

GOVERNANCE AND STAKEHOLDER INVOLVEMENT IN SUSTAINABLE NATURE-BASED TOURISM: A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK APPLIED TO A DESTINATION IN THE ECUADORIAN AMAZON

Abstract

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Purpose – Nature-based tourism offers significant opportunities for rural communities in developing countries; however, weak governance and inadequate stakeholder management threaten its sustainability. This study aims to apply a conceptual governance model based on parameters to assess the level of stakeholder involvement in the sustainable management of nature-based tourism destinations.

Methodology/Design/Approach – A mixed-methods approach was adopted, combining semi-structured interviews, statistical analysis, and documentary review. The proposed conceptual framework incorporates compliance parameters to examine the roles and interactions of public and private stakeholders. Results are presented through frequencies and percentages to identify governance strengths and weaknesses.

Findings – The model was applied to a nature-based tourism destination in the Ecuadorian Amazon. Most parameters showed partial or non-compliance. The main challenges identified were weak coordination between public and private stakeholders and the absence of effective multi-level organizational structures.

Originality of the research – This study contributes by applying a practical governance assessment tool to analyze stakeholder involvement in unprotected natural areas. The proposed model and coding criteria are replicable and can support comparative and inferential analyses in other nature-based tourism contexts.

Keywords tourism governance, stakeholders' engagement, sustainable tourism, Nature-based tourism; tourism management; Amazonian region; developing countries.

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INTRODUCTION

Ecotourism, nature-based tourism, wildlife, and rural tourism are the main tourism models associated with sustainable tourism and are considered alternatives to mass tourism (Fernández Güell, 1989; Gonsalves, 1987; Mauri, 2020). Nature-based tourism is an engine of local development in rural areas (Díaz, 2017). According to Valentine (1992), it can be understood as an activity related to the enjoyment of natural environments in a minimally altered state, which, in turn, can represent a threat to the natural and cultural heritage of destinations (Martínez et al., 2020). In protected natural areas, tourism is managed by specialized managers within the framework of strict regulations and controls (Leiper, 1979), unlike what happens in unprotected natural areas. The level of impact on natural environments directly determines the degree of authenticity of destinations (Martínez Quintana, 2017). Thus, destinations that do not have adequate planning and management are vulnerable to the impacts that tourism can generate within them (Montero & Parra, 2001).

The commercialization of natural spaces is linked to the sale of tourist experiences; this process consolidates the concept of gentrification of nature, referring to the construction of accommodations or the tourist use of natural spaces (Duterme, 2019). This process results in mass tourism that generates space for consumption, increasing the value of land and leading to a process of tourist urbanization (Cocola-Gant, 2019). Nature-based destinations can become spaces dominated by the purchasing power of tourists and new residents, exemplified in residential tourism (Aledo et al., 2013), turning them into scenarios of tourist gentrification. Some dimensions of tourism sustainability are not perceived by the community, and their evaluation remains unclear; therefore, the development of methodologies that allow measurement and adaptation to different contexts is required (Puentes-Ramírez et al., 2021).

There are key factors for environmental conservation in nature destinations, such as: visits by pro-environmental tourists; government responsibility; and adequate visitor management (Öztüren et al., 2021). The study on "Overtourism" issued by the European Parliament concludes that a common set of indicators cannot be defined, and that avoiding tourism overcrowding requires customized policies of cooperation between stakeholders (Peeters et al., 2018). As an alternative model, sustainable tourism has the capacity to manage resources to meet economic, social, and aesthetic needs, while respecting cultural integrity, essential ecological processes, biological diversity, and life support systems present in the regions (Avila & Garcia, 2015).

Sustainable tourism development depends largely on appropriate governance models, cooperative participation, cultural heritage as a driving force, transportation as an accessible and sustainable tool, and technological trends (Öztüren & Özgüt, 2022). Likewise, the homogeneity of opinions and similarity of relationships between the main actors in the tourism environment improve democratic processes to measure sustainability and favor decision making (Damian et al., 2022). In this sense, Byrd (2007) states that the processes of socialization of territorial and environmental regulations, as well as management strategies for stakeholders and public and private actors, are fundamental. Stakeholder participation should be consolidated through formal or informal working groups, such as citizen participation forums, neighborhood or sectoral committees, focus groups, surveys, public meetings, and implementation studies, which are among the tools used in this research.

Initial studies on tourism destination management focused on “top-down” issues and public policies, i.e., those focused on government; more recently, the importance of stakeholders in tourism management to achieve economic and social development objectives has been recognized (Zhang et al., 2021). Three of the dimensions present in tourism governance research are: complexity due to the number of stakeholders, public-private relations, and resource interdependence (Zhang et al., 2021). One of the principles of governance in nature-based tourism is the involvement of the local population in the management of natural and cultural resources, which impacts the quality of life of communities and leads to better results for these tourism destinations (Mulyadi, 2020). “From the sustainable development perspective, tourism planning and management should involve a diversity of voices, including also those with limited political or economic power” (Partanen et al., 2023, p. 1).

The governance of each territory is conditioned by the natural space (Marshall, 2019), and this can be analyzed from the perspective of peripheral economies, labor precariousness, and tourist dependence. Governance focuses on functions and processes that institutionalize decision-making, raise awareness among the resident population, and empower their participation (Pantoja Pantoja, 2014; Boullón, 2006; Cabezas Hernández & Leal-Solís, 2021; Prats Cátala, 1996; Pulido Fernández, 2014; Toro et al., 2015). To achieve sustainable development goals, the national government must actively engage a group of stakeholders in a collaborative effort (Ilkhanizadeh, 2021). Likewise, the intervention of mediators between tourists and the community, as well as the forced displacement or segregation of permanent residents, should be avoided (Hoyos, 2020; Lacouture, 2019).

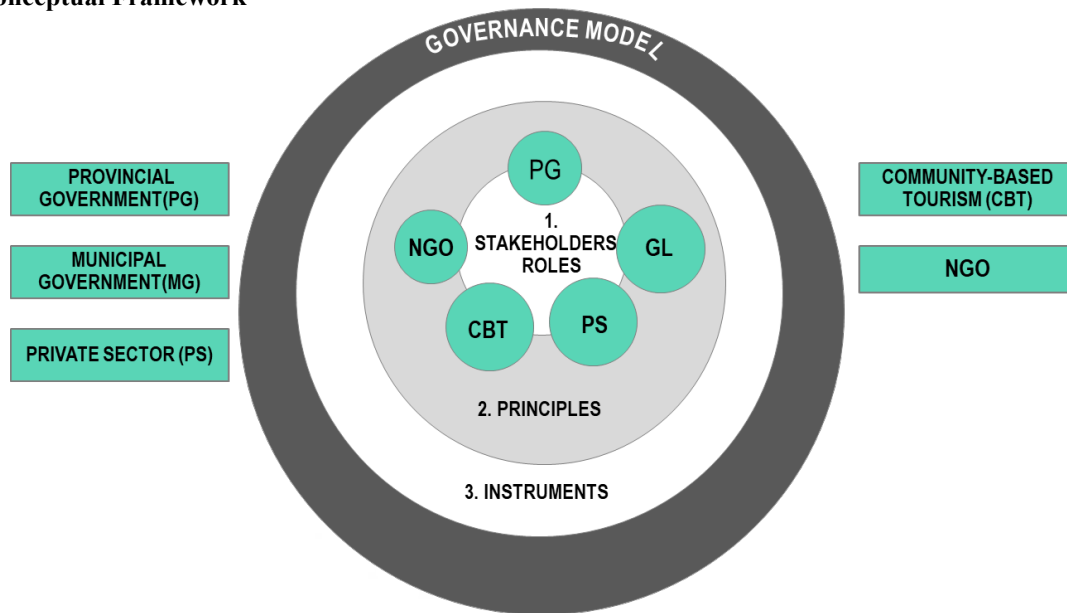
The main object of this study is the application of a conceptual governance model for assessing stakeholder involvement in sustainable tourism, using compliance parameters and identifying governance strengths and weaknesses that are visualized through frequencies and percentages. The parameters are verified through semi-structured interviews, statistical analysis, and document review. Findings indicate partial or no compliance in most parameters, with key issues identified being public-private coordination and insufficient multi-level organization.

The case study is in the Ecuadorian Amazon (19727 km²), in the largest Amazonian municipality in the country. However, tourism management has several limitations for the implementation of sustainable strategies; this reality is similar in other tourist destinations with similar geographical and socio-economic characteristics. Local and provincial public institutions (Asamblea Nacional del Ecuador, 2015), private and community tourism associations, and NGOs were identified as stakeholders. An innovative governance tool shows the roles and responsibilities of stakeholders, enabling strategic guidelines for sustainable management that can be adapted to similar nature-based destinations.

1. METHODS AND MATERIALS

A methodological design was adopted based on a conceptual model of tourism governance, first developed by Medina-Enríquez (2019) at the Polytechnic University of Madrid. This conceptual model structures governance into three fundamental levels of assessment: i) stakeholders, ii) principles, and iii) governance instruments (see Figure 1). This research focuses specifically on the first level, which analyzes the roles and responsibilities of stakeholders in the application of sustainable practices in nature-based tourism. Stakeholders are assessed by considering their level of compliance and involvement in sustainable tourism initiatives. For this purpose, five types of stakeholders have been identified: the provincial government, the local government, private companies, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs).

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework



Note: First level of the conceptual framework of tourism governance that includes five stakeholders.

The research method combines components of the qualitative and quantitative methods, seeking to complement both approaches with each other and obtain a more comprehensive view of the phenomenon studied (Medina Romero et al., 2023). According to Medina Romero et al. (2023) the main characteristics of this mixed method are: data integration; flexibility; triangulation; holistic vision; complementarity; among others. The type of reasoning applied is inductive, applying the conceptual framework to a case study to obtain general conclusions that can be contrasted (Otero Ortega, 2018).

Semi-structured interviews are the main data collection technique of the conceptual framework and provide detailed insights into the role of stakeholders in the sustainability of nature-based tourism. Non-probabilistic snowball sampling was used, which facilitated initial contact with a few key stakeholders, who subsequently recommended other relevant participants, thus allowing a network of informants to be established (see Appendices). The interviews were conducted in three sequential stages: i) the first stage allowed for a deeper understanding of the research problem and the identification of initial key issues; ii) in the second stage, leaders of public institutions were interviewed to analyze their role and level of involvement in tourism governance and sustainability policies; iii) the third stage focused on private sector actors and representatives of community-based tourism initiatives. A total of 19 interviews were conducted, divided into five groups defined by the governance model: provincial government, local government, private sector, community tourism, and NGOs (Silva & Medina-Enríquez, 2022).

A quantitative coding process was used to analyze the interview data, in which the level of compliance with each sustainability parameter identified in the conceptual model was assigned a numerical value. The values 2 (full compliance), 1 (partial compliance) and 0 (non-compliance) allowed the variable 'compliance' to be transformed into an ordinal scale, enabling the systematic operationalization of qualitative evidence and its organization for comparative and descriptive analysis (Dettori & Norvell, 2018). These values were based on analytical criteria established in the conceptual model and are supported by documentary evidence. When interview responses and official documents showed that the parameter had been implemented in a clear and verifiable manner, as in the case of programs, regulations, or approved sustained practices, full compliance was marked. When the evidence revealed limited, fragmented, or emerging actions, partial compliance was recorded; when no relevant actions or policies were detected, non-compliance was recorded. In cases of ambiguity, interview data were compared with official documents to confirm the assigned value.

This coding based on levels of compliance made it possible to quantify the degree of alignment of the different stakeholder groups with the principles of sustainability and to make comparisons between them. The resulting ordinal values were aggregated by stakeholder category and analyzed using descriptive statistics to identify patterns and differences in levels of commitment. While the ordinal coding system allows for comparison between stakeholders, this research is limited to a descriptive level. However, the conceptual model and coding criteria are designed to be replicable and can support inferential analysis in future case studies.

In parallel, an analysis of official documents at provincial and local level was carried out to verify compliance with the parameters set in the research. The documents analyzed included provincial and local tourism plans, development plans, and legal frameworks provided by public administrations, which helped to contextualize the tourism sustainability policies and practices of each stakeholder group. Table 1 shows the number and type of parameters assessed for each group, detailing 38 specific items such as planning, promotion, regulation, training, infrastructure, and sustainable practices, among others.

Table 1: Parameters evaluated to stakeholders

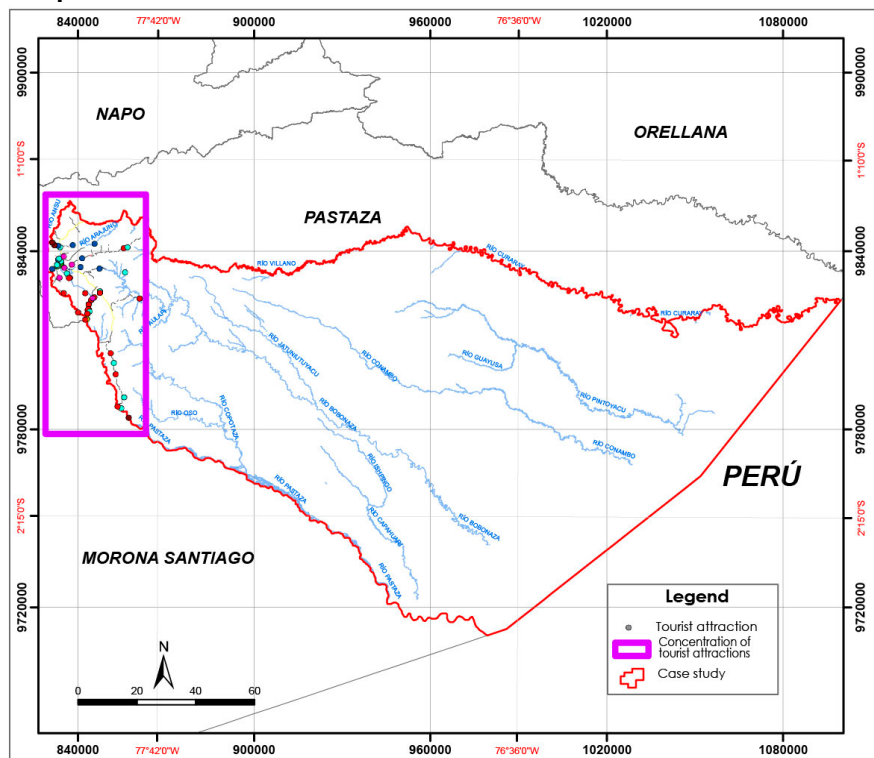
STAKEHOLDER	PARAMETERS	#
Provincial government	planning, promotion and infrastructure	10
Municipal government	planning, regulations, training and infrastructure	12
Private Sector	sustainable practices, education, and associations	9
Communities	planning, regulation and practices	4
NGOs	technical support, training and certifications	3

Note: 38 parameters evaluated to stakeholders

To visualize the results obtained from both techniques, the R software (version 4.1.1) (R Core Team, 2010) was used together with the 'ggplot2' package (Wickham, 2016), which generated frequency and percentage graphs that facilitated the identification of patterns and divergences in the level of commitment of key stakeholders to tourism sustainability. Together, both the semi-structured interviews and the documentary analysis contributed to the verification of the sustainability parameters established in the model, allowing for a comprehensive and triangulated assessment of the roles and practices of different stakeholders in sustainable tourism governance.

The case study to which the parameters of the conceptual model are applied corresponds to the municipality of Pastaza (Silva & Medina-Enriquez, 2022), located in one of the Amazonian provinces of Ecuador. Forty percent of its territory corresponds to areas of ecological protection; however, most of its tourist attractions and resources are in rural areas with no protection category (64). The municipality of Pastaza covers an area of 19,944.86 km², includes 13 rural communities and 1 urban community, and is home to 6 indigenous nationalities, representing 32% of the population (Gobierno Autónomo Descentralizado Municipal de Pastaza, 2020). This natural destination has serious weaknesses that affect the sustainability of tourism, such as reduced supply, low quality of services, weak regulation and control, and poor governance.

Figure 2: Geolocation map of tourist attractions



Note: Concentration of tourist attractions around the urban area of the province of Pastaza

2. RESULTS

The methodological application of the study resulted in five matrices of results broken down by each of the stakeholder roles (see annexes): provincial government, local government, private sector, communities, and NGOs. The results were coded with the numbers 2, 1, and 0, with the ordinal number 2 corresponding to total compliance with the role, 1 to partial compliance and 0 to non-compliance with the parameter. With the frequencies and percentages obtained, a comparative analysis of the results was prepared for each of the stakeholders studied. Of the 10 parameters applied to the provincial government, 30% show full compliance, 30% show partial compliance, and 40% show non-compliance, another 30% are partially complied with, and 40% are not complied with. The existence of a tourism development plan that includes some sustainability principles in its strategies, as well as tourism promotion that contains environmental conservation messages, stands out.

Table 2: Parameters met by the Provincial Government

Provincial Tourism Planning		Results
A	Strategic Plan for Sustainable Tourism with strategies for environmental and sociocultural sustainability.	2
B	The organizational structure maintains a Tourism Directorate with autonomous management.	1
C	Execution of environmental conservation plans in non-protected areas where tourism is developed.	0
Sustainable Tourism Regulations		Results
D	Management of norms regulating the environmental impacts of tourism in non-protected areas.	0
E	Management of norms that regulate the socio-cultural impacts of tourism in non-protected areas.	0
F	Management of laws and regulations that support the development of sustainable community-based tourism.	1
Tourism promotion		Results
G	Promotional campaigns contain messages regarding environmental and sociocultural sustainability.	2
H	Citizen awareness campaigns are promoted regarding the importance of implementing sustainable tourism.	0
Tourism and sanitation infrastructure		Results
I	Improvement of tourism infrastructure in the last 2 years (roads, accesses, facilities).	2
J	Environmental sanitation infrastructure in the last two years (sewage treatment plants).	1

Note: Numerical values were assigned for each compliance level with the following code; 2 = Total compliance; 1 = Partial compliance; and 0 = Non-compliance

The local government complies with 8 of the 12 parameters, while partial compliance represents almost 60%; it is interpreted that a large part of the parameters are intentions that do not reach full compliance. In terms of planning, the administration has a strategic tourism plan focused on development; however, there are weaknesses in terms of environmental and sociocultural sustainability strategies. In terms of local regulations, they focus on land use control and recycling measures required to obtain an operating license; currently, there are no norms that directly minimize the negative impacts of tourism activities. One of the competencies of this level of government is the training of tourism entrepreneurs. This focuses on quality and productivity, but there is no evidence of direct focus on sustainable tourism issues.

Table 3: Parameters met by the Local Government

Local Tourism Planning		Results
A	Sustainable Tourism Strategic Plan in operation	1
B	Strategic Tourism Plan includes environmental sustainability strategies	1
C	Strategic Tourism Plan includes socio-cultural sustainability strategies.	0
D	Land Use and Development Plan includes tourism sustainability guidelines.	1
Sustainable Tourism Regulations		Results
E	Norm regulating the environmental impacts of tourism activities	0
F	A norm regulates the socio-cultural impacts of tourism activities.	0
G	Sufficient technical staff for effective control of tourism norms.	1
Training for private stakeholders and community-based tourism		Results
H	Training on environmental sustainability for the private and community tourism sector	0
I	Training on socio-cultural sustainability for the private and community tourism sector	0
J	Training on tourism quality for the private and community tourism sector.	2
Projects and Infrastructure		Results
K	Investment in sanitation infrastructure in the last two years.	1
L	Investment in tourism infrastructure in the last two years (public spaces, road improvements, parks).	1

Note: Numerical values were assigned for each compliance level with the following code; 2 = Total compliance; 1 = Partial compliance; and 0 = Non-compliance

Private businesses reflect 56% non-compliance in their roles, 44% partial compliance, and 0% total compliance. The supply of tourism services at the national level presents a legal inconsistency, which is evidenced by the percentage of businesses operating without tourism licenses. This problem has a direct impact on the quality and sustainability of accommodations, restaurants, and other services that do not comply with standards and good practices. Green certifications in private enterprises are almost non-existent; only two accommodations are registered as certified, suggesting that the destination does not encourage these processes. On the other hand, it was found that tourist attractions do not have codes of conduct for tourists, nor is the installation of interpretation elements mandatory. Likewise, it was verified that the associative capacity of the businesses does not exceed 50%, a reality that affects the implementation of sustainability policies.

Table 4: **Parameters met by the Private Sector**

Sustainable practices and certifications	Results
A Accommodation meets norms for sustainable practices (saving water, electricity, or recycling).	1
B Accommodations have green certifications that endorse the implementation of sustainable practices.	0
C Tourist attractions have green certifications that endorse the implementation of sustainable practices.	0
Tourist education	Results
D Tourist attractions have a comprehensive code of conduct for tourists.	0
E The guides and tour operators inform tourists about the conservation of the natural environment.	1
F Natural tourist attractions implement elements of interpretation and environmental awareness.	1
Partnerships and professionalization	Results
G More than half of the private sector is a member of an association.	0
H Private associations organize training for the implementation of sustainable practices.	1
I More than half of tourism business owners have superior education	1

Note: Numerical values were assigned for each compliance level with the following code; 2 = Total compliance; 1 = Partial compliance; and 0 = Non-compliance

The community tourism sector, despite having an invaluable cultural heritage, has not been able to consolidate itself as part of the tourism offer. Of the four parameters proposed in the conceptual model, three are not verified, particularly those related to the regulation of negative impacts and tourism quality. This sector faces serious limitations due to the lack of government support in terms of infrastructure, basic services, education, and health. Few community enterprises have developed and are able to offer quality services.

Table 5: **Parameters met by Community-based tourism**

Parameters met by Community-based tourism	Results
A Community tourism leaders participate in the Strategic Tourism Plan and decision-making.	1
B Community tourism enterprises have a community tourism development plan.	0
C Community tourism is regulated in terms of tourism quality.	0
D Community tourism is regulated in terms of sustainable practices.	0

Note: Numerical values were assigned for each compliance level with the following code; 2 = Total compliance; 1 = Partial compliance; and 0 = Non-compliance

Finally, the NGOs involved in the tourist destination reflect **33% total compliance**; training for private enterprise and community tourism enterprises is verified. Their indirect participation contributes to the approval of regulations; however, there is no participation in the generation of tourism sustainability policies and strategies. The NGOs located in the territory do not issue green certifications to tourism businesses; they only promote the responsible use of natural resources.

Table 6: **Parameters met by Non-governmental Organizations**

Parameters met by Non-governmental Organizations	Results
A NGOs are involved in capacity building for private enterprises and community-based tourism.	2
B NGOs provide technical support to the public sector in the implementation of sustainable tourism practices.	1
C NGOs promote the issuance of green certifications for tourism businesses.	1

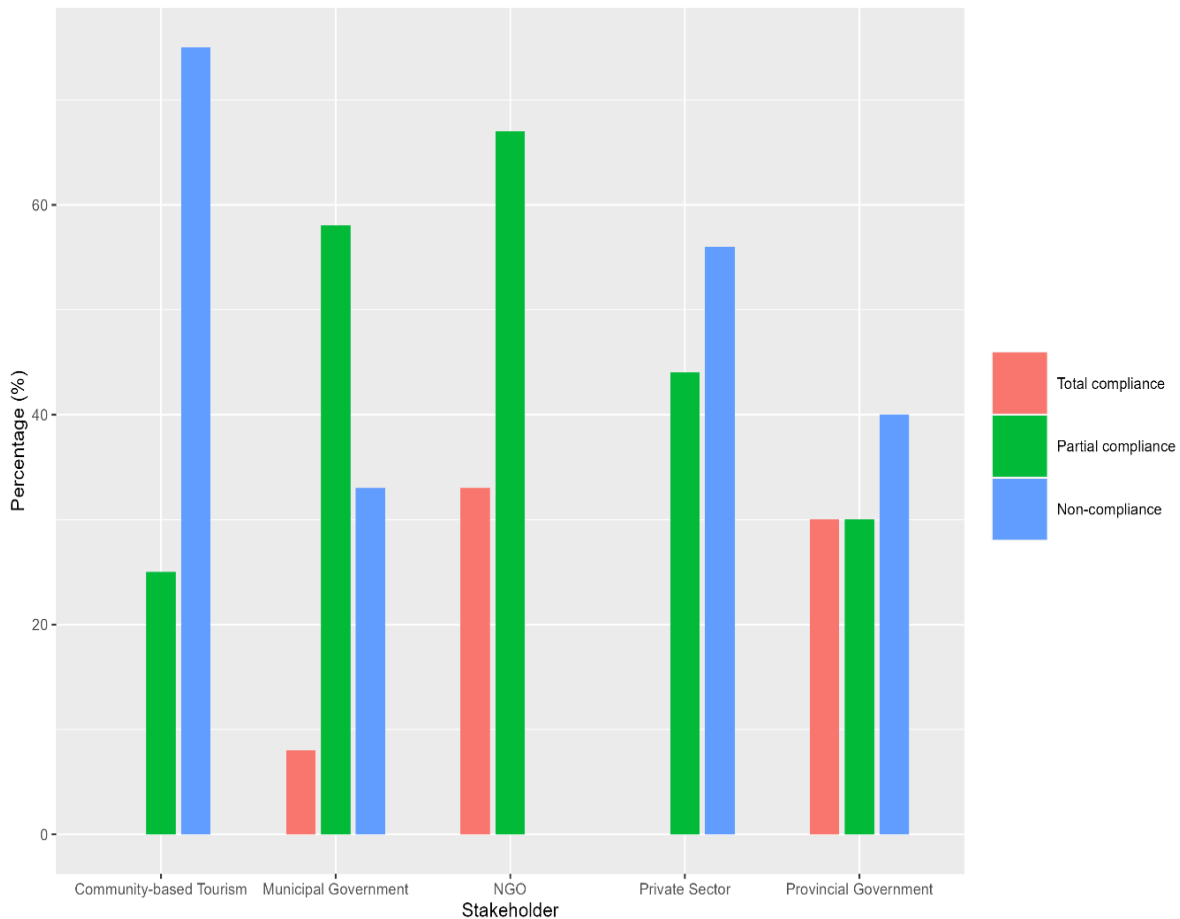
Note: Numerical values were assigned for each compliance level with the following code; 2 = Total compliance; 1 = Partial compliance; and 0 = Non-compliance

Table 7 and Figure 3 show the overall results of the different stakeholders that were evaluated. The results indicate that stakeholders do not fully comply with the 38 proposed parameters (14%), while partial compliance and non-compliance reach a combined percentage of 86%.

Table 7: Percentage of compliance of the different stakeholders. Comparative results

Stakeholders	Total Compliance	Partial Compliance	Non-Compliance
Provincial Administration	30 %	30 %	40 %
Local Administration	8 %	58 %	33 %
Private Sector	0 %	44 %	56 %
Community-based Tourism	0 %	25 %	75 %
NGO	33 %	67 %	0 %
Total	14 %	45 %	41 %

Figure 3. Stakeholder compliance Barplot



Note. The graph shows the percentage of compliance of each stakeholder regarding the parameters of sustainable tourism governance.

Overall, the results indicate that the intervention of stakeholders involved in sustainable tourism governance is still more declarative than functional. The prevalence of partial implementation manifests itself in different ways across all stakeholder groups: local and provincial governments lead tourism planning and promotion, despite weaknesses in environmental and sociocultural regulations; private agents have a high level of non-compliance with regard to licenses, certifications, and the implementation of good practices; communities participate little in decision-making and lack structural support; finally, although NGOs are mainly engaged in training, their impact on public policy is limited.

This form of unequal articulation generates a fragmented governance structure, where each actor acts in isolation, without effective coordination mechanisms. From a relational perspective, this situation is inconsistent with the Ecuadorian regulatory framework. COOTAD establishes that decentralized autonomous governments must plan development and coordinate public, private, and community actors in their territories (Asamblea Nacional del Ecuador, 2015), while the LOOTUGS states that land use planning must integrate economic, social, and environmental dimensions in a coordinated manner (Asamblea Nacional del Ecuador, 2016).

3. DISCUSSION

According to the conceptual framework proposed by Medina-Enriquez (2019), and the sustainability parameters applied, it is observed that the provincial administration shows 30% total compliance, 30% partial compliance, and 40% non-compliance. The local government has a total compliance of 8%, 50% partial compliance, and 33% non-compliance. In the private sector, non-compliance increases to 56%, while partial compliance is 44% and an alarming 0% total compliance. Finally, the NGOs involved show 33% compliance and 67% partial compliance. When determining the obligations and functions of private stakeholders, although they benefit most from sustainable tourism management, they fail to comply to a greater extent than public stakeholders. The lack of permits to offer tourism services, the absence of environmental certificates, non-compliance with environmental regulations, and weak business cooperation are problems that arise in the governance system. All the above weakens the implementation of sustainable policies. Community-based tourism faces difficulties due to the lack of government support in terms of training, infrastructure, and essential services. This limits its connection with the private sector and reduces opportunities for synergy among participants. This disproportionate relationship generates more conflicts than collaborations, reinforcing fragmented governance in which economic progress does not translate into commitments to the environment or society.

From a regulatory perspective, COOTAD establishes that only decentralized autonomous governments have the authority to plan development, organize the territory, and promote productivity. This means that they have a direct obligation to include public, private, and community stakeholders in the planning stages. However, the findings indicate that this coordination is mainly formal and weak. At the same time, insufficient government support for community-based tourism limits the possibilities for synergy. This indicates that current governance mechanisms produce more conflicts than solutions. Finally, NGOs, although active, have a limited impact on the creation of sustainability policies and certifications.

The results indicate that the lack of training in sustainability and the lack of specific regulations on the sociocultural and environmental effects of tourism are the causes of ineffective and fragmented management. Specifically, the lack of collaborative work, insufficient regulation of community-based tourism, and high rates of non-compliance in the private sector show that there are no operational processes that motivate or require stakeholders to implement sustainable initiatives. From a public policy perspective, these findings suggest that planning instruments should include technical control systems; collaborative agreements between the community, private, and public sectors to consolidate infrastructure, training, and cooperation; mandatory regulations to monitor the impact of tourism in unprotected areas; and tax and economic systems that incentivize good practices and green certifications. LOOTUGS, in relational terms, maintains that economic development, environmental sustainability, and social justice must be connected to land use planning. In this vein, the fact that the results analyzed are not aligned with these regulatory frameworks explains why tourism governance remains merely declarative. Sustainability policies cannot be implemented without formal alliances, mandatory instruments, and effective incentives, resulting in scattered tourism management that restricts the achievement of the social, environmental, and economic goals of sustainable tourism.

This is consistent with previous studies that emphasize the importance of proper planning and management to avoid degradation of tourism destinations (Montero & Parra, 2001). The inability of the private sector to comply with sustainability and quality standards is worrisome, as tourism services play a crucial role in the tourists' perception and experience. The lack of incentives to obtain green certifications and low participation in associations reflect a disconnect between public policies and private sector practices, similar to what has been observed in other studies on regulation and quality control in tourism (Nasarre, 2020). Our findings not only confirm patterns found in past research; they also analyze how the implementation of sustainability systems fails due to weak governance mechanisms in unprotected natural areas. Partial compliance among stakeholders demonstrates a governance model that officially recognizes sustainability but lacks the institutional mechanisms required to implement it effectively. This reinforces the patterns of social exclusion and environmental vulnerability mentioned above. Additionally, the need for closer collaboration between local and provincial governments and NGOs has previously been highlighted as a solution to improve sustainability (Öztüren & Özgüt, 2022).

Theoretically, this study contributes to the understanding of the complexities of governance in nature-based tourism, highlighting the importance of coordination among multiple stakeholders. Practically, it suggests the urgency of establishing robust regulatory frameworks and training programs focused on sustainability. The implementation of incentives for green certifications and the strengthening of infrastructure and basic services in indigenous communities are also essential steps towards more sustainable tourism management. One of the strengths of the study is its focus on a detailed analysis of stakeholder roles and responsibilities, using robust qualitative techniques that provide an in-depth understanding of the situation in Pastaza. However, a limitation is the lack of longitudinal quantitative data that could provide a more dynamic view of changes in tourism management over time. Using the governance framework proposed for other unprotected natural destinations, future research could expand this analytical perspective. These studies have the capacity to analyze how sustainability outcomes change over time due to changes in regulatory frameworks, planning instruments, or cooperation systems between public, private, and community organizations.

A significant case is that of Laguna del Quilotoa, where community-based tourism has had a direct impact on local development. Tourism management led by indigenous communities in this territory has made it possible for income from activities such as guiding, transportation, and food services to be redistributed locally, which has strengthened family economies, improved basic infrastructure, and reinforced cultural identity processes. In contrast to models dominated by external actors, in community governance, community members are actively involved in the decision-making process. This demonstrates that this form of governance can generate economic, social, and environmental benefits simultaneously.

This case shows that governance models that effectively include local communities promote not only environmental conservation but also territorial development and social unity. Therefore, the possibility of implementing the proposed model depends on its ability to adapt to situations in which communities play a crucial role in tourism management, in relation to public policies and regulatory frameworks that support their autonomy and strategic role in local development. This supports the concept that sustainability cannot be achieved solely through state or private structures, but through cooperative systems in which the community is a central axis of tourism governance. It is also recommended to explore the impact of the implementation of green certifications and training programs on tourism sustainability. Finally, comparative studies with other similar destinations could provide valuable insights to improve sustainability policies and strategies.

Theoretical and normative contribution

Since the beginning of the oil stage in Ecuador in 1970, Ecuador has based its economy on an extractive and accumulation model, with territorial planning centralized in the State. The cities of Quito and Guayaquil became the main economic poles, creating a bipolar development that generated economic and social inequalities (Acosta, 2006). The new 'Constitución de la República del Ecuador' (Constitution of Ecuador) (Asamblea Nacional del Ecuador, 2008) introduced significant changes in land use planning regulations. These regulations require all administrations to guarantee territorial planning, promoting principles of subsidiarity, complementarity, sustainable development, and social equity (Gómez Orea & Gómez Villarino, 2013)

The 'Plan Nacional del Buen Vivir' (Senplades, 2009), one of the reference documents for territorial planning in the country, intended to harmonize the economy, nature, and society, with the objective of eradicating poverty and ensuring the equitable redistribution of resources. This plan incorporates a hierarchical structure, with specific planning policies and tools at each territorial level, and grants local governments autonomy and decentralization, enabling them to govern themselves (Gómez Orea & Gómez Villarino, 2016). Land use plans regulate land use, classifying areas according to primary activities: residential, commercial, green areas, protection zones, and risk areas (Asamblea Nacional del Ecuador, 2016). The 'Plan Nacional de Desarrollo 2017-2021-Toda una Vida' (National Development Plan 2017-2021) (Consejo Nacional de Planificación, 2017) highlights the need to restructure the economy away from fossil fuels towards an economy based on bio-knowledge and biodiversity. The Organic Law on Land Management (Asamblea Nacional del Ecuador, 2016) emphasizes citizen participation in planning, incentivizing agricultural productivity and promoting food security and social equity.

Ecuador's legislative and regulatory instruments prioritize sustainable land management and resource management in alignment with local and regional development policies. However, when local administrations assume the competencies required by law, due to a lack of human and economic resources, these are not effectively translated into programs, projects, and regulations. Tourism, although an important economic force, faces challenges such as the conservation of natural and cultural heritage, and the equitable distribution of resources. Tourism overload can exacerbate inequalities and negatively affect the quality of life of residents (Ferrandis, 2016). A sustainable development model should integrate community participation, responsible public policies, and local management that consider the social and environmental impacts of tourism, as proposed in this research.

In conclusion, tourism can be a positive force for development, but it requires careful planning to incorporate equity, sustainability, and citizen participation. Therefore, this study emphasizes the urgent need for a new governance model that promotes the sustainability of nature-based tourism in Pastaza. The lack of coordination among stakeholders and insufficient regulations limit the potential of this tourist destination. Implementing sustainability strategies, improving the quality of tourism services, and enhancing infrastructure in indigenous communities are essential steps to reduce the negative impacts of tourism and ensure sustainable tourism development.

CONCLUSIONS

One of the main weaknesses found in the case study is the inconsistency of statistical data on supply and demand, which hinders decision-making in tourism planning and management. This problem causes a lack of coordination between the policies and strategies of the different levels of government. Likewise, tourism development plans at the provincial and municipal levels focus on the promotion of tourism products, which do not consider all the dimensions of sustainability. For example, in terms of tourism promotion, the local administration is limited to the promotion of festivals and free fairs that attract low-cost, high-impact tourism. These weaknesses are compounded by the unfavorable location of the tourist destination, which is adjacent to other more developed and accessible destinations, making it difficult to position it within the national and international tourism market.

Economic investment by private enterprises is minimal, and the problems of regulation and control are reflected in the low quality of services, the privatization of natural resources, and cost speculation. Thus, regulations aimed at mitigating the negative impacts of nature tourism do not establish mandatory sustainable tourism principles and practices. With an unstructured inventory of tourism companies and a low percentage of associativity, the participation of these stakeholders in public-private alliances is limited. On the other hand, despite being a sector with high potential, community-based tourism presents several weaknesses for its development, which originate from cultural differences and the lack of governmental support. Without access to education, basic services, and infrastructure, the level of poverty faced by these communities is exacerbated. Only one NGO supports community tourism, and its contribution is minimal compared to the needs of this sector.

The lack of coordination and disarticulation of the stakeholders involved requires the application of governance instruments and tools, such as public-private alliances, associative capacity, and the technical strengthening of public agencies. One of the main strategies for mitigating negative impacts should be to overcome empiricism in tourism to increase the quality of services. The promotion of the offer should not be the only strategy for tourism development; it is necessary to work on policies, regulations, and projects that focus on environmental, social, and economic sustainability.

In the context of developing countries, this study opens the way for several lines of research, such as sustainability strategies in unprotected natural areas; sustainable management in natural destinations; and the application of governance principles and instruments, among others. The application of a conceptual governance model facilitates the evaluation of the different stakeholders regarding the sustainability of nature destinations. Through a system of parameters categorized into levels of compliance, the commitment and participation of each of the public and private representatives in the implementation of sustainable tourism are evidenced. Within tourism management, this instrument applied to a specific case study provides an overview of weaknesses and strengths that, when translated into local regulations, programs, and projects, can contribute to the mitigation of negative impacts on nature destinations.

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