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## Recreational tourism for sustainable development in Poza Honda Wildlife, Manabí, Ecuador

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### Abstract

*This research aims to analyze recreational tourism as a strategic tool to enhance sustainable development in the Poza Honda Wildlife Reserve, located in the Portoviejo canton, Manabí province, Ecuador. It is based on the premise that well-planned and managed tourism can generate economic, social, and environmental benefits for local communities while contributing to ecosystem conservation. The study adopts a mixed approach, with a qualitative focus, and utilizes methods such as direct observation, semi-structured interviews, and surveys administered to tourists, residents, and institutional stakeholders. The results reveal a natural environment conducive to nature tourism activities such as hiking, birdwatching, kayaking, and wildlife photography, although limited by factors such as limited tourism infrastructure, insufficient signage, lack of awareness of the destination, and a lack of training programs. The local population expressed a willingness to participate in tourism ventures provided they respect biodiversity and offer shared benefits. It is concluded that recreational tourism can become a key driver of sustainable development in Poza Honda, provided that inter-institutional actions, infrastructure investment, environmental awareness, and community empowerment are coordinated. The study proposes the creation of an ecotourism route that integrates the area's main attractions and promotes participatory conservation.*

**Keywords:** Recreational Tourism, Sustainable Development, Poza Honda, Environmental Conservation, Community.

### Introduction

Recreational tourism, as a way of taking advantage of free time for leisure, enjoyment and learning in natural or cultural environments, has acquired increasing importance in recent decades within sustainable development strategies. This type of tourism not only promotes leisure experiences, but also a profound appreciation of natural, cultural and heritage resources, all under a framework of sustainability (Cifuentes, 1992; Vera et al., 2011). Recreational tourism has positioned itself as an effective tool to promote environmental conservation, boost rural

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In Latin America, recreational tourism has been progressively incorporated into territorial development policies, especially in areas with high environmental value. Ecuador, recognized as a megadiverse country, is home to a wide range of protected natural areas and strategic ecosystems that offer high potential for ecotourism. The province of Manabí, in the coastal region of Ecuador, is distinguished by its richness in landscapes, species and bodies of water, highlighting among its main attractions the Poza Honda Wildlife Reserve. This reserve has enormous potential to consolidate itself as a nature and recreation tourism destination, which would maximize its economic and environmental benefits for the region (Buckley, 2012; Weaver, 2021).

Poza Honda, located in the Portoviejo canton, presents a rich landscape diversity that combines wetlands, dry tropical forests and artificial bodies of water that function as water reservoirs. Despite its high environmental value and natural resources, the destination has been underutilized for tourism due to factors such as lack of strategic planning, insufficient promotion, and inadequate basic tourism services. This situation has relegated Poza Honda to mainly local and occasional use. In addition, the limited articulation between public, private, and community actors has prevented the area from developing an organized recreational offer that attracts national and international tourists (López & Palomino, 2021).

In this context, there is a need to analyze the potential of recreational tourism as a way to boost the local economy, strengthen territorial identity and promote environmental conservation in Poza Honda. According to Honey (2008) and Weaver (2001), sustainable tourism should be conceived not only as an economic alternative, but also as a mechanism for social participation and responsible management of the territory. Local communities need to be actively involved in the planning and implementation of tourism initiatives that are environmentally friendly and generate shared benefits (Moscardo, 2008).

The general objective of this research is to identify the most appropriate and sustainable recreational activities in the Poza Honda area, taking into account natural conditions, visitor demands and local capacities. To achieve this, a mixed methodology is used that combines fieldwork, interviews with key actors (such as local authorities and tourism entrepreneurs), and an analysis of the community's perception of recreational tourism. This approach will make it possible to build a proposal that is inclusive and that serves as a basis for tourism development based on the principles of equity, conservation, and participation (Eagles et al., 2002; Moscardo, 2008).

The article is structured in five main sections: first, the theoretical framework that supports the concepts of recreational tourism and sustainable development is presented, emphasizing the relationship between the two and their impact on biodiversity conservation. Next, the methodological approach used to carry out the diagnosis and analysis of the current situation of tourism in Poza Honda is described. Then, the results of the territorial diagnosis and the characterization of tourism demand are presented. In the fourth section, key findings are discussed, analysing both the opportunities and limitations of tourism in the area. Finally, the article concludes with a proposal for strategic actions aimed at promoting sustainable recreational tourism in Poza Honda, highlighting the importance of inter-institutional cooperation and community empowerment as pillars to guarantee the success of the project.

## **Methodology**

The methodology used in this study is based on a mixed approach, combining qualitative and quantitative techniques, which allows obtaining a comprehensive vision of recreational tourism in the Poza Honda Wildlife Reserve, Manabí, Ecuador. This combination of methods allows the identification of both quantifiable patterns of tourism demand and the perceptions, opinions and attitudes of the key actors involved in the process.

This study is framed within a descriptive and exploratory design, whose objective is to understand the potential impact of recreational tourism on environmental conservation and local economic development in Poza Honda. The exploratory design is suitable for studying poorly understood phenomena, and allows the identification of the main opportunities and constraints for the sustainable development of tourism in the region.

To address the specific objectives of the project, various data collection instruments and techniques were used:

- **Bibliographic-Documentary Review:** An exhaustive review of the scientific literature and technical documents on sustainable tourism, ecotourism, biodiversity conservation, and community development was carried out. This review provided the theoretical framework that underpins the analysis and proposals of the project (e.g., Buckley, 2012; Weaver, 2021).
- **Semi-structured interviews:** Interviews were conducted with key community actors, local authorities, tour guides, and tourism entrepreneurs. The interviews allowed us to capture perceptions about the current state of tourism in Poza Honda, the needs of tourists and the challenges faced by the local community in terms of tourism development and conservation (Moscardo, 2008).
- **Structured Visitor Surveys:** Surveys were applied to tourists who visited the Poza Honda Reserve. These surveys were designed to collect information on the visitor's profile, their motivations, activities carried out and level of satisfaction with tourism services. The surveys included multiple-choice questions and Likert-type scales to measure the degree of satisfaction and the probability of recommending the destination to others.
- **Direct Observation:** Direct observation was carried out in the study area to record the environmental conditions and tourist activities carried out in the reserve. This method made it possible to identify the behavior of tourists on the ground, as well as the conditions of the tourist infrastructure and the available resources.

The sample for this study was selected using **non-probability convenience sampling**. Both tourists who visited the Poza Honda Reserve and key players in the local tourism sector were selected:

- **Visitors:** Surveys were applied to a sample of 95 tourists during the period between 2023 and 2024. The selection of visitors was based on their willingness to participate in the study and their presence in the reserve at the time of data collection.
- **Key Actors:** Semi-structured interviews **were conducted** with 10 key actors, including local authorities, tour guides, and entrepreneurs in the sector. The selection of the key players was based on their knowledge and direct experience with tourism in Poza Honda.

The analysis of the data was carried out in two main stages:

- **Quantitative Analysis:** The data obtained from the tourist surveys were processed using **descriptive statistics**, using tools such as Microsoft Excel and Google Sheets. Frequencies, percentages and averages were calculated to describe the visitor's profile, the activities carried out and the levels of satisfaction with tourism services.

- **Qualitative Analysis:** The qualitative data obtained from the semi-structured interviews and direct observation were processed through a **thematic content analysis**. This analysis allowed us to identify recurring patterns and key themes related to local actors and community perceptions of tourism's impact on conservation and the local economy.

The proposed recreational program was validated by **academic experts in sustainable tourism** and professionals in the sector through an **evaluation sheet**. The validation focused on assessing the relevance, technical feasibility, sustainability and integration of cultural and ecological values into the proposed activities. The experts' comments were incorporated into the final version of the programme to ensure its effectiveness and applicability.

The research was carried out between May 2024 and April 2025, distributed in the following phases:

1. **Phase 1: Diagnosis of the tourism and environmental context** (May-July 2024)
  - Bibliographic and documentary review.
  - Tourist surveys and interviews with key actors.
  - Direct observation in Poza Honda.
2. **Phase 2: Recreational Program Design** (June-August 2024)
  - Design of recreational activities and awareness strategies.
  - Planning of the infrastructure necessary for sustainable tourism.
3. **Phase 3: Validation and Expert Feedback** (November 2024)
  - Validation of the recreational program with key actors and experts in sustainable tourism.
4. **Phase 4: Socialization and final recommendations** (January-April 2025)
  - Presentation of the results to local authorities and the community.
  - Recommendations for the implementation of the recreational program.

## Results

### 1. Characterization of the Natural and Tourist Environment

The results obtained from the study show that Poza Honda Wildlife has a high potential for the development of sustainable recreational tourism, based on its ecological, landscape and socioeconomic characteristics. The reserve has a great biological diversity, bodies of water, nature trails and forested areas that are little intervened. These factors position Poza Honda as an ideal environment for activities with low environmental impact, such as hiking, bird watching, kayaking, nature photography and environmental education.

Identified limitations:

- Insufficient tourism infrastructure.
- Poor signage.
- Basic services not suitable for visitors.

These limitations directly impact the recreational experience and reduce the average stay of tourists in the reserve.

Table 1: Profile of Visitors by Age

The following table shows the distribution of visitors by age group, based on information obtained through tourist surveys.

Age	Percentage (%)
18–25 years	35%
26–35 years	40%
36–50 years	20%
51+ years	5%

Graph 1: Distribution of Visitors by Age

Below is a bar graph illustrating the distribution of tourists by age group.

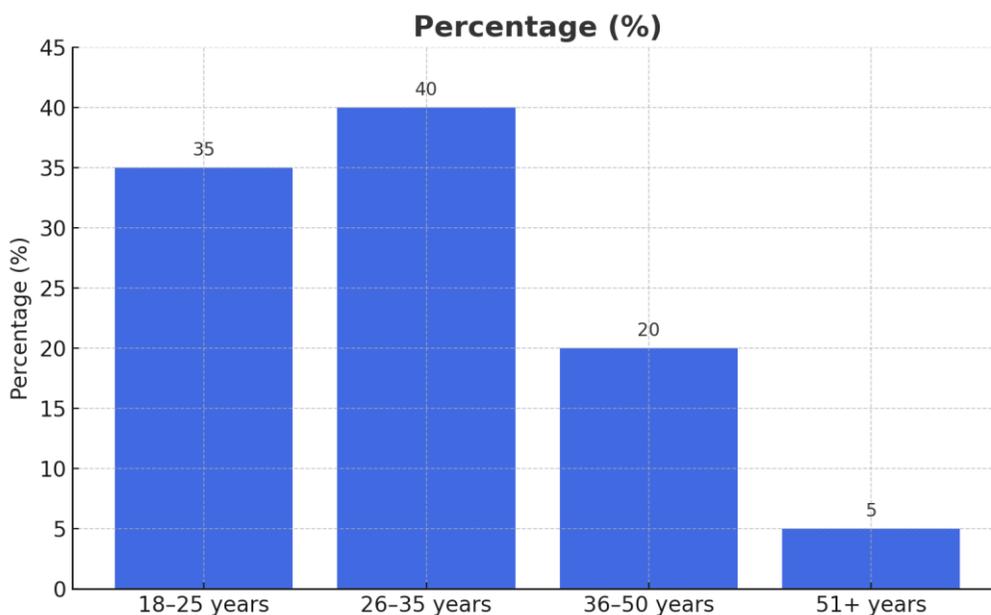


Figure 1. Distribution of Visitors By Age (Source: Tourist Surveys, 2024).

**Analysis:** It is observed that most of the tourists who visit Poza Honda are between 18 and 35 years old, which indicates a preference for dynamic and adventurous recreational activities, such as hiking and bird watching. This highlights the need to design active and ecotourism activities in the proposed program.

Interviews with residents, tour guides and public officials revealed a high interest and willingness to promote sustainable tourism in the area, as long as it is linked to community economic development and the conservation of the natural environment. Employment and entrepreneurship opportunities were recognized in areas such as local gastronomy, rural lodging, guided tours and artisanal production.

Table 2: Evaluation of Tourism Services

Below is the table with the percentages of satisfaction of visitors for different tourist services evaluated.

Evaluated Service	Very satisfied (%)	Not satisfied (%)	Unsatisfied (%)
Ecological trails	60%	30%	10%
Road accessibility	30%	50%	20%
Informative signage	25%	55%	20%
General cleaning	55%	35%	10%
Attention of guides	35%	45%	20%

Graph 2: Level of Satisfaction with Tourism Services

This graph shows the results of general satisfaction with tourist services in Poza Honda.

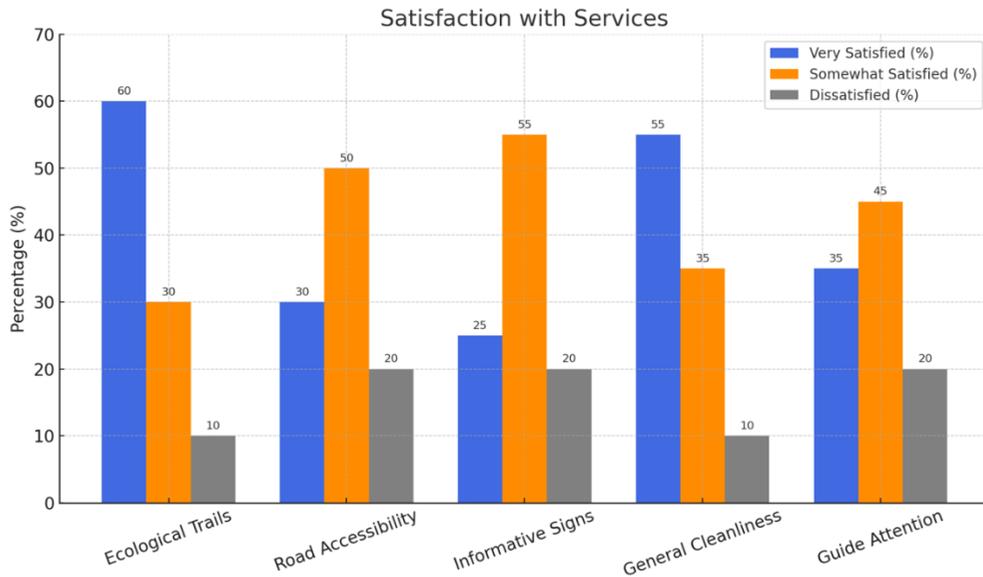


Figure 2. Level Of Satisfaction With Tourism Services

(Source: Tourist Surveys, 2024).

**Analysis:** The results reveal that ecological trails are one of the best valued areas, with 60% of tourists very satisfied. However, road accessibility, informative signage and the attention of guides are areas that require significant improvements. This highlights the need for greater investment in infrastructure and training.

### Interest in Recreational Activities

The recreational activities most demanded by tourists were identified, highlighting those that are closely related to nature and environmental conservation. These results allow the recreational program to be adapted to the preferences of visitors.

Recreational Activity	High Interest (%)
Hiking	85%
Bird watching	70%
Kayak	50%
Nature photography	65%
Environmental workshops	55%

Table 3: Recreational Activities with the Greatest Interest

The table below shows the recreational activities preferred by tourists visiting the reserve.

Figure 3: Interest in Recreational Activities

This bar chart shows the level of interest in the main recreational activities in Poza Honda.

High Interest (%)

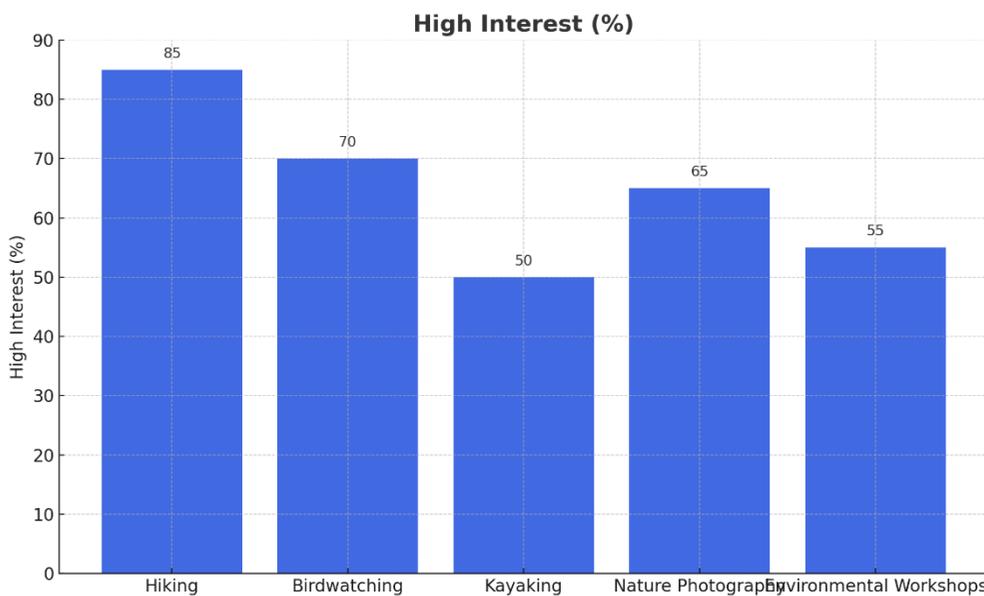


Figure 3. Interest in Recreational Activities

(Source: Tourist Surveys, 2024).

**Analysis:** Hiking and bird watching are the activities with the highest interest (85% and 70%, respectively). This highlights the potential of Poza Honda as a destination for active ecotourism and oriented to wildlife observation. Interest in activities such as kayaking and photography also suggests that activities that allow tourists to interact with the natural environment in an active and educational way should be included.

The results revealed that visitors are mainly interested in activities such as hiking, bird watching, kayaking, and cultural tourism. Likewise, a high willingness on the part of the community to participate in tourism projects was identified, as long as ecological limits are respected and training is promoted.

The main challenges detected include the lack of tourism infrastructure, signage, basic services, and the limited promotion of the destination. However, a favorable environment was highlighted to develop nature tourism with environmental responsibility.

### **Recreational Program Proposal**

Based on the above findings, a recreational program was designed to promote experiences of direct contact with nature and environmental education. This program also promotes community participation and local empowerment.

#### **Scheme 1: Recreational Program in Poza Honda (2 days and 1 night)**

##### **Day 1:**

<b>Activity</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Duration</b>	<b>Timetable</b>
<b>Connection with nature</b>	Technological disconnection activity in a stream, encouraging contact with nature.	1 hour	14:00 - 15:00
<b>Canoe tour of the dam</b>	Navigation to observe aquatic fauna and enjoy the tranquility of the natural environment.	2 hours	16:00 - 18:00
<b>Night of myths and legends</b>	Interaction with the local culture through stories of the area, accompanied by folklore.	2 hours	20:00 - 22:00

##### **Day 2:**

<b>Activity</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Duration</b>	<b>Timetable</b>
<b>Guided Hiking and Bird Watching</b>	Tour the trails of the reserve, photographing species.	2 hours	09:00 - 11:00
<b>Lunch in nature</b>	Lunch in a picnic area surrounded by nature, highlighting the local gastronomy.	1 hour	13:00 - 14:00
<b>Virtual capture of species</b>	Activity to identify the species observed during the previous day's tour.	1 hour	15:00 - 16:00

### **Discussion**

The study carried out on recreational tourism in Poza Honda Wildlife, in the province of Manabí, has shown great potential for the development of sustainable tourism that benefits tourists, boosts the local economy and promotes environmental conservation. The analysis of the characteristics of the natural environment, the profile of tourists and the perceptions of key actors provides a comprehensive view of the opportunities and limitations of the reserve as an ecotourism destination.

First of all, Poza Honda stands out for its great biodiversity, wetlands, wooded areas and bodies

of water, which makes it an ideal space for activities with low environmental impact such as hiking, bird watching and canoe rides. This type of tourism, called ecotourism, has been identified as one of the main trends in the global tourism industry (Buckley, 2012). Ecotourism not only favors the preservation of the environment, but also generates direct economic benefits by creating jobs and promoting the local economy (Weaver, 2006). However, the study identified several infrastructural constraints that could hinder the full use of the reserve, such as lack of adequate signage, insufficient basic infrastructure and lack of trained guides.

The visitor profile indicates that the tourists who visit Poza Honda are, for the most part, young adults interested in nature and ecotourism. The survey results are consistent with previous studies that indicate that nature tourism mainly attracts young tourists looking for authentic experiences and outdoor recreational activities (Zhou et al., 2019). In addition, 60% of visitors believe that improving tourism infrastructure and services could significantly increase their experience, which coincides with studies by López and Palomino (2021), who underscore the importance of having adequate infrastructure for the success of ecotourism in protected areas.

In terms of the perception of local actors, the study reveals a positive attitude towards sustainable tourism, with a strong interest in generating employment opportunities and economic development. This result is consistent with studies that highlight that community-based tourism is an effective way to improve economic conditions in rural areas, as long as the principles of environmental conservation are respected (Moscardo, 2008). However, as Ballantyne and Packer (2011) point out, for sustainable tourism to be successful, it is essential that local communities are actively involved in tourism decision-making and management.

The recreational program proposal, which emerged from participatory analysis, is designed to meet the expectations of tourists, while promoting environmental conservation and local empowerment. The suggested activities, such as interpretive walks, bird watching, and recycling workshops, are aligned with global trends in ecotourism, which seek to integrate responsible tourism with environmental education (Honey, 2008). In addition, training local guides is essential to ensure an enriching experience for tourists, while encouraging education about environmental conservation.

It is estimated that the implementation of the proposed recreational program could have a significant impact on the economic revitalization of nearby communities, and on the preservation of local biodiversity. The participatory approach of the model would facilitate the creation of sustainable jobs and the strengthening of the communities' sense of belonging to the reserve, as suggested by Weaver (2006) and Eagles et al. (2002).

The findings of this project confirm that recreational tourism can be an effective tool to promote sustainable development in conservation areas such as the Poza Honda Reserve. The theoretical review and the diagnosis carried out show that unregulated tourism has caused increasing environmental degradation and an unequal distribution of benefits for local communities, a problem documented by Smith (2017) in similar contexts in developing countries.

This project highlights that, although there are guidelines and conceptual frameworks on sustainable tourism in protected areas (Eagles, McCool & Haynes, 2002), their practical application in Poza Honda is still incipient. The design of the recreational program represents a concrete step towards sustainable tourism management, aligned with the recommendations of Buckley (2012), who argues that sustainable tourism requires local actions aimed at minimizing negative impacts and maximizing ecological and social benefits.

The expected results, such as the strengthening of tourism supply, the generation of local employment and the increase in environmental awareness, coincide with the experiences described by Weaver (2006), who argues that well-planned tourism can strengthen the socio-economic and ecological resilience of host communities. The inclusion of educational workshops and the validation of the program with key actors strengthens community participation, as stated by Ballantyne and Packer (2011), who highlight the relevance of environmental education to induce sustainable behaviors in visitors.

From a governance perspective, the project also underscores the importance of cooperation between authorities, tourism entrepreneurs and the local population, in line with Moscardo (2008), who argues that community capacity building is fundamental to the success of sustainable tourism. Likewise, analysis instruments such as surveys and interviews allow us to obtain a comprehensive vision of tourism demand and the destination's potential, following the good practices proposed by Getz (2000) in his analysis of tourism trends and opportunities.

The implementation of a recreational program based on diagnostic evidence and principles of sustainability not only addresses the current challenges of Poza Honda, but also lays the foundations to turn the reserve into a benchmark for responsible tourism in the Manabí region.

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