

## EXTENDED ABSTRACT

# VISITORS' PERCEPTION OF SUSTAINABLE TOURISM MANAGEMENT IN NATURE DESTINATIONS. CASE STUDY IN THE GALAPAGOS NATIONAL PARK (ECUADOR)

*Manuel Rivera Mateos*

Universidad de Córdoba (España)

manuel.rivera@uco.es.

<http://orcid.org/0000-0003-2780-380X>

*Iván Mendoza Montesdeoca*

Escuela Superior Politécnica Agropecuaria de Manabí (Ecuador)

mendozaivan86@gmail.com.

<http://orcid.org/0000-0002-9824-7372>

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The national parks were designed in their day as a legal figure for the protection of natural spaces with environmental, natural and landscape resources of special relevance and with a remarkable biodiversity, as well as an instrument to promote sustainable use, research, environmental education, and recreation. In line with these objectives, it is increasingly essential to know the behaviors and opinions of visitors and the resident population itself when proposing strategies and actions in terms of sustainability of these territories. On the other hand, the measurement of the levels of satisfaction of the demand of visitors and local actors on the sustainable management of these protected areas is a fundamental tool to know the needs of improvement and territorial planning of these spaces as tourist destinations.

The establishment of systems for monitoring and evaluating the levels of sustainability of tourism is today one of the most challenges posed at the international level both in the academic-scientific world and in the technical and administrative world. The definition of indicators of sustainable tourism is the most appropriate instrument for using objective measures and standards that allow to control, measure, and manage the tourist space in a correct and constant in time without prejudice to the determination of other actions such as studies of tourist-recreational carrying capacity of natural and heritage spaces and the evaluation of negative multidimensional impacts. In any case, comprehensive actions in the field of sustainable tourism must consider not only environmental and socioeconomic impacts, but also socio-cultural impacts, traditionally so ignored, and whether they are emerging or incipient tourist destinations as mature and consolidated and in any of the typologies or tourist modalities (Lepp, 2007; Diedrich and García Buades, 2009).

However, despite the need and interest of the application of multidimensional indicators to ensure tourism sustainability, the managers of protected natural areas are being little inclined, as is the case in Ecuador, towards the adoption of strategies for the management and planning of visitor flows (Rossi *et al.*, 2015) or lack the trained technical staff and the necessary means for their application. The involvement and awareness of national park managers is more difficult, when it comes to adopting tools to control and limit tourism-recreational demand to redistribute, prohibit, reduce or reorient this demand according to areas of public use management or propose selective filters of public profiles and demand segments more aware of the defense and protection of the natural environment (Armstrong and Kern, 2011).

According to Padín (2013), responsible tourism management is one where the inhabitants of a territory and visitors work and get involved in tourism development with the objective and general interest of achieving social and economic benefit for the host local communities. Mohammad (2016) points out that the participation of different stakeholders, including tourists and visitors, in the management of tourism and the understanding of its value orientations, is fundamental to achieve the sustainability of heritage tourism, compared to traditional management models in which the tourist has been practically ignored within the processes of enhancement of heritage as a tourist resource and sustainable tourism management, despite serving the opinion and considerations of demand as a source of fundamental information for the planning and sustainable development of nature destinations.

In Ecuador, in 2018, the Galapagos Islands were recognized as the main national tourist destination with a total of 276,000 tourists, 14% more than in the previous year, reaching the highest figure since the eighties when the official registration of visitors began. An offer of around 900 tourist businesses and nearly 800 guides have even grown at a faster rate than demand and have also reached peak figures in 2018. In 1989 this island destination registered about 42,000 tourists, so the average annual growth rate in the last thirty years has been +6.42% (Galapagos Tourism Observatory, 2019), with what this implies of important affections to the natural environment.

Due to this, this work analyzes the perceptions collected from national demand and foreigners through a sampling and application of a questionnaire based on criteria and indicators for the management of sustainable development and the multidimensional aspects of tourism in the Galapagos Islands, as the main national tourist destination of Ecuador. It is important to recognize the importance of considering the perceptions of the direct actors interacting in the tourism system. These are crucial to properly guide measures to support sustainable development and implement new forms of tourism development. Those more in line with the principles of integral sustainability such as ecotourism or rural community tourism, of which we already have a wide range of experiences of good practices and lessons learned worldwide as well as failed cases.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

The approach used in this research has been basically experimental-descriptive, applying a model and tools of inferential statistics with multivariate work and taking into consideration statistics of central tendency and dispersion, as well as contrasts of hypotheses about the normality of the data (K-S test for a sample), positive, negative and absolute differences, in

addition to the chi-square test to be able to accurately assess each variable with regarding the perception of each visitor surveyed. A sampling was previously carried out in which a statistical formula of unknown population was applied and the design of a questionnaire that had to consider the use of indicators and criteria of tourism sustainability and various variables to facilitate the obtaining of information on the perceptions and behaviors of the demand.

As a next step, a grouping of an index of 93 indicators and variables of sustainable tourism was carried out. These indicators and criteria were subjected to validation by 52 experts in various branches of knowledge and their consideration for the selection and validation of variables needed in the context of the real enhancement of Ecuador's protected areas and tourism-recreational activity. On the other hand, documentary information on tourism statistics and qualitative analysis by the agencies to coordinate and manage actions for the sustainable use of the protected areas of Ecuador were collected. Based on the selection and validation of indicators using the expert method, the use of 10 multidimensional criteria was established, which in turn is disaggregated into 26 indicators for sustainable tourism.

Once the criteria and indicators were defined, a questionnaire-type tool was designed to apply a survey for the collection of primary information through fieldwork that allowed to know the perception of visitors about the sustainable management of the destination, using a Likert scale from 1 to 10 where number 1 represents a high deficiency and 10, on the contrary, efficient management.

### **3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

In general terms, the results obtained point to a perception of the destination "Galapagos" by the respondents that has an average rating although with a tendency to "good". Nevertheless, the lowest indicator referred to above reveals the priority need to improve the sustainability strategies of tourism activity to the extent that visitors themselves perceive a level of affection not negligible to the destination, especially from the environmental and socio-environmental point of view, so that it is this aspect that should be considered more priority to strengthen the strategies and substantive actions of territorial sustainability.

In general, the study carried out positive evaluations are given about the general sustainability of the destination, particularly the valuations of foreign tourists (much more demanding than those of national tourists). We must conclude that there are still imperative needs to improve certain aspects or factors to facilitate a much more sustainable and participatory management model where the actors are properly integrated.

On the other hand, it is certainly encouraging for the destination to see a certain degree of environmental awareness on the part of most visitors, which can be understood in part by the high level of studies pursued, since they are mostly university students. In fact, as reflected in the survey, we find a tourist profile sensitized by the control and reduction of water and energy consumption, by the treatment of solid waste and the minimization of impacts during their stay on the island, and although they value positively the actions to mitigate its effects by tourism service providers. These tourists are also aware of the need for some improvements. The same happens in terms of the assessment of the state of conservation of the heritage sites and resources, both natural and cultural, visited, even when they qualify it as very good.

Likewise, these visitors, although they also value positively the adequacy of the destination and its tourist-recreational offer in terms of accessibility for all audiences, are aware of the need for not inconsiderable improvements in the more active and dynamic enhancement of heritage resources and the facilitation of the tourist experience in them through better planning and public management, as well as promotion and design of attractive tourist products. Although they highly value the official tourist information received in the sites visited, they seem to detect that the instruments of promotion and commercialization of the products and resources of the destination are still insufficient and somewhat obsolete in some cases, especially in the face of the attraction of international tourism, which is still very minority.

Finally, in terms of informative and interpretative signage and interpretation centers, information and visitor reception, the assessment is also good, such as the professionalization of human resources in the hotel and restaurant industry and the commercial tourist idea of the destination, despite its still limited positioning and recognition at an international level. In addition, tourism is also favorably valued as an instrument of local development and obtaining economic income for the population.

#### **4. CONCLUSIONS**

The answers obtained on the sustainability of the tourist destination show that important improvements must be considered in terms of comprehensive accessibility to the national park and within them about transport and internal means of displacement, adopt measures to control tourist flows, measure the capacity of tourist load and minimize negative impacts on the natural spaces with the highest tourist-recreational frequency of the islands. Likewise, there are significant deficiencies in the management of solid waste and wastewater discharges in some towns inside the natural park, as well as in the programming of education and environmental awareness activities for both the local population and visitors. On the other hand, visitors recognize the excessive dependence on the supply of electricity and the supply of fuel for public and private transport on fossil fuels (mostly diesel). Hence, the need to design strategies that allow greater efficiency and sustainability in internal displacements through the territory is emphasized.

The data finally obtained, we can conclude that there is a very weak strategic and territorial planning and with few substantive and integral actions, to which the lack of a true institutional leadership is added. This not only brings together and coordinates the different public agencies with competence incidence in the National Park, but also generates collaborative synergies with private agents and entrepreneurs. Without a proper strategy in terms of tourism sustainability, with little knowledge of the territorial impacts that tourism activity generates in this territory and with poor zoning and management of public use, the planning default is further aggravated by the scarce and inefficient public and private investment in aspects related to basic services such as water management, ecological transport, infrastructure and equipment for public use or actions in the field of accessible tourism. Although the whole of the tourist-recreational nature offer of the islands is positively valued, it suffers from added values of an experiential, emotional, innovation and creativity nature, capable of taking better advantage of the comparative

and differential advantages of this destination and its exceptional biodiversity to generate a greater attraction in order to position itself properly in the international market of nature and active and adventure tourism, in which it currently maintains a certainly low share in the ranking of receiving destinations.