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# Tourist's perception of the sustainable development of the Machalilla National Park

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## Abstract

The Machalilla National Park (MNP) has included, as a tourism development strategy, the use of its the extensive compendium of tourism resources, however, this uncontrolled use in the integration of tourism activities can generate environmental deterioration and thus, a decline in the arrival of tourists. The objective of this research is to analyze tourists' perception in the sustainable development of the Machalilla National Park. The methodology used to reach this objective was of a mixed descriptive type with a documental and bibliografic design. The results related to tourist's sociodemographic profile highlighted that the vast majority of tourists that arrives at the MNP are conformed by: women, ages 22-31, they are national, coming from Manabi province, students, visiting this place for touristic purposes. Regarding tourist potential areas, this study determined that Playa Los Frailes was the place with the greatest tourist influx during the period May-August. The main weaknesses detected were the environmental aspect, high number of tourists and garbage, specifically plastic garbage. In conclusion, it is transcendental to strengthen the processes and activities of the management of the MNP to ensure the environmental sustainability of its natural, cultural and social values.

**Keywords:** Turistic development; Machalilla National Park; environmental sustainability.

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# Percepción del turista en el desarrollo sostenible del Parque Nacional Machalilla

## Resumen

El Parque Nacional Machalilla (PNM) ha incluido, como estrategia de desarrollo turístico, el uso de su extenso compendio de recursos turísticos, sin embargo, este uso descontrolado en la integración de actividades turísticas puede generar deterioro ambiental y por ende, una disminución en la llegada de turistas. El objetivo de esta investigación es analizar la percepción de los turistas en el desarrollo sostenible del Parque Nacional Machalilla. La metodología utilizada para alcanzar este objetivo fue de tipo descriptivo mixto con un diseño documental y bibliográfico. Los resultados relacionados con el perfil sociodemográfico del turista destacaron que la gran mayoría de turistas que llegan al MNP están conformados por: mujeres, de 22 a 31 años, son nacionales, provenientes de la provincia de Manabí, estudiantes, que visitan este lugar con fines turísticos. En cuanto a las zonas con potencial turístico, este estudio determinó que Playa Los Frailes fue el lugar con mayor afluencia turística durante el periodo mayo-agosto. Las principales debilidades detectadas fueron el aspecto ambiental, el alto número de turistas y la basura, específicamente la basura plástica. En conclusión, es trascendental fortalecer los procesos y actividades de la gestión del PNM para asegurar la sostenibilidad ambiental de sus valores naturales, culturales y sociales.

**Palabras clave:** desarrollo turístico; Parque Nacional Machalilla; sostenibilidad ambiental.

## 1. Introduction

The tourist trends have had a variation according to tourist's interests, knowing that the increase in the tourist flow is directed towards the development of activities related to nature, ecological, adventure and rural tourism which are options that can only be offered in natural spaces. These spaces are considered natural heritage and are generally found in unexplored territories with extraordinary biodiversity of flora, fauna, terrestrial and marine landscapes that deserve conservation. In this sense, to guarantee their protection and conservation of countries national heritage, the term protected areas have been created (Reck and Martínez, 2017).

Accordingly, in recent years, there has been a growing interest in including tourism in protected areas as a tourism development strategy for nearby towns, taking into account that tourism is a source of income that directly and indirectly produces an economic impact, as well as the social influence and especially environmental well-being. This is not for a short or sporadic time, but rather in the long term that is why this type of tourism developed in protected areas is sustainable (Aragón, 2005).

Since the beginning of the 1990s, the World Tourism Organization (WTO) has worked establishing an epitome of guidelines and methodologies focused on the link between protected areas

and tourism, while promoting initiatives with characteristic of sustainability standards that must be met. In the same way, national governments, promotes good practices, the development of ecotourism, community tourism, in addition to the creation of regional networks of protected areas (WTO, 2002).

Examples of this procedures can be found in the European Union with the creation of the Natura 2000 System, and the Network of Heritage Parks of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). They have been shaped, establishing protocols to show that tourism is sustainable, such is the case of the European Charter of Sustainable Tourism in Protected Areas. In countries like Nepal and India, their protected areas also belong to an interconnected transnational regional network, so that tourism works better, that is, for there to be sustainability, they do so from the management of tourism policies (Leung et al, 2019).

Regarding the American region, the case of the Dominican Republic presents a scenario where the tourism development of its provinces is done from the use and sustainability of its protected areas. In this region, they execute not only a holistic management through the development of community tourism, but also through private companies with public sector entities which promotes a club of tourist products, that also increases opportunities for the benefit of other stakeholders in the place (Orgaz, 2017).

For Ecuador, the situation is different, although 20% of its territory is made up of 66 protected areas, managed by the Ministry of the Environment, Water and Ecological Transition (MAAE) through the National System of Protected

Areas (MAAE, 2021). In this country, tourism development is very incipient, because some of the conservation areas are exclusively fragile and not all tourist activities are carried out, making it difficult to propose strategies that involve the development of the binomial: tourism and environment.

One of the main references of protected areas in the coastal zone of Ecuador, is the Machalilla National Park (MNP), listed in the 15 most visited natural areas, until 2019. The margin is over 200,000 visits, 271,837 to be exactly, (Herrera et al, 2021), carrying out activities based on nature, cultural, adventure, ecotourism and educational-scientific research tourism that are established according to art. 31 of the Special Regulation of Tourism in Protected Natural Areas (Ministerio de Turismo [MINTUR], 2016).

However, all these tourist activities are directed and coherent governed by the principle of sustainability and other environmental principles, provided for in the Constitution and the law. Tourist demand is a key factor for the existence of tourism development in the place, and tourist's responses or manifestations are the result of expectations and perceptions, regarding the quality of services and experiences offered, considering that the actions involved do not violate the natural environment of the MNP (Galarza, 2019).

In this order of ideas, there is a growing concern regarding the management of tourism in this natural area due to the fact that there is evidence of negligence in the planning, control, regulation and surveillance of tourist activities. Besides, there is no defined mechanism for the control of the load capacity leading to visual and acoustic contamination. Also, there is an

inappropriate management of garbage, solid waste and wastewater, there are constructions in unsuitable places built by local inhabitants who want to benefit from the felling of trees (Vega, 2022).

Other shortcomings are related to tourism personnel and management. There is an unfair competition between formal operators with informal ones who are not properly trained. It is also observed a lack of coordination within the protected area under the responsibility of the Ecuadorian Navy, the Ministry of the Environment, the Ministry of Tourism and the GAD of Puerto López. All these problems are causing tourism not to be a source of development and conservation of the MNP, but rather, it harms the environment as well as the visitor experience (Vega, 2021).

Faced with this situation, it is imperative to make the tourism industry compatible with the environment to guide the tourism development of the MNP and guarantee economic, social and environmental sustainability, that is, to promote tourism for generating income to favor nearby communities, improving their life quality, minimizing the environmental impact as much as possible, as well as providing tourists with experiences that allow future visits.

This work aims to analyze the perception of tourists in the sustainable development of the Machalilla National Park, being the main actor for tourism development, thanks to the efficient use of protected areas offered, the variety of landscapes, cultural legacy and biodiversity of flora and fauna. The methodology applied in this research corresponds to a mixed descriptive type, employing a documentary-bibliographic design based on virtual platforms such as scientific articles, degree works, and technical reports, among others.

## 2. Theoretical Background

Tourism has become one of the most effective profitability strategies, due to the need to respond to the problems of communities and foreigners who enjoy green spaces and ecosystems. In this sense, it is used to exploit the benefits of the productive apparatus in line with the pleasure of the biodiversity of flora and fauna and of the natural environments that generate interest in a population that wants to know and enjoy them. Tourism promotes the development of societies because of the increase in economic indicators, which are reflected in the various activities that are involved in their development.

Langui et al, (2017) states that the statistics managed by the World Tourism Organization (WTO) indicate that more than 250 million jobs are created, as well as an economic production that exceeds 510 million dollars, which means 10% of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP). Similarly, Garcia et al, (2017) state that there will be an annual increase of 3% in tourism until the year 2023, which will generate a social, productive and economic impact; however, it will produce a negative impact due to the consumption of energy, water and other resources.

This economic development, thanks to the tourism industry, is the product of the interaction of activities carried out by organizations dedicated to service such as hotels, restaurants, meeting centers, among others. Each one plays an important role for tourism to boom and progress in the town. These actions can be executed due to public-private policies or mechanisms which involve: elaboration of packages and macro-products; legislation and quality certification; control and supervision

of tourist establishments; promotion and marketing; research and planning; training and qualification; awareness and information; investment promotion, among others (Navarro, 2015).

Likewise, other actions must be carried out so that the activities derived from tourism do not generate high levels of environmental impact or break with the values and cultures of the tourist area. The research carried out by Lalangui et al, (2017) points out that sustainable tourism can be developed if the following factors are applied: Offering tourists to collaborate with community activities or in development or conservation projects; Respect for the community's culture, heritage and traditions, and Support for projects that the community is developing.

In this sense, Ecuador presents innumerable tourist sites displayed in architectural works, colonial zones, ecosystems with particular flora and fauna, natural monuments and natural reserves that provide an attraction for tourists, producing a positive effect in the social, cultural and economic sphere in the communities living in these areas. Some of these displacements can be found at the MNP which can provide satisfaction to tourists' needs.

This Park has an extension of 42,000 hectares of terrestrial territory and 14,000 corresponding to the marine area, located in the province of Manabí which is one of the largest Ecuadorian coasts. Touristically, it has a range of natural resources highlighting dry forest, climate, Playa los Frailes, Isla de la Plata, Islote El Ahorcado, Pedernales, Salango, Agua Blanca Community. It is part of the tourist cultural resources where vestiges of settlements of the Valdivia, Machalilla and Manteño Huancavilca culture can be found (Vega, 2021).

With the use of these tourist resources, the activities in the MNP focus on ecotourism, cultural tourism and adventure. In the forest, hiking is practiced, along the trails: Bola de Oro, El Rocío, El Sombrerito and San Sebastián Humid Forest. In the latter colonies, birds' nests are ideal for sighting while in the coastal area water activities are carried out including surface diving, deep diving for coral reefs sighting, snorkeling, surfing and whale watching.

With respect to land activities, extreme sports are practiced, festivals are held, tours of museums and camping. It should be noted that in the place there are tour operators that offer different services, combining various attractions for the subsequent tour, complemented with hotel, food and nightclubs establishments. Economically, all this variety of activities allows generating income for those involved in the MNP tourist area (Machalilla National Park, 2011).

The MNP contains 18 communities distributed in the Julcuy and Puerto Cayo parishes of the Jipijapa canton and the Machalilla, Puerto López and Salango parishes that belong to the Puerto López canton which an estimated population of 24,900 inhabitants. The Island of La Plata, has no inhabitants and belongs to the Montecristi canton. These communities have limited infrastructure for housing, roads, basic services, health services, education, and complementary services (INEC, 2010).

Due to their ancestral roots, the inhabitants have traditionally dedicated themselves to anthropic activities, fishing and agriculture, and these are considered their main source of income. Agriculture is carried out all year round, but with short-cycle products destined for consumption and in small quantities

to be marketed. Fishing is more relevant, there are an estimated of 3,800 artisanal anglers. Men, women and children are dedicated to harvesting. Shellfish in the intertidal zone (National Fisheries Institute, 2010).

On the other hand, the tourism development of the MNP has been gradual. Orlando (2020) comments that tourist activities have become the main source of income for many communities in the MNP. However, Torres (2009) states that tourism in the MNP presents weaknesses such as insufficient economic allocation and scarce operational personnel, so both situations do not allow covering control activities in high seasons, which implies environmental deterioration.

Despite this situation, in 2019 the MNP registered 271,837 visitor entries. For the year 2020 there was no record due to the declaration of COVID-19 pandemic, thanks to Ecuadorian state policies such as restrictions on tourist income, confinement and social distancing. In March 2021, the attention of the MNP was reopened and since then new strategies and dependencies regarding the management of this protected area have been reconsidered.

Considering the characteristics that are affecting the MNP in the maintenance of its environmental conditions is imperative for tourism development, so the tourist's perception is a very important variable for the detection of problems in terms of conservation and improvement.

### 3. Methodology

The realization of this work is based on a mixed approach research within a descriptive type, using a documentary-bibliographic design. The first type allowed to explain the current situation of

the MNP while the second, was carried in order to analyse the information collected to conform the theoretical bases and to contrast the results of the investigation.

According to the type and design adopted, the techniques used was the bibliographic compilation of primary and secondary sources and a survey. The latter, was designed to find out the opinions of tourists, employing a structured multiple-choice questionnaire to determine: the profile of the tourist who visits the MNP, the tourist potential attractions and, the shortcomings perceived by the tourist considering the environmental aspect. The survey was applied to 48 people who visited the MNP during may to June 2022.

## 4. Results and discussion

As it has been mentioned above, the results found through the questionnaire were divided into six parts to enable their discussion and analysis. These parts include: sociodemographic characteristics, tourist potential, environmental sustainability characteristics, infrastructure, environmental pollution and care standards.

### 5. Sociodemographic characteristics

According to the data observed in Table 1, the profile of the tourist demand that arrives at the MNP is determined by women with 70.80%, in terms of age the range of 22-31 years predominates with 54.20%, with respect to the marital status prevails single with 85.40%. Of the people surveyed 97.90% are nationals, being the most recurrent those coming from the Manabí province with 56.30%, the main occupation corresponds to

students with 40.80%. Besides, when people visit these sites, 59.20% of their

trips are made up of 3-4 people and 53% do so for tourist interest.

**Table 1**  
**Tourism demand profile**

VARIABLES	OPTIONS	%
Sex	men	29,20
	women	70,80
Age	10-11	0
	8,30	
	12-21	54,20
	22-31	33,30
	32-41	4,20
	42-51	0
	52-61	0
Older than 62	0	
Civil Status	Single	85,40
	Married	1,50
	Other	2,10
Nationality	National	97,90
	Foreign	2,10
Province of residence	Manabí	56,30
	Guayas	25,00
	Quito	10,70
	Sto Domingo	8,00
Occupation	Student	40,80
	Public Servers	18,80
	Teachers	8,30
	Housewives	4,20
	Private Employess	27,90
reason for the trip	Attractiveness recommendation	20,80
	Promotion in social networks	10,20
	To Visit Family	2,00
	Touristic Interest	53,00
	Already Knew	14,00



Cont... Table 1

	1-2 persons	10,40
Persons that travels with 3-4 persons	59,20	
More than 5 persons	28,30	
More than 10 personas	2,10	

Source: Sample research study. Prepared by the author (2023)

Comparing these results with the ones presented by Cevallos and Zambrano (2021), they have some similarities, due to the fact that most tourists are between 26-35 years of age; the majority are from the national market, specifically from the city of Quito with 38.0% and 42% are students. This discrepancy may be due to the moment in which the survey was carried out, which has an effect in the season, so it could be in times of high or low demand.

### 5.1. Tourist Potential

Tourist resources include all those natural and cultural places that generate

visiting interest and that with the intervention of man and the appropriate means, tourist activities are created, becoming potential within a locality if they are not well managed.

The information in Table 2 shows those natural resources identified as being of great visiting interest for tourists, highlighting Los Frailes beach with 27.80%, in the second place, Agua Blanca with 26.70%. In the same way, the months of influx of tourists are considered a relevant factor for the MNP, the most crowded being the period from May to August with 52.10%, the period in which the humpback whale season opens.

**Table 2**  
**Tourism resources of the MNP**

VARIABLES	OPTIONS	%
Most visited attractions	Los Frailes Beach	27,80
	De La Plata Island	25,20
	Salango	20,30
	Agua Blanca	26,70
Months of affluence	January-April	31,30
	May-August	52,10
	September-December	16,60

Source: Sample research study. Prepared by the author (2023)

Comparing with the research of Cevallos and Zambrano (2021), it is worth to mention that the main tourist resources in the MNP are Playa Los Frailes, Isla La Plata, Comuna Agua Blanca, Playa Salango having similarity with the data of this research. The results propose support confirming that all these attractions, as they belong to such an extensive protected area, are suitable for the activities that take place there, such as striking, making it potentially attractive for tourists.

### 5.2. Environmental sustainability characteristics

The effects that can occur due

to the massive influx of tourists are a concern for the MNP. The conservation of the environment and resources are a priority for the sustainable development of tourism in the MNP. Given this situation, it is necessary to understand the importance of tourist carrying capacity, which tries to delimit the harmful impacts that tourism can cause to the environment.

In this sense, the survey presented questions regarding the carrying tourist capacity of the MNP, which results are shown in Table 3. As it can be observed, there is a high income of tourists with 35.40%. On the other hand, 77.10% stated that the income limit for tourists only occurs in certain attractions.

**Table 3**  
**Tourist carrying capacity**

QUESTIONS	OPTIONS	%
High income from tourists	Yes	70,80
	No	29,20
The entrance to tourists is limited to only some attractions	Yes	87,50
	No	12,50

Source: Sample research study. Prepared by the author (2023)

This result is effectively corroborated by the study carried out by Mendoza (2019), stating that at Los Frailes Beach, the main attraction of the MNP, the effective or tourist carrying capacity corresponds to 81.32%, that is 1041 daily visitors, while for the other attractions no results were detected in the literature that contrast these data.

### 5.3. Infrastructure

In the same way, data was obtained regarding the factors that are part of the MNP infrastructure, as detailed in

Table 4. The results show an apparent indifference because it is an area with open spaces, but it should be noted that they also affect the perception of tourists when visiting the place. The results found indicate that the attractions have signals with 77.10%; likewise, the park ranger service is efficient in providing the information requested by tourists. The state of the entrance roads is currently in fair condition (58.30%) and the parking lots have sections for people with disabilities in case they have individual transportation.

**Table 4**  
**Infrastructure**

QUESTIONS	OPTIONS	%
The attractions have signs	Yes	87,50
	No	12,50
Park rangers provide information	Yes	93,80
	No	6,20
State of the entrance routes	Good Condition	30,60
	Bad Condition	11,10
	Regular	58,30
There are parking spaces for people with disabilities	Yes	70,80
	No	29,20

Source: Sample research study. Prepared by the author (2023)

Mendoza's research (2019) highlights that, part of the infrastructure, spaces built for public use are also considered, so that in his study at Playa los Frailes he identifies 6 places for public use, in which 1 main booth stands out, 6 dressing rooms, 2 bathrooms, 6 showers, 3 handicraft cabins and parking with a limit of 100 cars. Despite this, it does not cover the capacity for tourists who come to this place.

#### 5.4. Environmental Pollution

Tourists are also aware of environmental pollution in the MNP, highlighting garbage with 40.80%, followed by organic waste with 34.20% and the most common waste is plastic with 46.40%. Consequently, the main problem caused by environmental deterioration is the loss of flora and fauna with 37.10%, which produces a decline in the tourists' arrival of a 26.80%. These results can be seen in Table 5.

**Table 5**  
**Environmental pollution**

QUESTIONS	OPTIONS	%
Perceived impacts on the environment	Garbage	40,80
	Water contamination	15,20
	Soil degradation and erosion	13,10
	landscape alteration	10,10
	excess construction	11,20
	Noise from vehicular traffic	8,40
	Presence of pollutants in the air	1,20
Most perceived residues during your journey	Plastic	46,40
	Glass	4,20
	Paper	8,30
	cans	7,10
	organic waste	34,20

**Cont... Table 5**

Main problems caused by environmental deterioration	Loss of vegetation	37,10
	Overexploitation of natural resources	20,70
	Decline in tourist arrivals	26,80
	Deterioration in the quality of life of the inhabitants	15,40

Source: Sample research study. Prepared by the author (2023)

According to the control and surveillance strategy report for the Machalilla National Park, presented by USAID (2011), contamination problems were perceived from other areas of conservation such as agriculture, livestock, artisanal fishing, harvesting of fruits from the forest, as well as as activities not compatible for conservation such as logging, hunting of wild animals, being caused mainly by local inhabitants. With the passage of time, some of these mentioned characteristics have been

given a touristic form, leading to the entry of other people, in this case tourists, causing another type of contamination and waste generation.

## 5.5. Care Standards

For a few years, a series of regulations and recommendations for care in protected areas have been established. In this sense, Table 6 shows the general perspective of tourists and visitors in the MNP.

**Table 6**  
**Care Standards**

QUESTIONS	OPTIONS	%
Where is the garbage disposed at	Floor	30.50
	Garbage Can	65.80
	Taken In Bags	3.70
There is a ban on food and drinks	Yes	93.80
	No	2.10
	Maybe	4.10
It is allowed to cut the vegetation	Yes	98.10
	No	1.90
Forbidden to disturb wild animals	Yes	97.50
	No	2.50
Camping is allowed in indicated places	Yes	94.60
	No	6.40
Forbidden to introduce plants and release animals	Yes	98.30
	No	1.70
It is prohibited to collect archaeological elements	Yes	100
	No	0

Source: Sample research study. Prepared by the author (2023)

The results show the collection of waste in garbage cans with 65.80%, the prohibition of food and beverages is verified, responding positively with 93.80%. The allowance to cut the vegetation was indicated by a 98.10%, while a 97.50% reported prohibition from disturbing wild animals. Camping allowed only in indicated places shows a 94.60%. In addition, 98.30% expresses that it is banned to introduce plants or release animals, and a 100% indicates that collecting archaeological elements is prohibited.

These provisions are not only applicable to MNP, but are also globally considered since largely, the conservation of these natural environments and the biodiversity that lives in them depends on the action of human being.

## 6. Conclusions

Protected areas provide diverse ecosystems, so opportunities for tourism development can occur which results in an increase in tourist demand. However, this situation can produce a side effect such as environmental threat to the conservation. Likewise, tourism and environmental pollution have a significant link, because of the impacts generated by tourist activity on the resources of the MNP. In this sense, it is necessary to develop efforts to preserve the natural space without diminishing the quality of the tourist experience, which is a challenge since it is difficult to keep tourism development within the limits of sustainability.

Undoubtedly, during the period of the pandemic, nature had a recovery period; however, the currently characteristics of environmental sustainability perceived by tourists continue to be negative.

There is no doubt that the fundamental bases that support the conservation of biodiversity in this protected area are established, but they are gradually fulfilled. Therefore, it can be inferred that it is transcendental to strengthen the processes, interconnected elements and management activities of the MNP to ensure the long-term sustainability of its natural, cultural and social values.

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