

Stakeholder Sustainability in Tourism Projects in Protected Areas: A Case Study in the Serranía de la Lindosa, Guaviare, Colombia.

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Abstract: Sustainable tourism is presented today as a viable development engine for protected areas in the Colombian Amazon since it promotes the management of natural resources in such a way that economic, social, and environmental needs are satisfied while preserving cultural integrity, ecological processes, and biodiversity, bringing benefits for all stakeholders. The purpose of this research work was to explore the relationship between stakeholders in tourism in protected areas in the Serranía de la Lindosa in Guaviare, Colombia. An exploratory study was conducted on stakeholders and human capital indicators in the development of sustainable tourism projects in protected areas in the department of Guaviare. Initially, the methodology and indicators of a study conducted in Qinghai Lake in China were used as a basis. Subsequently, an evaluation instrument of 31 indicators of the Human system (stakeholders) was structured to measure the interrelationships between the community, tourism, and Protected Areas. The instrument was then applied to stakeholders in a protected area with high tourism flow in the department of Guaviare (Serranía de la Lindosa). Twenty-five individuals including residents, tourism project managers, and tourists participated in the study. Preliminary results indicate that the sustainability of the human system in tourism projects in general is intermediate (3.2 out of 5). The study combines stakeholder sustainability theory to measure the interrelationships of the human system in the management of tourism projects in the region. The study is intended as a starting point for further explanatory studies regarding stakeholder management in the development of tourism projects in the Colombian Amazon region.

Keywords: project management, stakeholder management, tourism projects, sustainable tourism, protected areas.

Sostenibilidad de las Partes Interesadas en Proyectos Turísticos en Áreas Protegidas: Un Estudio de Caso en la Serranía de la Lindosa, Guaviare, Colombia.

Resumen: El turismo sostenible se presenta hoy en día como un motor de desarrollo viable para las áreas protegidas en la Amazonía colombiana, ya que promueve la gestión de los recursos naturales de tal manera que se satisfacen las necesidades económicas, sociales y ambientales, al tiempo que se preserva la integridad cultural, los procesos ecológicos y la biodiversidad, generando beneficios para todas las partes interesadas. El propósito de este trabajo de investigación fue explorar la relación entre los actores involucrados en el turismo en áreas protegidas de la Serranía de la Lindosa en Guaviare, Colombia. Se realizó un estudio exploratorio sobre los indicadores de las partes interesadas y el capital humano en el desarrollo de proyectos turísticos sostenibles en áreas protegidas del departamento de Guaviare. Inicialmente, se tomó como base la metodología y los indicadores de un estudio realizado en el lago Qinghai en China. Posteriormente, se estructuró un instrumento de evaluación de 31 indicadores del sistema humano (partes interesadas) para medir las interrelaciones entre la comunidad, el turismo y las áreas protegidas. Luego, el instrumento se aplicó a las partes interesadas en un área protegida con alto flujo turístico en el departamento de Guaviare (Serranía de la Lindosa). Veinticinco individuos, incluyendo residentes, gerentes de proyectos turísticos y turistas, participaron en el estudio. Los resultados preliminares indican que la sostenibilidad del sistema humano en los proyectos turísticos en general es intermedia (3.2 de 5). El estudio combina la teoría de la sostenibilidad de las partes interesadas para medir las interrelaciones del sistema humano en la gestión de proyectos turísticos en la región. El estudio pretende ser un punto de partida para futuros



estudios explicativos sobre la gestión de las partes interesadas en el desarrollo de proyectos turísticos en la región amazónica colombiana.

Palabras clave: gestión de proyectos, gestión de partes interesadas, proyectos turísticos, turismo sostenible, áreas protegidas

Introduction

In the department of Guaviare, Colombia, more than 85% of its territory corresponds to protected areas such as natural parks, forest reserve zones, natural reserves, and lands with special regulations [1]. Currently, deforestation is the main threat to these areas, with more than 6,000 hectares deforested just between January and March 2021 [2]. This situation, coupled with the lack of economic and social development opportunities in the region, has caused Guaviare to occupy the lowest levels of competitiveness in the country [3]. However, after the signing of the peace process in 2016, the department emerges with new growth opportunities where sustainable tourism presents itself as a viable development option [4].

In this sense, sustainable tourism has established itself as a viable development driver for protected areas in the Colombian Amazon [4]. Consequently, sustainable tourism in protected areas requires not only achieving low environmental impact but also fair benefits for stakeholders and their participation rights [5]. However, some literature review studies suggest gaps between the application of stakeholder theory and sustainable tourism management in protected areas in Latin America [6]. Although several studies propose the evaluation of indicators on the effects of tourism on the environment, economic, and sociocultural surroundings, few have focused on stakeholder perception or attitude and their relationships [5].

Now, from a project management perspective, stakeholders are people or individuals who can affect or be affected by a decision, activity, or outcome of a project [7]. The PMI highlights the importance of stakeholder involvement as one of the key factors influencing a project, defining its performance and results [7]. Therefore, it is crucial to examine stakeholder perceptions regarding the management of sustainable tourism projects in protected areas of the region.

This exploratory study evaluated subjective human capital indicators to assess stakeholders in the development of sustainable tourism projects in protected areas of Guaviare. Thirty-one indicators from the Sustainable Ecotourism Indicator System (SEIS) [39] and a validated instrument applied in the Qinghai Lake Nature Reserve in China [5] were adapted. The instrument was applied to local residents, project managers, and tourists in the Serranía de la Lindosa (Guaviare), a protected area with high tourist flow in Guaviare. Preliminary results indicate that the sustainability of the human system in tourism projects is intermediate (3.2 out of 5). This study combines stakeholder sustainability theory to measure human system interrelationships in the management of tourism projects in the region, seeking to be a starting point for subsequent descriptive or explanatory studies on stakeholder management in the development of tourism projects in the Colombian Amazon.

A. Tourism Context of the Region

Tourism has established itself as an engine for job creation, social development, and equality, generating one in ten jobs and representing 10% of world GDP [8]. In Colombia, the 2022-2026 National Development Plan "Colombia World Power of Life" proposes strengthening the offer through the development of various types of tourism, including ecotourism, landscape tourism, biotourism, agrotourism, adventure, scientific, health, and wellness [9]. Furthermore, Colombia embraces the 17 sustainable development goals [10] and the 2030 agenda set forth by the UN [11], recognizing sustainable tourism as an important actor for its purpose of protecting the environment, maximizing economic benefits, and improving the living standards of residents [12], and following the UN roadmap for the transformation of post-pandemic tourism, which proposes the promotion of sustainability and inclusive economic growth [13].



For its part, the Colombian Ministry of Commerce, Industry, and Tourism established the cultural tourism policy, recognizing the country's potential in the sector and its lack of competitiveness [14]. In summary, sustainable tourism is projected as a viable development option in regions where protected areas exist, such as the Colombian Amazon, since it seeks to meet the needs of tourists and host regions while protecting and strengthening opportunities for the future [15].

Regarding Guaviare, it is a department of the Colombian Amazon with an approximate population of 108,000 inhabitants and 56,460 km² of territory, of which only 14.9% is usable for productive activities and the remaining 85.1% are environmental or archaeological protection zones [1]. This region bases its economy on commerce, agriculture, and extensive cattle ranching, which causes deforestation [16], contributing less than 1% to the national GDP and occupying the 27th place out of 33 regions in competitiveness [3], which has generated precarious social development indices [16]. Therefore, the competitive factor of the department should be based on systems based on sustainable development that recover deforested areas, conserve biodiversity, and generate social justice [17], especially when there is a need to guarantee the preservation of the Amazon as a global natural CO₂ sink [18].

In this sense, the development of Guaviare should discourage productive activities that encourage deforestation, which is where sustainable tourism appears as a viable development option [19]. According to the above, different plans and programs propose reducing deforestation and decreasing the expansion of the agricultural frontier [21]. Even so, tourism in the region has not managed to take off, contributing less than 10% to the departmental GDP during the last decade [22]. Although there is great potential in tourist destinations, there are still no services and products that generate a high-impact demand, so decisive support from institutions is required for its reorientation and strengthening [20]. Currently, 9 protected areas and 27 indigenous reservations coexist in the department, within which are 2 natural parks, the Serranía del Chibiriquete (the largest in the country) and part of the Serranía de la Macarena [23].

B. Sustainability in Project Management and Stakeholders

The Project Management Institute (PMI) defines a project as "a temporary endeavor undertaken to create a unique product, service, or result" [7]. Other definitions establish that a project is the search for an intelligent solution to the approach of a problem aimed at solving a human need [24]. Therefore, projects arise from the identification of a need and become a fundamental component for the implementation of development policies [25]. Since it is an instrument for making decisions regarding the use of resources, a thorough study of all related areas is required [26]. These characteristics are incorporated into project management models, recognizing great opportunities for success. In addition, Green Project Management (GPM) defines projects as the mechanism to implement change, whose results affect sustainability, so project management must address the sustainability approach [27].

Currently, there are several bodies of knowledge from which project management has developed as a profession, structuring management models that establish knowledge and good practices, such as the PMI's PMBOK [7], PRINCE2 from Great Britain [28], and the ICB from the International Project Management Association [29]. All of these recognize the importance of stakeholders and their identification and management as a key factor for success in projects. In this regard, stakeholder theory holds that organizations are defined around the expectations of their stakeholders [30], which correspond to interest groups that can influence or be influenced by a project [31], since the greater the impact of a project, the more stakeholders involved around interests and power [32]. Therefore, it is assumed that it is important for a project to comply with the basic principles of sustainable development if the needs of all stakeholders are met [33,34]. Hence, the main task of stakeholder management is to identify and maximize the key points that are common to the parties, balancing conflicting interests, which is no trivial task [35, 36].

C. Sustainability Indicators in Tourism in Protected Areas



Sustainable tourism indicators are divided into two categories: assessment of stakeholder perception, qualitative indicators, and assessment of the effects of tourism on the environment (ecological, economic, and social), generally quantitative indicators [37]. However, few studies have focused on measuring the internal aspects and relationships between stakeholders [5]. Lee and Hsieh [38] managed to identify two dimensions (stakeholders and ecological environment) of sustainability for tourism. According to this view, subjective indicators are also crucial for effective tourism governance in PAs [40], as they allow for the assessment of perceptions and are considered one of the most appropriate options for integrating the opinions of different stakeholders on the sustainability of tourist destinations [41,42].

In the field of tourism, researchers have identified five key stakeholders: tourists, local communities, businesses, government, and NGOs [43], with the most mentioned in relation to tourism in protected areas being tourists, the community, and resource managers (project managers) [44]. Recent interdisciplinary studies integrate social and natural sciences to understand the complexity of coupled systems (socio-ecological systems and human-environmental systems) for sustainable development [45]. In this context, the territorial system of human-environment interaction suggests that coupled human-environmental systems are complex, composed of and integrated by intersystems of the geographic environment and human activity [46, 47].

From this perspective, the geographic subsystem is made up of economic, sociocultural, and ecological environments, while the human activity subsystem is formed by stakeholders [48]. According to stakeholder theory, the sustainable development of the human system largely depends on the support of all stakeholders [49]. Ross & Wall [50] considered that the relationships between resource managers, communities, and tourists could be adopted to assess the state of tourism in protected areas.

Following this framework, Tsaur, Lin & Lin [39] propose a sustainable ecotourism indicator system called SEIS (Sustainable Ecotourism Indicator System), which consists of a system that evaluates the perception of one group of stakeholders with the other two groups. This system has been considered to evaluate tourism sustainability in various protected areas such as Toiman (a marine park in Malaysia), Jiuzhaigou (a nature reserve in China), and recently the Qinghai Lake Nature Reserve in the same country [5].

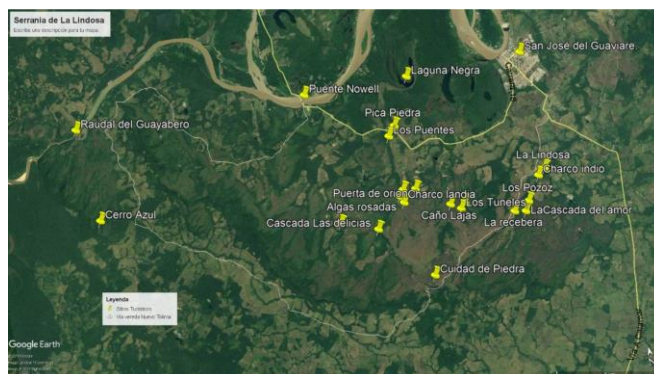
Methodology

The study was conducted in four methodological phases. First, the indicators from the SEIS study in Qinghai Lake Nature Reserve, China, were adapted to evaluate the human system across six dimensions. Second, data was collected through an online survey administered to local residents, tourists, and managers of tourism projects, with each group assessing the relationships of the other two groups with the protected areas. Third, the collected data were analyzed to determine the degree of sustainability of the human system using the sustainability barometer proposed by Prescott-Allen. Finally, the results were interpreted by combining stakeholder theory and sustainability to exploratively measure the interrelationships of human capital in the management of tourism projects in the Serranía de la Lindosa.

This exploratory study evaluated subjective indicators of human capital to assess the perception of stakeholders in the development of sustainable tourism projects in the Serranía de la Lindosa, a protected area in the department of Guaviare in the Colombian Amazon (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Serranía la Lindosa Tourist Sites.





Source: Sanabria [51]

A quantitative approach was used, based on the methodology and indicators of the SEIS (Sustainable Ecotourism Indicators System) employed in a previous study conducted in the Qinghai Lake Nature Reserve in China [5]. Thirty-one indicators, validated using the Fuzzy Delphi method, were selected to evaluate the human system across six dimensions: community in protected areas, tourism in protected areas, protected areas in the community, tourism in the community, community in tourism, and protected areas in tourism [40]. These indicators were adapted to a common language and structured into a survey-type evaluation instrument.

For the application of the instruments, an online form was structured to facilitate data collection from different stakeholder groups. The survey was administered to three stakeholder groups: local residents, tourists, and managers of public and private sector tourism projects. Each group assessed the relationships of the other two groups with the protected areas using a 5-point Likert scale [44]. A total of 25 individuals participated: 10 project managers, 8 local residents, and 7 tourists. The collected data were analyzed to obtain the degree of sustainability of the human system overall and in each of the six dimensions evaluated. The sustainability barometer proposed by Prescott-Allen [52] was used to categorize the results into unsustainable, potentially unsustainable, potentially sustainable, and sustainable.

This case study combines stakeholder theory [31] and sustainability to exploratively measure the interrelationships of human capital in the management of tourism projects in the Serranía de la Lindosa. Exploratory studies are fundamental to begin understanding phenomena that have not been previously studied, especially in complex contexts such as sustainable tourism in protected areas.

Results

Table 1 shows the sociodemographic characteristics of the respondents. The gender distribution of the respondents is balanced, and this balance is maintained across the evaluated stakeholder groups.

Table 1. Profiles of the respondents

	<i>All respondents (25)</i>		<i>Local residents (8)</i>		<i>Tourists (7)</i>		<i>Project managers (10)</i>	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
<i>Male</i>	12	48	4	50	3	42.86	5	50
<i>Female</i>	13	52	4	50	4	57.14	5	50
Total	25	100	8	100	7	100	10	100
<i>18-25</i>	2	8	1	12.50	1	14.29	0	0



26-30	2	8	1	12.50	0	0	1	10
31-40	6	24	2	25	1	14.29	3	30
41-50	8	32	2	25	2		4	40
51-60	3	12	1	12.50	1	28.57	1	10
60 or older	4	16	1	12.50	2	14.29	1	10
Total	25	100	8	100	7	100	10	100
High school	1	4	0	0	0	0	1	10
Undergraduate	14	56	6	75	3	42.86	5	50
Graduate or higher	10	40	2	25	4	57.14	4	40
Total	25	100	8	100	7	100	10	100
Less than 1 million COP	4	16	2	25	2	28.57	0	0
Between 1 and 2 million COP	3	12	0	0	1	14.29	2	20
Between 2 and 3 million COP	3	12	2	25	0	0	1	10
Between 3 and 4 million COP	3	12	1	12.50	0	0	2	20
More than 4 million COP	12	48	3	37.50	4	57.14	5	50
Total	25	100	8	100	7	100	10	100

Source: Own elaboration

96% of the survey respondents have received higher education. The highest educational level among the respondents was undergraduate, consisting mainly of local residents. 80% of project managers have an income above 2 million COP, suggesting that being a project manager in the context of tourism is a role that allows for economic benefits for this stakeholder group.

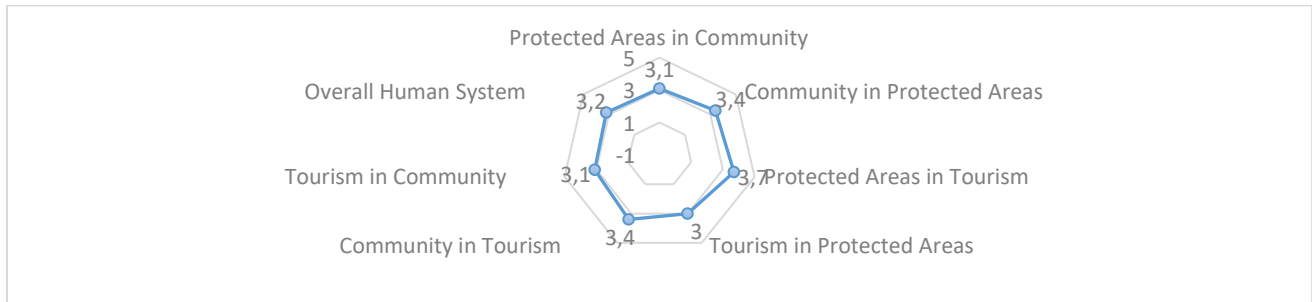
Regarding the gender of the respondents, a balanced distribution between men and women is observed across all stakeholder groups, which does not suggest that gender is a determining factor in the perception of sustainability. On the other hand, the educational level of the respondents shows a clear trend towards higher education, with 96% of the participants having attained undergraduate or postgraduate studies. This high proportion of individuals with higher education could influence their ability to understand and value the principles of sustainability in tourism. However, there are no significant differences in the distribution of educational level among the different stakeholder groups, suggesting that education is not a determining factor in the perception of sustainability.

In terms of salary income, there is a notable difference between project managers and other stakeholder groups. 80% of project managers have an income above 2 million Colombian pesos (COP), while this proportion is lower among local residents and tourists. This disparity in income could influence the perception of the economic benefits derived from tourism. Project managers, having higher incomes, may have a more positive view of the economic benefits of tourism in the region, while local residents and tourists with lower incomes may perceive these benefits as less significant.

On the other hand, the result of the human system evaluation is 3.2 (out of 5) overall. As presented in Figure 2, the following results were obtained for each dimension: Protected Areas in the Community (3.1), Community in Protected Areas (3.4), Protected Areas in Tourism (3.7), Tourism in Protected Areas (3.0), Community in Tourism (3.4), and Tourism in the Community (3.1).

Figure 2. Human system evaluation results

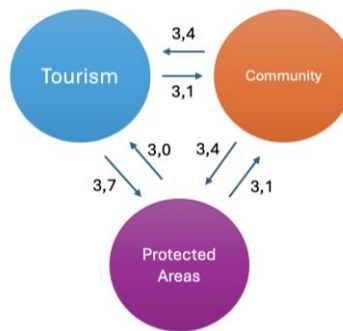




Source: Own elaboration

Figure 3 illustrates the scores for the human system in the development of sustainable tourism and its projects in the “Serranía de la Lindosa”. The values indicate the degree of sustainability among tourism, the local community, and the Protected Areas (PA).

Figure 3. Sustainability between tourism, the community, and the Protected Areas.



Source: Own elaboration

According to the results obtained in the study, the sustainability of the human system evaluated in the Serranía de la Lindosa (3.2) is potentially sustainable. However, a determined and coordinated effort among stakeholder groups is required to drive this potential towards full sustainability. From the perspective of the human system, this would be possible through awareness, education, and culture around the principles of sustainability in tourism and the management of stakeholder expectations in tourism projects [5].

A notable finding is the gap between project managers' perceptions of tourism in protected areas and what local residents perceive about the benefits derived from this activity. This discrepancy could be attributed to the level of maturity of tourism in the region, which could only consolidate as an emerging national destination after the signing of the peace agreement in 2016 [4]. Therefore, it is a sector that is still in the process of consolidation, and whose benefits may not be significantly permeating the local community. Deepening the understanding of the underlying causes of these differences in perception is crucial for designing effective sustainable tourism project management strategies that involve and benefit all stakeholders [34].

Regarding opportunities for improvement, while the need for a coordinated effort by stakeholders to move towards full sustainability is pointed out, it is important to provide more specific recommendations. In this sense, awareness and education strategies around the principles of sustainability in tourism, as well as mechanisms for community participation in decision-making, could contribute to aligning expectations and generating more equitable benefits [5]. Likewise, the development of integrated stakeholder management models that

consolidate project management as an area of strong application in this sector emerges as a promising path [6] [40].

When contrasting the results with the existing literature, coincidences are observed with previous studies that highlight the importance of considering the interrelationships of all stakeholders to avoid negative effects on projects [35]. However, the application of stakeholder theory and sustainability to exploratorily measure the interrelationships of human capital in tourism project management in the region constitutes a distinctive contribution of this research, considering the gaps identified between the application of stakeholder theory and sustainable tourism management in protected areas of Latin America [7].

Conclusions

It is important to acknowledge the limitations of the study, derived from its exploratory nature and sample size. Future research could address these limitations by expanding the geographical scope, including other stakeholder groups, or employing mixed methods to triangulate the results. Similarly, it is recommended to carry out, in the short term, a process of identification and weighting of specific indicators of sustainable tourism for the Amazon region using Fuzzy Delphi, which would allow a comprehensive evaluation of the sustainability of tourism in protected areas of the region and the development of integrated stakeholder management models [6] [40].

From a practical perspective, tourism project teams and managers in the region now have an important input that considers the interrelationships of stakeholders in the human system, something that had not been previously established for the Serranía de la Lindosa. According to the literature consulted, not considering the interrelationships of all stakeholders can cause negative effects on projects [35]. Therefore, it is recommended that project management professionals in this sector incorporate these findings into their planning and decision-making processes.

Looking to the future, it is important to carry out, in the short term, a process of identification and weighting of specific indicators of sustainable tourism for the Amazon region using Fuzzy Delphi. This would allow a comprehensive evaluation of the sustainability of tourism in protected areas of the region and the development of integrated stakeholder management models that consolidate project management as an area of strong application in this sector [6] [40]. Future descriptive or explanatory studies could address these recommendations by expanding the geographical scope, including other stakeholder groups, or employing mixed methods to triangulate the results.

Consequently, although the path towards full sustainability of tourism in this region is just beginning, studies like this lay solid foundations to move in that direction in an informed and strategic manner. It is hoped that future research can expand the sample and delve into the identified relationships, contributing to the consolidation of a stakeholder management model in sustainable tourism projects for the Colombian Amazon region.

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