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Community-based Ecotourism in Yasuní National Park

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Abstract

Community-based ecotourism in Yasuní National Park is presented as a tool for sustainable development and environmental preservation in one of the most biodiverse areas of the world. This study analyzes the perception of local stakeholders and visitors on the impact of community-based ecotourism. To achieve this objective, a Delphi methodology was applied to gather opinions and build consensus among experts on the impact of community-based ecotourism in Yasuní National Park, using two research techniques: an interview with a focus group of 15 people from the community and a survey of 90 tourists. The findings reflect that community-based ecotourism contributes to socioeconomic development and cultural conservation, but also faces challenges in the equitable distribution of benefits. It is concluded that community participation and the implementation of sustainable policies are essential to ensure its success.

Keywords: Community-Based Ecotourism, Cultural Conservation, Sustainable Development, Yasuní, Sustainable Tourism.

Introduction

Theoretical Framework

Tourism is a social, cultural and economic phenomenon that has evolved over time, adapting to different changes according to new market demand. But its essence remains a temporary displacement for recreational or business purposes. In response to changing preferences, rural tourism has emerged, a modality that connects travelers with nature, promoting immersive activities in unique landscapes and local environments. This type of tourism allows visitors to enjoy and become an active part of the environment, fostering a cultural exchange and renewed respect for the communities visited (Faraldo & Rodríguez, 2014; UNWTO, 2016).

In Latin America and the Caribbean, community-based ecotourism is considered an extension of rural tourism, an activity that has become a sustainable practice that directly involves local communities in the management and operation of tourism activities. Ecuador is no exception, and specifically in Yasuní National Park, this type of tourism is being developed as a tool for environmental conservation and cultural valorization. Yasuní National Park, recognized as one of the most biodiverse places on the planet, is not only home to an impressive variety of endemic species, but also to indigenous communities such as the Waorani, Kichwa and Tagaeri-Taromenane (the latter in voluntary isolation). However, this ecosystem faces a series of threats that compromise its ecological balance and the survival of its inhabitants. Among the most critical challenges are deforestation, driven by the expansion of the agricultural frontier and

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illegal logging, as well as oil exploitation, whose activities have generated significant environmental impacts, affecting the fauna, flora and water quality.

Despite these pressures, community-based ecotourism has emerged as a key strategy to promote sustainable development in the region. This form of tourism not only represents a source of economic income for local communities, reducing their dependence on extractive activities, but also strengthens the conservation of cultural and natural heritage. Through initiatives led by the communities themselves, visitors have the opportunity to interact respectfully and consciously with the environment, participating in activities such as guided hikes, wildlife observation, handicraft workshops and traditional ceremonies.

Community Ecotourism and Sustainable Development

Community-based ecotourism, as defined by Ceballos-Lascuráin, is considered “a form of tourism that is responsible with natural areas, conserves the environment and contributes to the well-being of local communities” (Maciel et al., 2023), and at the same time promotes ecological awareness. In the Ecuadorian Amazon, this type of tourism is being promoted as a tool for conservation and at the same time generates income for the communities, helping them to reduce their dependence on extractive activities (Buckley, 2009). According to the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), community-based ecotourism incorporates the principles of sustainable tourism, promoting practices that respect ecosystems and minimize the environmental footprint, which is vitally important in fragile areas such as Yasuní. It also promotes economic diversification by encouraging the production and marketing of handicrafts, traditional cuisine and the provision of tourism services, allowing the economic benefits to be distributed more equitably within the communities.

From a sustainable development perspective, community-based ecotourism integrates the three fundamental pillars: environmental, social and economic. At the environmental level, it contributes to the protection of ecosystems, promoting practices that minimize the ecological footprint, such as the use of sustainable infrastructure and proper waste management. On the social aspect, it strengthens cultural identity and the transmission of ancestral knowledge, empowering communities in the management of their own resources. Finally, from the economic point of view, it promotes responsible productive activities that guarantee long-term income without compromising natural resources for future generations.

Socioeconomic Impact of Community-Based Ecotourism

Community-based ecotourism in Yasuní can become a tourism practice that generates economic, social and cultural benefits for its communities, contributing to job creation and promoting equity in income distribution (Chan et al., 2021). This is argued because it can generate job opportunities in areas such as tour guiding, gastronomy and handicrafts, strengthening the local economy and diversifying sources of income, helping to reduce poverty in the communities (Raza & Acosta, 2023).

The Importance of Community Ecotourism in the Economic Reactivation of Villages

Community-based ecotourism is undoubtedly becoming a key tool that rural communities can rely on to reactivate their economy. This activity generates direct and indirect employment, boosting sectors such as handicrafts, gastronomy, and guiding and lodging services. There is considerable empirical evidence that, in rural areas, community ecotourism contributes to diversifying the local economy, providing a source of income that does not depend on extractive

activities, such as oil exploitation or logging, which negatively affect the environment (Albán et al., 2019).

Cultural Preservation in the Context of Community Ecotourism

Another characteristic attributed to community ecotourism is that it plays a relevant role in the cultural preservation of local communities. This model of tourism not only generates economic benefits, but also acts as a mechanism for safeguarding intangible heritage, allowing beliefs, worldviews, knowledge and traditions not to disappear due to rural-urban migration and cultural syncretism. By encouraging the participation of visitors in cultural experiences, ecotourism promotes the recognition of indigenous values and cultural identity. Another relevant aspect is that ecotourism contributes to the protection of native languages, many of which are at risk of disappearing due to globalization and the influence of a dominant western culture. By recovering historical memory, ecotourism becomes a platform to revitalize native languages and strengthen their use within the communities.

Community-based Ecotourism in Yasuni National Park

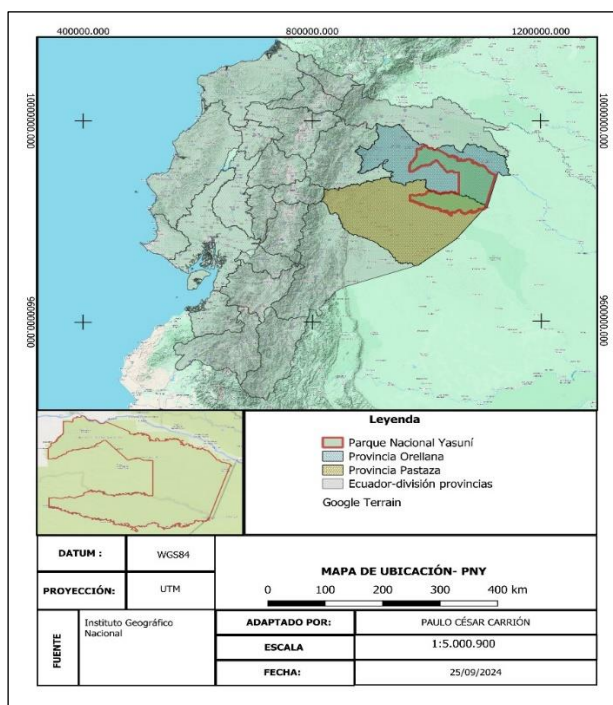


Figure1. Location Map Of Yasuni National Park.

Note: Yasuní National Park, located in the Amazon region of Ecuador, extends between the provinces of Orellana and Pastaza. This territory represents one of the most biodiverse areas on the planet and is home to indigenous peoples in voluntary isolation. Its conservation is fundamental for the ecological balance, the protection of ancestral cultures, and the mitigation of climate change.

Yasuní National Park is one of the most important natural reserves worldwide and in the Americas due to its extraordinary biodiversity, this park has been classified within category II of the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), being designated as a protected

area with the purpose of preserving its ecosystems and encouraging the responsible use of natural resources by local communities, both for subsistence and recreational purposes. Yasuní National Park gained greater international relevance with the proposed Yasuní ITT project, which received widespread support from environmentalists around the world (Jaramillo, 2019). However, its ecological integrity continues to be threatened by road construction, illegal logging, and especially oil extraction, activities that put its unique biodiversity at serious risk (Sandoval-Salazar et al., 2021). In this context, relations between the indigenous communities of Yasuní and the Ecuadorian state have historically been marked by conflict, especially since the expansion of the oil frontiers in the second half of the 20th century. The promises of development derived from the exploitation of non-renewable resources did not translate into substantial improvements for the local communities, who, faced with the social and environmental impacts, began to seek economic alternatives in accordance with their cosmivision, respectful of the territory and sustainable over time. It is in this scenario of resistance and search for autonomy that in the late 1990s and early 2000s community ecotourism initiatives began to gain momentum in the park. Inspired by the desire to protect their land and way of life, this model was driven by the joint work of non-governmental organizations, committed academics and, especially, by the indigenous leaders of the local communities. It emerged as a practical alternative to generate income without relying on extractive activities, offering a way to care for the forest while strengthening cultural pride and preserving ancestral traditions.

In 2005, the Red Solidaria de Turismo de la Ribera del Río Napo (REST) (Solidarity Network for Tourism along the Napo River) was created, a community-based tourism proposal articulated by thirteen Kichwa communities located in the buffer zone of Yasuní National Park, specifically in the Aguarico canton in the province of Orellana. This project arose with the technical and financial support of the NGO Solidaridad Internacional, with the objective of “becoming a strategic option for the protection and conservation of the environment within the riverbank and as an economic option for the Kichwa populations settled along it” (Mora Garcés, 2011, p. 11). One of the projects linked to the REST that is still in operation is Sacha Ñampi, initially integrated by the communities of Nueva Providencia, Alta Florencia, Santa Rosa, Santa Teresita, Sinchi, Chicta and the Jatun Cocha lagoons, which emerged as an alternative for sustainable development. However, according to local testimonies, over time its administration has been concentrated in a single family, which has generated internal tensions and a profound breakdown in community cohesion. What was conceived as a collective effort has resulted, for many community members, in an unequal benefit that contradicts the principles of community-based tourism. This situation reflects the challenges that rural initiatives face when there are no clear and equitable governance mechanisms that guarantee the real participation of all stakeholders.

In contrast, there is a community ecotourism project that has been consolidated over time. The Napo Wildlife Center (NWC), managed entirely by the Kichwa community of Añangu, has opted to substitute extractive activities for ecotourism as a means of development. The NWC not only offers high quality lodging, but also authentic experiences of contact with nature and Kichwa culture, under a strict environmental conservation policy.

Both cases reflect different trajectories within community ecotourism, while one faces internal tensions and risks of individualization of the project, the other has managed to consolidate itself as an example of successful community management. These experiences show that the success of community-based tourism does not depend solely on natural resources or tourist attraction, but fundamentally on organizational quality, social cohesion, and lasting community agreements that sustain the model.

Despite these still meager community efforts, a structural aspect that profoundly limits the impact of ecotourism as a local development tool in the park is the fact that most tourist visits to this protected area are carried out by private operators outside of the indigenous communities along the tourist routes, thus limiting the direct participation and economic benefits that the communities could obtain from tourism in their own territory. This phenomenon reproduces a covert extractivist logic, where the resource to be exploited is no longer oil, but biodiversity and local culture, but without guaranteeing a fair distribution of benefits. As pointed out by Mora Garcés (2011), One of the greatest challenges for community-based tourism in the Amazon is “the structural disadvantage in which communities find themselves vis-à-vis consolidated tourism operators, who appropriate most of the value generated by the activity” (p. 91). This concentration of the tourism chain outside the community directly affects the local economy by preventing tourism revenues from circulating and being reinvested in basic services, education or conservation in the indigenous communities themselves. From an environmental perspective, this situation also represents a threat. External operators do not always prioritize conservation and in many cases promote massive, standardized tourism that does not respect the carrying capacity of the ecosystem.

Visitors to YNP

The natural and cultural diversity of Yasuní National Park captures the interest of both Ecuadorian and international travelers, attracted by activities such as ecotourism, wildlife observation, interaction with local communities, and exploration of exceptional ecological environments. Studying the origin of visitors allows for a better understanding of tourism dynamics in the area and the development of more appropriate management and promotion strategies. The following are the percentages of domestic and foreign visitors registered in recent years.

Mes	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
1-ene	157	265	64	-	-	-
2-feb	85	219	22	-	-	-
3-mar	238	73	0	-	-	-
4-abr	0	201	0	-	-	-
5-may	128	0	62	-	-	-
6 jun	160	0	31	-	-	-
7 jul	222	30	105	-	-	-
8 ago	153	69	182	-	-	-
9 sep	190	174	36	-	-	-
10 oct	129	101	0	-	-	-
11 nov	137	110	0	-	-	-
12 dic	555	304	36	-	-	-
Total	2.355	557	810	452	64	0

Table1. Evolution Of Visits From National Origin To The YNP From 2019 To December 2024.

Note: 2020 shows an unusual peak in January and February, followed by a sharp drop, probably due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, which significantly restricted mobility from

March onwards. In 2019, the data reflect a more stable behavior, with some regularity in tourist inflows during the first months. In 2021, 2022, 2023 and 2024, data are scarce or incomplete, which limits the analysis, but allow us to observe a very partial or limited recovery in certain months. Some values are absent, which may be due either to a lack of registration or to a significant decrease in tourism due to health or economic restrictions.

Mes	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
1-ENE	880	569	-	-	817	267
2-FEB	385	683	12	-	667	495
3-MAR	1014	169	-	-	668	590
4-ABR	987	-	-	-	553	422
5-MAY	1141	-	-	345	689	1436
6-JUN	608	-	-	560	672	1434
7-JUL	743	-	41	967	880	672
8-AGO	572	-	98	904	489	533
9-SEP	584	-	62	595	464	226
10-OCT	283	-	145	285	287	512
11-NOV	512	-	262	506	686	614
12-DIC	1149	-	672	967	208	536
TOTAL	8858	1421	1292	5129	7080	7787

Table 2. Evolution of Foreign Visitors To the YNP From 2019 To December 2024

Note: The table shows a sharp drop in foreign tourism in 2020 due to the pandemic, with a gradual recovery in the following years. 2019 saw the highest and most consistent flow, while 2023 and 2024 reflect a slightly stronger revival.

Methodology

The main objective in selecting the Delphi methodology was to build opinions and thus have consensus among experts on the impact of community-based ecotourism in Yasuní National Park, in order to address ecological, socio-cultural and economic aspects.

The Delphi method is a research method that has been used for a long time and has been recognized for its reliability and flexibility to adapt to emerging issues where there is limited information or high uncertainty, as in the case of community ecotourism in sensitive areas such as Yasuní National Park (Landeta, 2006). The following are the seven steps that were implemented for its execution:

1. Selection of Experts

The first step was to identify a panel of experts on the topic, following the recommendations established in the bibliography: academics, community leaders, environmental authorities and tour operators with experience in the Amazon and ecotourism in community contexts. The diversity of the panel is very important in order to have a multiplicity of approaches to sustainability, local economy and cultural preservation (Okoli and Pawlowski, 2004).

2. First Round: Initial Questionnaire

With the panel of experts now in place, a structured questionnaire was applied to gather their opinions on the impact of community-based ecotourism on biodiversity conservation, community development and economic income. By conducting this round, we were able to obtain a wide range of initial opinions, reflecting individual knowledge and experience (Rowe and Wright, 1999).

3. Analysis and Synthesis of Results

The next step is to qualitatively analyze the opinions, which allowed for the identification of recurring themes and patterns. This analysis also allows summarizing key points on issues such as economic benefits, sustainability challenges, and the role of local communities in ecotourism management, etc. (Hasson et al., 2000).

4. Second Round: Revised Questionnaire

Consisted of sending out a second questionnaire to delve deeper into the most controversial or consensual issues. In this second round, the experts had access to the aggregated opinions of their colleagues, promoting the adjustment of their responses towards an informed consensus (Linstone and Turoff, 1975).

5. Third Round: Refinement of Consensus

Also known as the last round, here the experts were asked to revise their opinions based on the results of the previous round.

6. Interpretation of Results and Development of Recommendations

Once the final results were available, work was done to generate recommendations for the development of community ecotourism in Yasuní National Park, including proposals for public policies and sustainable management practices (Helmer, 1983).

7. The second instrument used in the research was the survey that was applied to 90 national and foreign tourists who visited Yasuní National Park in the last three months. The questionnaire was structured and included closed and open-ended questions to explore their motivations, expectations, level of satisfaction and recommendations. In order to achieve a representative sample, respondents were selected at different points in the park, such as interpretation centers, main trails, and community lodging areas. The data were collected by a group of students from the Universidad Técnica Particular de Loja (Universidad Técnica Particular de Loja).

Results

Positive Impacts:

The generation of local employment in activities such as tour guiding, gastronomy, and handicrafts is fundamental to strengthening rural economies and promoting sustainable development. These activities not only take advantage of the cultural and natural resources of the community living in Yasuní National Park, but will also diversify sources of income for its inhabitants. In addition, it will promote the empowerment of traditionally marginalized groups, such as women and youth, who can lead local enterprises. Employment in these sectors will promote the transmission and preservation of cultural heritage, ensuring its long-term sustainability.

The revaluation of cultural traditions and the improvement of community infrastructure without causing alterations to the ecosystem are essential pillars for experiencing sustainable development in Yasuní National Park. These actions will foster pride and cultural identity among the population, encouraging the transmission of traditional knowledge and practices to new generations. At the same time, they will contribute to strengthening social cohesion, as cultural activities promote meeting spaces and collaboration among the inhabitants. Improved infrastructure, such as roads, basic services and community centers, will facilitate access to resources and attract visitors, boosting tourism.

Promoting environmental education among visitors and residents will be key to raising awareness of the importance of conserving local ecosystems and their biodiversity. This type of education encourages sustainable practices, such as proper waste management and the protection of natural resources. By involving both the Yasuní National Park population and tourists, a shared sense of responsibility for the environment is created. In addition, these initiatives strengthen local knowledge about the environment, empowering residents as stewards of their territory.

The integral management of the Napo Wildlife Center (NWC) by the Añangu Kichwa community has provided empirical evidence of the potential of community-based ecotourism as an effective strategy for environmental conservation and strengthening indigenous autonomy. In this way, it has been possible to progressively replace extractive activities with low-impact ecotourism, the NWC, thus generating sustainable income, encouraging biodiversity protection and revaluing local cultural practices. The focus on authentic experiences, the quality of the services offered and the strict conservation policy position NWC as a benchmark for responsible tourism in the Amazon.

The formation and strengthening of the Red Solidaria de Turismo de la Ribera del Río Napo (REST), which was formed by thirteen Kichwa communities, represents a significant advance in the consolidation of collective initiatives aimed at the conservation of Yasuní National Park. It has become an example of territorial articulation, initially promoted with the support of an international NGO, and has become a fundamental pillar in the creation of economic proposals that link environmental protection with community wellbeing. By promoting tourism based on principles of equity, participation and sustainability, REST not only fosters respect for Amazonian ecosystems, but also strengthens local governance processes.

Challenges:

Unequal distribution of economic benefits, with concentration in a few actors, is a challenge that can limit the positive impact of community-based ecotourism. This phenomenon can generate gaps between community members, affecting equity and social cohesion. When resources and benefits are concentrated in the hands of a few, development opportunities for other sectors, especially indigenous communities, are restricted. In addition, this concentration can discourage collective participation and generate internal conflicts.

Dependence on external operators and lack of training in community ecotourism management represent important barriers to the autonomous development of local communities. When external operators control most of the activities, the economic benefits do not always reach local residents directly, limiting their positive impact.

The environmental risks associated with unregulated community-based ecotourism can cause serious impacts on local ecosystems, such as soil degradation, contamination of water sources

and loss of biodiversity. The absence of regulations will encourage unsustainable activities, such as excessive visitors in sensitive areas or uncontrolled construction, which affect the natural balance.

One of the most relevant structural obstacles to the effective conservation of Yasuní National Park is the systematic exclusion of indigenous communities from the economic circuit generated by tourism. The majority of tourism flows in the area are managed by external private operators, which concentrate profitability and leave the communities in a marginal position. This dynamic reproduces extractivist logics in which biodiversity and local culture are exploited as resources without an equitable distribution of benefits. Furthermore, by not prioritizing sustainability principles, these operators can promote massive tourism practices that affect the carrying capacity of the ecosystem, putting at risk both its ecological integrity and the long-term viability of tourism.

Analysis of Results

Community-based ecotourism has generated economic, social and environmental benefits in several regions, allowing local communities to obtain additional income through the provision of conservation and culture-based tourism experiences. However, its impact has not been uniform, as some communities face challenges related to lack of training, poor infrastructure and limited participation in decision-making. This can be evidenced and argued with the study conducted by Ruiz & Andrade, in 2020.

From the perspective of the tourists interviewed, biodiversity and cultural richness are the main attractions of community-based ecotourism. However, the lack of adequate standards of sustainability and regulation has generated concerns about the quality of services and the environmental impact of certain activities. Visitors mention the importance of more responsible practices, such as the efficient use of natural resources, waste minimization and certification of eco-lodges. In this sense, the implementation of stricter regulations and awareness programs for tourists and operators is essential to ensure a truly sustainable ecotourism model. This information coincides with the study conducted by Hernández et al. in 2021.

The empirical analysis indicates that training and education programs play a crucial role in strengthening local capacities, allowing communities to develop skills in tourism management, customer service and environmental conservation. These initiatives not only improve the quality of services offered to visitors, but also foster a sense of ownership and responsibility for natural and cultural resources as concluded by Gonzalez & Perez, 2021.

On the other hand, collaboration between local communities and external actors, such as non-governmental organizations, tourism companies and governmental entities, is essential to overcome structural limitations and improve the sustainability of ecotourism. Through strategic alliances, it is possible to access financing, technical assistance and marketing networks that facilitate the development of more solid ecotourism projects, as evidenced in the analysis conducted by Ramírez et al. in 2022.

The success of the Napo Wildlife Center as an initiative led by the Kichwa community of Añangu, which has replaced extractive activities with sustainable ecotourism, contrasts sharply with the structural phenomenon of community exclusion in tourism circuits dominated by private operators. This result coincides with Stronza and Durham (2008), who argue that community-based tourism has true conservation potential only when local communities have effective control over management and benefit sharing. In contrast, when tourism is managed

by external actors, as is the case in most visits to Yasuní, patterns of economic dependence are perpetuated and environmental governance is weakened. The Añangu experience validates the thesis that community empowerment and ownership of the tourism model are essential conditions for ecologically and socially sustainable conservation.

The organizational fragmentation observed in the Sacha Ñampi project, due to the concentration of power in one family, reveals the limits of ecotourism initiatives when they lack inclusive governance structures. This finding is in line with Berkes (2004), who argues that the resilience of communities in the management of common resources depends on their capacity to generate shared rules, conflict resolution mechanisms and a culture of active participation. In the absence of these elements, even well-intentioned projects tend to reproduce internal inequalities, weakening both the social fabric and the commitment to conservation. Sacha Ñampi's experience shows that it is not enough to have access to valuable natural resources; organizational quality and equity in decision-making are key determinants of sustainability.

Conclusions

Community-based ecotourism in Yasuní National Park is a fundamental catalyst and a strategic tool to boost and diversify the local economy. By generating jobs in sectors such as specialized guiding, local gastronomy, and handicraft production, this model not only contributes to improving family incomes, but also promotes the intergenerational transmission of ancestral knowledge, which revitalizes culture and community identity, promoting more equitable and sustainable development.

Community-based ecotourism plays a crucial role in protecting the park's ecosystems through sustainable practices such as environmental education and responsible use of these natural resources. However, the lack of clear regulations and monitoring mechanisms can compromise the effectiveness and continuity of these initiatives in the long term.

Effective articulation between local communities, environmental authorities, tourism operators and NGOs is key to overcoming structural barriers that have historically limited the sustainable development of this activity. Effective coordination and collaboration from an ecosystemic vision would allow the formulation of sustainable policies and the development of technical capacities within the communities, empowering them to manage natural and cultural resources in an autonomous and responsible manner. The integration of these actors not only contributes to the consolidation of a resilient community-based ecotourism model, but also promotes a much more equitable distribution of economic, social and environmental benefits, ensuring its long-term viability.

Recommendations

It is necessary to develop comprehensive training programs aimed at local communities, with special emphasis on key areas of tourism management, environmental conservation and project administration. These programs should be adapted to the specific needs of each community and designed to empower them, allowing them to autonomously lead the planning, execution and evaluation of their tourism projects.

To maximize the impact of community-based ecotourism in the park, it is necessary to promote strategic collaboration between the communities that inhabit Yasuní, governmental entities, civil society and non-governmental organizations, and possible international donors. These alliances should be marked in terms of access to financing, technical assistance and marketing networks

that support the development of sustainable infrastructure and the implementation of responsible practices, guaranteeing that economic and social benefits are distributed equitably, prioritizing environmental conservation and cultural heritage.

It is recommended that permanent monitoring and evaluation mechanisms be established for the socioeconomic, cultural, and environmental impacts of ecotourism in the park. This system should include concise indicators on the quality of services, user satisfaction, income distribution, and the state of the ecosystem. The results should be a strategic tool for management adjustment and risk mitigation, ensuring that tourism is sustainable and respectful of the natural and cultural environment.

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