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## Environmental public policies and sustainable tourism development in Ecuador's protected areas

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### INTRODUCTION

Critical analysis of public policies on environmental conservation, management, and tourism development in the protected natural areas of Ecuador to detect their dysfunctions, contradictions, and problems of applicability.

The scientific bibliography consulted coincides in pointing out the need to know how planned actions and strategies are being carried out in the development models proposed in protected natural spaces. With this, comparative analyzes can be established and lessons learned and reference cases of good practices can be extrapolated, to a greater or lesser extent, to other territories. Likewise, it is also essential to specify whether these models are truly framed within the principles and objectives of a sustainability policy, especially with the obligation to provide guarantees for the conservation of natural heritage and allow greater opportunities for participation to local communities.

### METHODOLOGY AND SOURCES OF INFORMATION

A predominantly exploratory research methodology with a descriptive-analytical approach is used when studying and systematizing the different regulations, actions and guidelines existing and implemented by international and national organizations with competencies in environmental conservation and sustainable development. These are systematized and analyzed through the main documents of interest that include principles, strategic guidelines, and specific rules of application.

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Through primary and secondary sources and internal documentation of various Administrations we have identified the most visible effects and impacts that these policies have generated in the protection and/or valorization of the natural heritage, as well as in the tourist development compatible with the conservation of these spaces, the generation of complementary income and economic diversification for local communities.

## **ENVIRONMENTAL SIGNIFICANCE AND TOURIST SUSTAINABILITY OF THE PROTECTED NATURAL AREAS OF ECUADOR**

The importance of Ecuador's protected areas as a fundamental support for its tourism offer is explained by being one of the 17 countries with the greatest biodiversity in the world and by occupying the second place in number of endemic species, in addition to having 17 different ecosystems and 35% of its territorial extension covered by undisturbed biomes, especially in the Amazon region. Its National System of Protected Areas (SNAP) covers, in fact, 13.64% of the national territory, with a total of 64 protected areas and an area of 18,401,927 hectares. Biological diversity is therefore fundamental for national economic development and is a fundamental element of their national and regional strategies for sustainable tourism development, at least at the level of theoretical discourse, given the great potential, still insufficiently explored, and of the benefits derived from the conservation of the natural environment and the maintenance of its eco-cultural and indigenous identity marks to become a first-rate tourist destination.

This country is part of the 30% of the countries with the greatest potential in the world for tourism development, taking into account the quality and diversity of its natural and cultural resources. Currently, there are 3,366 tourist attractions registered at the national level, of which 3% are located in the island region of the Galapagos, 28% in the Coastal region, 53% in the Andes and 17% in the Amazon, while 51% of these attractions correspond to cultural manifestations and 49% to natural sites. For the Ministry of the Environment (2020) the natural spaces that are part of the National System of Protected Areas (SNAP) have been experiencing in recent years an acceptable level of influx of visitors and at a good pace thanks to the presence of national visitors, which represent 95% of the total, while international demand is only 5%. The most up-to-date total number of visitors is 368,309 people in all the country's conservation areas (MAE, 2020).

## **RESULTS. ENVIRONMENTAL POLICIES AND THEIR ORIENTATION TOWARDS SUSTAINABLE TOURIST DEVELOPMENT**

The direct and indirect threats that fail to conserve these spaces provide important ecosystem services and have a natural heritage that serves as a basic support for sustainable tourism. These can find their turning point if efficient decision-making is adopted in the matter, such as the planning and management of the territory and a collaborative governance system with agents from the private sector, the productive fabric and the local community itself, promoting a commitment between the parties in terms of sustainability.

In the legislation studied, only very generic mentions are made to the planning and management of protected areas, without expressly considering that the National System of Protected Areas of Ecuador forms a non-homogeneous territorial group and with certainly different physical, geological or environmental characteristics according to zones. On the other hand, the levels of socioeconomic development in their areas of influence are also very different according to territories.

Likewise, it is important to point out that not all the protected areas legally declared as such in the country have been assigned stimulus functions to the strategies of sustainable development of activities such as tourism, since in Ecuador there are territories whose declaration responds exclusively to the environmental preservation of areas of special fragility. To this we must add the growing problem of land use and land control conflicts, which in certain cases reaches a worrying dimension that makes it difficult to implement planning and sustainability strategies.



Lastly, the fact that in protected areas where environmental education and recreational-tourism activities and scientific tourism can be carried out in principle, the Ministry of Tourism of Ecuador is not actively participating, not even in the Planning and managing sustainable tourism projects is limiting the State's capacity to actively promote the initiatives of rural communities, in the areas of influence of these spaces, and to properly guide them according to sustainability criteria.

## **DISCUSSION**

The strategic vision of the Ministry of Tourism on the basic pillar of tourism quality in Ecuador must be adapted to the specific territorial characteristics of protected natural areas and must be accompanied in parallel by environmental planning and the regulation of uses and management and governance systems, as well as the implementation of quality and sustainability standards. Connectivity in terms of public transport, access, multimodality of non-motorized means, etc. with national and international markets, is another priority, but the accessibility support infrastructures in different regions of the country, especially in coastal areas, present serious deficiencies as a result of: a) an excessively centralized policy in the attention to the needs of large cities, b) a limited management capacity and applicability of comprehensive development projects at the local and provincial level and, c) strong limitations to national and foreign investment in the tourism sector

In this sense, despite the fact that Ecuador has risen in the ranking of performance in tourism competitiveness since 2009, when it ranked 96th according to the World Economic Forum, in 2019 it continued to occupy a low position in said ranking (70/140). In addition, in the last five years, it has been losing competitiveness and the values of variables such as employment, tourism arrivals and tourism and environmental sustainability have fallen.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

We concluded that Ecuadorian regulations on the conservation of protected areas present notable points of collision and lack of coherence or coordination with tourism policies. This is the consequence of two main factors: 1) the lack of a broad strategic vision and comprehensive territorial planning of these territories as sustainable tourist destinations and, 2) the lack of a framework for management, planning and collaborative planning between the different local agencies and agents that affect these spaces.

The diagnosis carried out on the management and planning of these protected areas reveals the existence of important information deficits regarding most of the aspects related to the tourist development of these territories, the incidence of this activity in the socio-economic and business structure of their area of influence, the territorial impacts of an environmental and sociocultural nature or even on the same profile of the current and/or potential demand, that seeks tourist-recreational activities in direct contact with the natural environment.