of therapeutic landscapes allows exploration of interactions between people and their environment and the impacts these interactions have on health and well-being (Sánchez-Rodilla, 2022). These are used as a therapeutic tool to improve the mental, emotional, and physical health of individuals and do not solely refer to their visual properties. For example, in thermal practices, the sounds of water enhance mood, while bird sounds reduce stress and discomfort (Buxton et al., 2021). Therefore, beyond temporary relief of certain symptoms, therapeutic landscapes can bring about a deeper transformation for those seeking therapeutic effects in mineral-medicinal thermal waters.

Thus, it is possible to speak of an ecotherapy in which the therapeutic benefits of natural landscapes are harnessed within a biophilic experience (Barbiero & Berto, 2021). Therefore, ecotherapy implies a respectful relationship with nature, understood as a holistic recovery path for the psyche, rooted equally in analogous traditional practices such as Japanese *Shinrin-yoku* or forest bathing (Kil et al., 2021). Despite contemporary initiatives attempting to capture the idea of holistic thinking in an opportunistic and interested manner, it fundamentally represents an urgent cognitive, spiritual, and emotional need in the face of the ecological crisis.

3. Holistic thermalism as an ecological assemblage. A theoretical justification

New perspectives in nature tourism recognize the role of water as a source of life not only in a synchronic sense of human experience but fundamentally as an emerging fact preceding all living structures.

Though, its playful and recreational component tends to commodify it, instrumentalizing it as a service or a passive resource that can be accessed or exchanged for monetary value. This shift predates contemporary tourism development, as demonstrated by Geores (1998) in the case of Hot Springs in South Dakota, where a sacred healing site linked to indigenous practices was commercialized as a therapeutic place for white Americans in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. Such commodification extends to most thermal areas, including Europe and especially Spain. Only a few have managed to maintain, to some extent, genuine characteristics distinct from tourist paraphernalia and industry, serving as the last vestiges of an ancient thermal practice. Their isolation, limited accessibility, and location in economically modest areas have allowed their preservation.

In this sense, holistic thermalism aligns with the Gaian vision within Donna Haraway's proposal for the Chthulucene: a coevolutionary interrelation between living and inorganic forms, where the human is another manifestation, surpassing the limit or discontinuity of the Anthropocene/Capitalocene. There are scarce shelters for the assemblage between the human world and other living and inert forms (Haraway, 2016). This practice cannot be derived from a new stage in the evolution towards supposedly more nature-responsible tourism. Thermal tourism trends or spa tourism follow a different trajectory subject to the impossible perpetuity of capitalist and utilitarian relationships with Nature. It is not merely another form of eco-tourism sharing the same characteristics of the sector without rethinking the ontological human-nature rupture. The commodifying and mercantile relationship with Nature is, therefore, a characteristic of the "spaization" of thermal practice (Pinos, Sánchez & Maroto, 2021).

Asserting the vitality of matter would lead to considering non-human entities, both living and inert in Nature, beyond an instrumentalized approach. Holistic thermalism involves changing the bathing experience from a unidirectional process, where mineral-medicinal waters simply serve a function for the user. Viewing these waters as actants, a term proposed by B. Latour (1999), leads to contemplating the connectivity between different molecules and organic particles in the water and those of the human body, as vibrant matter (Bennett, 2010). There is no relationship of dependence or hierarchy. Interactivity is manifested, where the subjective component of the user and the ontological distinction between the two interacting bodies or matters dissolve.

Holistic thermalism, therefore, induces a therapeutic and playful sense that is not objectively bestowed by its commodified practice. This character is enhanced by immersing another body in the waters, increasing its agency through an alliance with other bodies. Inspired by Spinoza, Bennett identifies this as the idea of a conative body (2010). Fundamentally, this practice, transcending the ontological gap between human-nature, is a monist approach in the understanding of Deleuze. Visibly, the result is not a single substance generating a homogeneous harmonious whole. In the bath, our bodily and mental contours seemingly remain intact and distinguishable from the ripples and profiles drawn by the water. However, the joint action at more elemental levels of matter interacting constitutes a unique and monist experience. In short, the result is an ontological unity but formally diverse. The thermal experience, therefore, generates a "trans-corporeality" effect (Alaimo, 2010), where the subject's body instantly becomes part of the environment. The thermalist, for a moment, loses the self as a point of reference, where consciousness is possessed by something more transcendent enveloping the body. Additionally, the experience of immersion and bathing harks back to a uterine state.

Therefore, holistic thermalism can be understood as a bodily practice of "care of the self" (Foucault, 1984), not only due to its intrinsic therapeutic connotation (a practice that inherently implies living better and self-care) but also as an extension of the responsibility of care towards what, a priori, generates a therapeutic effect. If we consider thermal waters as vibrant matter, at the same level of performativity as the subject, both participating in the Gaian whole, "self-care" implies the responsibility to attend to what, preventively or healingly, affects the subject. This stance harks back to ancestral visions and indigenous worldviews, based on the premises "all things are connected" and "harming nature ultimately means harming ourselves," like the letter (or rather, speech) attributed to Chief Si'ahl in 1845. Braidotti (2013) warns, however, that defending these geocentric positions, especially those within the framework of deep ecology, risks falling into compensatory post-humanism, projecting moral significance onto non-human entities in a kind of possessive selfishness and personal interest. This would respond more to a guilt sentiment, typical of the Anthropocene, than to a tentacular reconnection within the Chthulucene framework.

It is necessary to distinguish, therefore, between directed thermal practices in the form of luxury spas, creating much more artificial experiences than those designed for a more direct relationship with the environment. Responsibility towards the thermal actant is enhanced when outdoor thermal practices, away from the luxury or mass-market spa format, are shared, with clear interaction among bathers. Holistic thermalism is often experienced as liberating, not only from one's own routine but, in general, from societal norms. Hence, it is commonly practiced in places with minimally transformed environments, seeking the pristine and wild qualities of the landscape and pursuing a solitary and individualized experience. Frequently, this is not fully achieved, as several users can participate simultaneously in this practice. However, this situation reinforces a communal concept of care, based on a certain sociability rooted in the bathing place. It is in this idea that the reciprocal practice of healing between humans (as a social species) and nature is understood. A virtuous spiral is generated, involving holistic bathers as more than mere users, rather as a collective entity with a more complete and coherent ecological sensitivity.

4. Trajectories of thermalism on a global scale: legislative framework and forms of uses

Europe has a well-established thermal product, based on a secular tradition of thermalism and supported by a significant regulatory framework. This strong presence of regulations completely shapes and defines the activity of thermal spas. One defining element is the strict requirement for quality control of the water, ensuring stringent hygienic and sanitary conditions. At the same time, thermal treatments require the presence of at least one physician at each thermal center. This creates a constraint that limits certain uses, while also providing added value and uniqueness to thermalism on the continent. European legislation dictates the operations of spas, although it is also advisable to adapt to market demands, always ensuring quality, safety, and the preservation of the therapeutic nature as mandated by the regulations. In this context, there are significant differences in the uses and dimensions that thermalism takes on in various European countries (Smith & Puczkó, 2014).

In the case of the Americas, especially Latin American countries, and in many countries in Asia, thermal water is almost exclusively synonymous with "entertainment" (Smith & Puczkó, 2014). Bathing sites lack the restrictive legislation for mineral-medicinal and thermal waters that exists in Europe (Tabbachi, 2008). The laws in these regions are much more lenient and different, allowing for the development of tourism products that would be impossible to implement in Europe due to its current legislation. In general, thermalism in these regions is less demanding in terms of its sanitary properties, as bathers are often unaware of the water's composition, its therapeutic indications, its possible side effects for certain users, etc. Many users visit simply because bathing is a recreational activity they engage in during their leisure time, and it is not governed by any minimum standards related to hygienic, sanitary, or public health conditions.

4.1. The trajectory of holistic thermalism in Spain

In Spain, the relationship between holistic thermalism and therapeutic landscapes is closely linked to the use of natural resources with

healing properties. Spanish thermalism has deep historical roots, dating back to the Roman era. Roman civilization played a significant role in introducing thermalism to the Iberian Peninsula. Despite the important connection of Roman baths to *civitas*, many of these spas were isolated from urban centers (González Sotuelo, 2020), constructing thermal facilities in natural environments integrated around thermal springs with healthful properties, such as Archena (Murcia), Caldes de Montbui (Barcelona), and Caldes de Malavella (Girona). During this time, the relationship of thermal enthusiasts with nature was closely linked to the belief in the healing properties of thermal waters—from a solution for skin problems to the treatment of rheumatic diseases—and the utilization of natural environments to promote health and well-being. The choice of locations in natural environments not only sought to take advantage of the healing properties of the water but also to provide a pleasant and serene environment for users to engage in outdoor therapeutic practices. Generally, the landscape, nature, and connection with it were considered an essential part of the treatment from its inception. Some treatments involved the use of clays, muds, or natural minerals present in the surroundings of the baths. Therefore, healing was based not only on the chemical properties of the water but also on other elements, materials, or substances present in the environment.

With the fall of the Roman Empire and the arrival of Christianity, thermal culture experienced a period of decline in the medieval period. Many baths were destroyed during invasions, and bathing was officially prohibited as it was considered immoral and contrary to religion (Van Tubergen & Van der Linden, 2002). The use of baths was only accepted for hygienic and medical purposes (Masetti, 2011; Alonso-Álvarez and Larrinaga-Rodríguez, 2015). However, from the 13th century onwards, the bathing tradition gradually recovered, especially in Southern Europe (Spain). Under the influence of Muslims, thermal treatments began to develop in these lands. Public bath buildings were reconstructed, and access was free. The baths were widely used and served as places for cleanliness and hygiene but also played a prominent social role (EHTTA, n.d). Their medical function was combined with relaxation and pleasure (Van Tubergen & Van der Linden, 2002). A century before the war of Granada, as narrated by the Arabist Francisco Javier Simones, Ben al-Jatib praises Alhama (Granada), stating that its land seems like a piece of gold, and he celebrates the Baths, both cold and hot. Regarding the latter, he indicates that its "cistern, full of goodness and delight, was highly appreciated, both by the noble people and the common folk; that God had endowed those waters with benefits, and that men found nothing else that could replace it, elevating his praise to comparing them with the delightful waters of paradise". He also mentioned that from its rugged rocks flowed fresh and clean water, purifying the bodies of all impurities (García Maldonado, 2023). This account gives an idea of the intimate communion that existed between thermal water and its natural environment at that time.

During the Renaissance, interest in the healing properties of thermal waters in Spain resurged, and during the 18th and 19th centuries, the nobility and bourgeoisie visited places with thermal waters for medical treatments, to connect with nature, and as social meeting places for the wealthier classes. However, society has not always used these healing waters with the best conditions.

Simultaneously to the luxurious and selective large spas of the time, thermal waters were used in smaller spas, bathhouses, or natural pools in rural Spain (Molina Villar, 2010). The bathing moment allowed relaxation and, with it, the contemplation of the landscape and self-reflection. This state of well-being in and with nature was enhanced, especially when the pools were outdoors, in a natural environment, without architectural barriers. This was especially true until the mid-18th century when most Spanish establishments did not have significant architectural structures.

Bathhouses and, especially, natural pools allowed bathers direct contact with the surrounding landscape. This landscape was formed by the characteristic vegetation of each place. Thus, fields of cereals, vineyards, olive groves combined with orchards and landscapes of fruit trees such as orange trees, pomegranates, apple trees, fig trees, ash trees on the banks of rivers and streams could be observed. In addition, sometimes this landscape was combined with the scents of aromatic plants such as thyme, sage, rosemary, or chamomile (Navarro-García & Alvim-Carvalho, 2019).

The development and consolidation of Spanish thermalism between the late 18th and early 19th centuries coincided with the beginning of romanticism and, consequently, with a significant revaluation of the landscape. Travelers could see and feel the landscape, had time, and had the necessary relaxation to read and enjoy the landscape sensorially and/or emotionally (Navarro-García & Alvim-Carvalho, 2019). During the 20th century, thermalism faced a strong competitor: sun and beach tourism. At this moment, from the second half of the 20th century and in the 21st century, thermalism is renewed, with new facilities, more customers, and integrates with other forms of wellness tourism, promoting a connection with nature sometimes more superficial than real (Fig. 1).

4.2. *Divergences in the practice of thermalism in Spain and implications for holistic thermalism*

Currently, there are different ways of using thermal water in Spain. These variations, depending on their characteristics, more or less facilitate the enrichment and contact of users with the surrounding nature. In this regard, three distinct categories of uses should be noted (Ourense Provincial Council, 2014).

- Thermal complex, thermal station and spa hotel: A set of facilities dedicated to the use and enjoyment of thermal waters, including spas, hotels, and other tourist and leisure infrastructures. These are typically comprehensive facilities, usually of a private nature.
- Baths, “caldas” and “termas”: Facilities constructed to harness thermal waters for therapeutic and relaxation purposes. They can have various structures, ranging from pools to steam rooms and showers. These are typically basic but functional installations, generally of a public nature.
- Thermal pools (“pozas”) and hot springs: A thermal pool is a natural or artificial formation that contains thermal water. These pools are usually located near springs and form in terrain depressions where water accumulates. Hot springs are natural locations where thermal water emerges to the surface, rich in minerals with therapeutic properties. They generally lack facilities and are usually public in nature.

Focusing on thermal pools and hot springs, from its origins in the Roman Empire to the present day, Spain has a rich tradition of natural thermalism, with numerous thermal stations proper or simple bathing spots (pools), lacking hotel amenities and often without any infrastructure, scattered throughout the country. The intervention-adaptation-improvement of these pools is usually minimal and follows a modest conditioning infrastructure to ensure easier access or actions that favor the hygiene and cleanliness of that place. Most of these thermal pools are located in rural and natural environments of great landscape value, such as mountains or valleys, with less intervened and recreated nature, and a more spontaneous landscape than built. For this reason, when visiting a bathing spot, one not only enjoys its waters and the thermal and mineral-medicinal qualities, but also a privileged natural, artistic, and historical environment (Puigvert & Figueras, 2018). Some examples of this today include (Fig. 2): Alhama (Granada), A Chavasqueira (Orense), Baños de Vilo (Periana-Málaga), La Hedionda (Casares-Málaga), Arnedillo (La Rioja), or Fontealda (Tarragona).

In relation to the above, and although many of the current thermal stations have their roots in ancient Roman baths, the direct connection of bathers with ecotherapy has become blurred in thermal practices. Modern thermal centers have focused on designing indoor spaces to incorporate natural elements and therapeutic landscapes, creating

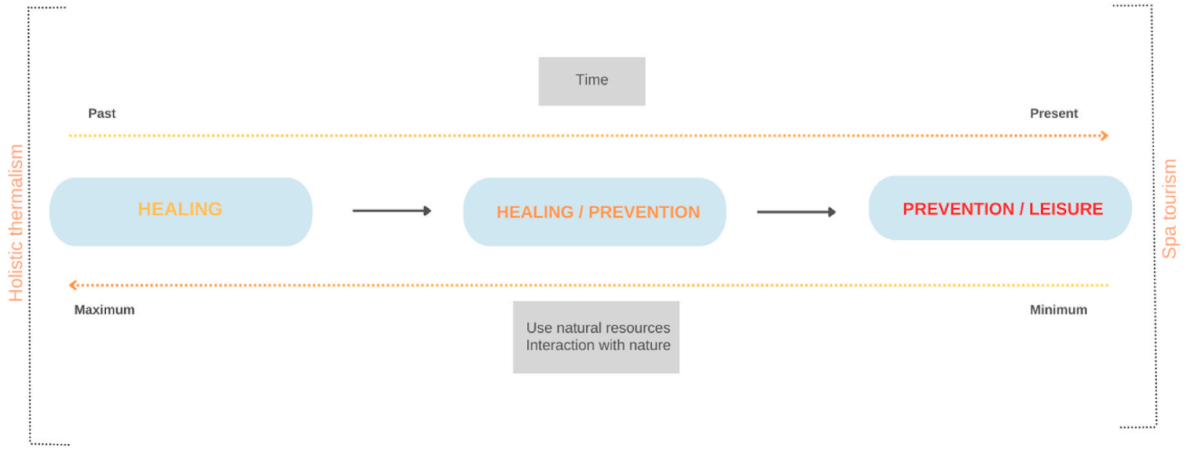

Fig. 1. Evolution of the concept of thermalism and its relationship with the use of natural resources.
Source: Own elaboration

Fig. 2. Examples of hot springs in Alhama de Granada (Granada) and Baños de Vilo (Málaga).
Source: The authors

environments that promote healing but without direct contact with nature. Sometimes, efforts are made to recreate the scents of the natural landscape by simulating fragrances of aromatic plants in some treatments, saunas, and bath rooms. There is a widespread interest in this practice, reminiscent of a desire to return "to the origins", manifested in the opening of rooms, pools, and spa areas to the surrounding environment. However, it is true that Spanish spas often promote outdoor activities, such as walks or hiking routes in natural environments of the area, also as a way to harness the therapeutic benefits of the surrounding nature. The connection with nature is considered an integral part of the therapeutic experience, contributing to relaxation and emotional balance.

In the last century, the evolution of Spanish thermalism differs from that of the European context, especially from the northern countries. On many occasions, European projects to modernize thermal services entail an aggressive break with the historical-cultural trajectory of the place, its physical environment, its people, and its resources (Navarro-García & Alvim-Carvalho, 2019). Nevertheless, despite the evolution of bathing towards more enclosed and private spaces where the surrounding landscapes cannot be directly contemplated, the complementary stroll (Fig. 3) to the prolonged thermal cure carried out in the southern most countries of Europe, and specifically in Spain, provides the bather with the opportunity for an intimate and relaxed encounter with the landscape (Pinos, Shaw, & Maroto, 2020). Spain is a country that has developed a rich tradition in thermalism, and in many cases, this practice has a holistic nature, due to Spain presents its own singularities.

Fig. 3. Spa goers in the walking areas of the Alhama de Granada spa (Spain).
Source: The authors

Firstly, the Spanish thermal history and culture have preserved the tradition of holistic treatment from the Roman civilization that once inhabited these lands, followed by the flowerishment of these practices during the long Muslim presence. Additionally, Spain's climatic and geographical variety allows thermalists to enjoy a greater diversity of locations for practicing holistic thermalism throughout almost the entire year. This is emphasized by the fact that more than half of the thermal practices take place in rural areas, promoting contact with the

surrounding nature. Furthermore, the longer stay of spa-goers in Spanish thermal baths, compared to other countries, allows them to develop stronger connections with the environment that hosts them, facilitating integral healing (Pinos, Abarca & Maroto, 2022). In summary, in some cases, the later development in modernization, its current inclination towards a combined medical-recreational approach and the lack of investments serve as incentives for thermal practices, both in terms of supply and demand, to maintain their original holistic nature without altering the place where they are practiced (Pinos, Sánchez & Maroto, 2021).

The efficient management of the landscape in Spanish thermal locations is particularly necessary due to its undeniable role in complementing thermal treatments based on mineral-medicinal water resources (Navarro-García & Alvim-Carvalho, 2019). Preserving a high-quality landscape that adds value to thermal destinations is thus a social responsibility (Martínez de Pisón, 2009). This way of acting potentially turns outdoor thermal practice and the thermalist into an opportunity to bring tourism closer to a more edifying and beneficial sense for the environment, achieving an enriching and harmonious relationship between user and nature, existing significant cases in Spain with a long continuity over time. Moreover, the water-landscape interrelation has woven a unique identity and human heritage in spa locations (Table 1).

5. Strategies for holistic thermalism in Spain: A framework for discussion

One of the contributions of this work lies in not considering spas or bathing spaces as independent elements of the territory where they are located, but rather starting from the conviction that their relationship with the environment should be synergistic. The interrelation of bathing places with the rest of territorial elements is considered crucial to achieving an adequate local development strategy that diversifies the productive structure of these geographical areas and results in an improvement in the socio-economic level of their population and their environmental surroundings.

Thermalism is a tourist modality that involves elements and agents constituting the territory, making it inherently territorial. This reality becomes evident when analyzing the toponymy of many thermal destinations: "alhama" (Alhama de Granada, Alhama de Almería, Alhama de Murcia) from the Arabic *al-Hamma* ("thermal bath"), "caldas" (Caldes de Montbui, Caldas de Reyes …) Latin term meaning "hot waters," or Archena, whose toponym is derived from *arcius*, "clay/*arcilla*" used in the bath. Many thermal municipalities in Spain share the fact that toponymy has emerged from the presence of mineral-medicinal waters in that geographical space, which, in turn, depends on the geological characteristics of the territory. Thus, the importance of water in these enclaves goes beyond an economic and productive dimension, acquiring marked symbolism and an ecocentric dimension rooted in the origin and identity of these destinations, and mutually enriching practice between users and nature. Thermalism is a territorial, geographical, and ecosystemic phenomenon as it not only has given names to numerous thermal destinations in Spain and Europe but also acts as the foundational trigger for their first settlements.

Table 1
Relationship between forms of use and holistic thermalism.

Typology of "thermal offer"/ form of use	Relationship with holistic thermalism	Direct benefits for the user	Direct benefits for managers
Thermal complex, thermal station and spa hotel	Low	Hygienic-sanitary control vs. Structure closed to Nature	High
Baths, "caldas" and "termas"	Medium-high	Medium-high contact with Nature	Low-null
Thermal pools and hot springs	High	High contact with Nature	Variable

Source: The authors

However, in line with Sánchez-Rodilla Espeso, 2022, authors have not engaged in in-depth debates on what the recovery of original thermalism in its entirety could mean and how therapeutic landscapes function. Furthermore, it would be advisable to apply the concept of thermalism to sustainability, linked to its evolution with divergent trajectories, as pointed out by Alvim Carvalho, 2016 concerning the existence of an identity basis for thermal sites. In modern practice, especially in more clinical or touristic settings, there is a usual trend to emphasize only the medical or physical aspects of thermal bathing, forgetting or minimizing its holistic dimension. Nevertheless, it is true that medical uses could not be performed in a natural environment, particularly in those natural hot springs that do not comply with EU health and public health regulations. Most European thermal facilities have been built in urban settings where access to natural resources is not always possible. Similarly, the capacities of these establishments also limit how natural these services are or can be. Furthermore, existing facilities are not always in a condition to provide access to "more nature". On the other hand, newly created facilities could apply a different approach, knowing that natural environments can meet a much lower demand, but that is actually the distinctive and key quality of the offer. Therefore, it could be mutually beneficial both to environment and thermalist to reintroduce holism, that is, to remember and promote that thermal bathing is a comprehensive experience involving body, mind, and spirit to fully leverage all the integral benefits of this ancient practice. From the ecocentric point of view, this may generate a sense of affection and awareness towards the biospheric net.

Many experts in the thermal sector debate whether Europe should evolve and adopt some of the characteristics of thermalism in America or Asia, which are much more permissive and open to the democratization and recreational aspects of spas, or whether, on the contrary, it should be the American and Asian thermal establishments that adopt the defining guidelines and methodologies of European thermalism. In this context, Spain, due to the majority of its facilities being located in rural areas and its current stage of evolution in thermal practices, slightly behind the more modern, recreational approaches implemented in northern European countries and equidistant from the more medical-therapeutic version found in southern European countries like Portugal, holds a strategic position to rethink the uses and approaches of its current and future thermalism. In this regard, it is in a privileged position to adopt more "Gaian" approaches, distancing itself from closed structures and the physical and conceptual separation from ancestral thermalism, as has already happened in some specific cases described by Pinos Navarrete et al., 2021. Moreover, in these cases, most of the facilities have been built in urban environments where access to natural elements is not always possible. Nevertheless, in Spain, while it is true that medical treatments cannot be carried out in a natural environment, this could be an opportune moment for management to rethink which model would be the most beneficial in holistic terms, and for users to express their preferences and needs for a more biophilic bathing format. Currently, the uses with the fewest facilities and regulations are the ones that most easily guarantee a holistic thermal experience. Rural and natural environments may satisfy a much smaller demand, but this is precisely the most important quality of the distinctive offering of thermal practices.

In addition, referring specifically to the Spanish territory, there are currently prevailing structural problems such as depopulation and aging in rural areas, high unemployment rates, masculinization, job precarity, and a clear inferiority compared to large urban areas in terms of infrastructure and services, resulting in the population not having the same opportunities as urban residents. This scenario encourages abandonment, driven by weak and poorly diversified productive structures. All these circumstances also have negative effects on the progressive environmental deterioration (erosion, desertification due to inappropriate agricultural practices, fires due to mountain abandonment, etc.) and the

existing historical-artistic heritage (abandoned and even subject to looting). The Depopulated Spain entails a process of population detachment from its territory, challenging immensely valuable traditional practices and knowledge of these rural communities with their local resources.

However, some of these rural areas have mineral-medicinal thermal waters, as Spain is one of the countries with the highest number of thermal stations in Europe, and these have exceptional potential for sustainable use -with a Gaian and biophilic vision- and the ability to help improve the reality of the rural population. Especially in some regions of southern Spain, there are underutilized spas in rural areas, and their revitalization could translate into creating positive synergies at the local level, which would be a useful complement in the fight against depopulation and the emptying of rural Spain (Pinos-Navarrete and Maroto-Martos, 2023).

In this context, a central idea runs through the entire discussion: the need for spas to offer more effective, more ecological, and more sustainable treatments, along with authentic local experiences (Stevens et al., 2018; Smith & Wallace, 2020). Thermal establishments must now work toward being seen as healthy and sustainable spaces serving society. This would restore the more holistic dimension of thermal tourism in Europe, which has been somewhat eclipsed in recent decades by the rise of wellness, though it has received some attention from authors like Cassens et al. (2012) and Speier (2008). Additionally, the role of the local population must be conceived in a dual way, as it is also important that the local community feels integrated into and part of the management process of its water resources, while also being users of the resource with a "Gaian" and "Chthulucenic" attitude. In this way, it would be possible to develop a thermal model that benefits both the local community and the thermal destination. The aim is for strategic planning to integrate spa tourism by including all territorial elements and stakeholders to ensure the proper functioning of the entire system. These issues have been directly analyzed by authors such as Surdu et al. (2015) and Negrea et al. (2016) for Romania; Loke et al. (2018) in Hungary; and Szromek (2020 and 2021) for Poland.

This endogenous and "bottom-up" approach could represent a significant boost to the local economies of thermal destinations (García-Altes, 2005). The economic dimension, already analyzed by Laczó and Ács (2009) in Hungary's spas, Drăghici et al. (2016) in Slovakia's spas, and Derco and Pavlisinova (2017) in Romania's spas, should never overlook other dimensions of reality that are not always easy to measure in monetary terms, such as environmental aspects. As important as the economic development of Europe's thermal tourism destinations is identifying the elements that hinder such development (Anaya-Aguilar et al., 2021) as well as their territorial impact (Jónás-Berki et al., 2015). The goal should be to analyze thermalism in order to replicate successful cases like that described by Martyin (2015), using a more sustainable model for local development, as advocated by Papageorgiou and Beriatos (2011), which includes the perceptions of the population, as seen in the case of Michalkó et al. (2013).

The changes in the characteristics of the stay in recent decades, which seem to promote quantity more than quality in this type of tourism, should not forget, especially in the current context, the defining strengths of thermal tourism. In localities whose economy revolves around health tourism, the territory, natural resources, heritage, population, and landscape are prominent parts of the concept that has historically contributed to the success of thermal therapies and the well-being of users and the local population. Managing these elements as integral parts of tourist activity is fundamental to avoid undermining the relationships that thermal activity has had with its municipalities and among thermalists because walking, local resources, and the landscape created and enhanced local and regional identity (Navarro-García & Alvim-Carvalho, 2019). Thermal destinations should not fall into touristification and continue to bet on the conservation and offering of their cultural heritage, landscape quality, natural environments, and an integral and updated conception of health. Following the mutually enriching practice approach, preserving the concept and the environment is crucial, as stated in Valeriani, Margarucci & Romano (2018), as the mineral-medicinal waters of spas are a natural resource that must be preserved to avoid altering their characteristics and therapeutic quality. Simultaneously, the environment surrounding thermal treatment has potentially therapeutic effects and improves psychophysical health (Antonelli et al., 2021). A seasonal, low-demanded and sustainable use of these waters, it would allow the environmental state of streams, rivers and springs to be maintained at optimal levels, vital for the conservation of local habitats and ecosystems. Therefore, the environment must be considered the essential sustenance of tourist activity that cannot be largely altered and that shapes the therapeutic landscape.

This added value, the symbiotic relationship with its surroundings, is what gives spa tourism its uniqueness and distinctive capacity in the global thermal market. Tradition, rootedness, and therapeutic singularity are key to positioning oneself as a health brand against other emerging competitors, such as spas. Studies by reference authors in spa tourism, such as Pforr and Locher (2012) and Alén et al. (2014), have emphasized the importance of achieving a therapeutic practice that allows thermal spaces to stand out and offer a unique product in the market. In some studies, such as Lebe (2006), Smith (2015), and Sziva et al. (2017), the image of a health tourism brand in the Balkans has been addressed as a potential development opportunity for the future, although it is more of a strategy than a real situation. Also, Fontanari and Kern (2003) have analyzed the context of opportunity that comes with positioning oneself as a health destination brand to gain attractiveness.

The uniqueness of this spa practice and the fact that it involves non-mass tourism will attract a more conscious user. This issue has been addressed by Alén González et al., 2007, concluding that positive perceived quality increases word-of-mouth communication. This statement is relevant to implement certain ethical policies in the management of thermal establishments. In the current situation, and despite new challenges, thermalism by definition is a type of tourism that aligns with the new strategic lines of the sector in favor of sustainability and degrowth pointed out by Fletcher et al. 2019,2020). Thermalism could be framed within the emerging concept of undertourism, given its affinity with the objectives pursued by this concept, far from the perishable experiences of immediate consumption. Managing spas or bathing spaces in this direction, away from mass tourism and already heavily consumed experiences, could allow holistic thermalism to emerge and position itself in a sustainable way, both for its development and to ensure its durability.

6. Conclusions

In its beginnings, thermalism in Spain was built on the relationship between the user, thermal water, and the surrounding environment. Throughout history, the thermalism-landscape combination was an inseparable and essential element for thermal treatment. The surroundings of bathing places became a therapeutic landscape, practically intrinsic to the balneotherapy itself. Consequently, bathing was an opportunity in and with Nature, a being-with and being-well in Nature.

However, with the evolution of thermalism in Spain, divergent trends are adopted in this direct and marital relationship between thermal practice and the natural environment. On the one hand, holistic thermalism is practiced in outdoor thermal pools, in spontaneous and less intervened spaces, where the user seeks to physically, mentally, and emotionally engage with nature and the surrounding environment for mutual enrichment. On the other hand, thermal establishments tend to equip themselves with infrastructure, sometimes becoming recreated spaces detached from their immediate surroundings. In many of them, on occasion, the benefits of direct contact with nature (aromas, landscape, etc.) are recreated or sought superficially. In other words, there is a gradual provision or accompaniment of thermal water resources with more and more infrastructure for commercialization and tourism. This represents a progressive departure from that primordial, ancestral, and

original conception of thermal practice.

Therefore, there is a need to conceive the holistic thermal experience as an ecological assemblage that distances itself from totalizing anthropocentrism and the victimization of nature. Following Donna Haraway's suggestion, it would be about finding shelters that have been minimized or exterminated during the Anthropocene (2016) to foster an effective ecological assemblage between the thermalist and bathing areas, which figuratively implies "staying with the trouble". If, within the tourism and recreational sector, a continuist trajectory is outlined, within the framework of the Anthropocene/Capitalocene, holistic thermalism can be an alternative for tentacular relationships with nature. It could rely, consequently, on a strategy of sympoiesis, as an experience of building together, establishing alliances to overcome the ontological gap between human beings and nature, and seeking conscious and full connectivity with the web of life. Spain, as a thermal power, with a tradition in outdoor thermal practices, still possesses these refuges where these assemblages can be fostered and could serve as an exemplary model for other recreational practices of being-with nature.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Aida Pinos-Navarrete: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Validation, Supervision, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Conceptualization. **Francisco Javier Toro-Sánchez:** Writing – review & editing, Methodology, Investigation, Conceptualization.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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