

## ORIGINAL RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Marketing management and sustainable tourism in the Imbabura geopark, Ecuador

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### ABSTRACT

Geoparks are resources designed to develop conservation, education, tourism, and sustainable development. This study explores the operations, marketing strategies, trends, and possible solutions to the impacts of COVID-19 in other geoparks and destinations. To obtain this information, interviews were conducted and a secondary exploratory study of scientific databases was undertaken. Actions to revitalize tourism include improving relationships between stakeholders, increasing the involvement of local communities, changing models, creating attractive tourism products, and innovating marketing strategies through technology.

**Keywords:** biodiversity; geopark; destination marketing; sustainable tourism

## 1. Introduction

The province of Imbabura is located in the South American continent, located north of Ecuador. It is bordered to the north by the province of Carchi, to the south by the province of Pichincha, to the east by the province of Sucumbíos and to the west by the province of Esmeraldas; with unique characteristics that make it an area suitable for sustainable development in several aspects, many of them natural, which is why in 2015 it submitted the candidacy to be recognized as a Global geopark, UNESCO's own accreditation<sup>[1]</sup>, for the period April 17, 2019 to April 16, 2023. Analyzing from another perspective, there is an invaluable opportunity to reformulate and restart the actions and strategies to be taken to exploit the full potential of the destination places. The health emergency experienced in the world due to the pandemic,

causes greater orientation towards its host communities, with trends towards enclave tourism<sup>[2,3]</sup> and on how the psychology of environmental distress affects the decisions and experience of the tourist, especially, in sustainable tourism<sup>[4]</sup>. This pandemic, likewise, offers opportunities for companies to actively engage in different corporate social responsibility initiatives during the emergency. Affecting marketing environments also produced accelerated changes and innovations<sup>[5]</sup>, threatening the existence of many companies worldwide; managers must adapt their marketing strategies to disruptive environments<sup>[6]</sup>, while other authors focus on organizational capabilities to deal with crisis issues<sup>[7]</sup>. What is certain is that, consumer behavior has changed and companies must adapt to this change to propose new innovations in their marketing strategies, including the use of technology and digital media that confirm direct positive

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relationships between experience, credibility and behavioral intentions of the online destination brand riveting recommendation<sup>[8]</sup>.

Therefore, this study aims to contribute to the scientific knowledge of realities, states and application of strategies in different tourist destinations at local, national and global levels, before and during the emergency. It is intended to know the current state of the Imbabura geopark, understand the impact of the pandemic, the change in consumer behavior and possible trends or solutions that can be applied to effectively revive tourism in the province and maintain the UNESCO designation.

### **1.1. Marketing**

Marketing is directly related to the economy and commercial success of a company, regardless of the industry it is in, so the correct use of its strategies will make the difference in any condition it is in. Even more, in the current situation in which the effects of the pandemic have changed all forms of behavior and now some concepts are altered. Marketing is always mindful of the study of market behavior, behaviors that are evident and reflected in actions such as in the daily purchases people make, online entertainment and tourism choices; however, in the alterations of attitudes, values and beliefs can be subtle<sup>[5]</sup> simulating this type of change, organizations must be clear that marketing innovation is effective and will increase their survival rate while maintaining their competitive advantage<sup>[9]</sup>.

The Ecuadorian company is very affected and many of these affections are related to tourism. It is understood that to survive a crisis innovation in technology is the main option, but, that it needs money and time (R&D). However, innovation in marketing can be done more quickly to adapt to new customer changes in disruptive environments by means of a typology of strategies in two dimensions, the motivation for innovation (problematic search or lazy search) and the level of collaborative innovations (independent or collaborative)<sup>[6]</sup>.

The impact on tourism consumers changes the way they choose or visit a destination, making them more selective, since mass tourism will not be the chosen one; experience and extended vacations are now preferred<sup>[10]</sup>. Tourism generates a great impact on the global economy, responsible for millions of jobs<sup>[11]</sup>. It is directly related to the development of communities that see in tourism a development and improvement of their living conditions, both authorities and professionals, must rethink the behavior of tourists to develop a more balanced industry through a reformulation of policies. Wen et al.<sup>[10]</sup> in their research provides that one of those behaviors of tourists will be the choice for a slow tourism, which will be beneficial for the communities, where the tourist will prefer quality and longer stay than the quantity of places visited. Likewise, they name certain strategies to consider within marketing and management such as avoiding overcrowded destinations, distribution channels, travel patterns, smart tourism. One of the options to market or motivate slow tourism within destination marketing is virtual reality (VR). Lin et al.<sup>[12]</sup> applied the strategy to promote a second-tier city in China, obtaining great results, defining that the tourist's feelings when affected by technology generate different reactions, among them, nostalgia that gave a strong contribution for decision making in the visit of a tourist place and the development of sustainable heritage tourism of the site, highlighting historical, cultural and landscape tourism values.

In the same way, marketing strategies used online, through platforms or social networks such as Facebook, Instagram or You Tube generate a positive impact on the cognitive and affective image of a destination<sup>[13]</sup>. Jung & Dieck recommend integrating and applying new technologies such as augmented reality, virtual reality, as well as 3D printing, considered key for the competitiveness of cultural heritage tourist sites or those related to sustainable tourism<sup>[14]</sup>. This is how the relationship of marketing, destination marketing, tourism marketing, social marketing or any of these involved, has a direct relationship for the success of management in the tourism industry. As Dimitrios

said, many aspects will have to be considered to initiate its reactivation, strategic marketing together with destination management and understanding of the tourism consumer will allow all those involved to understand, to a large extent, that innovative marketing, led by research and the use of technology will be the only way to market and manage competitive destinations<sup>[15]</sup>.

## **1.2. Sustainable tourism**

Tourism is one of the industries with the greatest projection for income and contribution to states and governments, due to the number of jobs it generates and the people it transports worldwide. Developing countries have a great opportunity to continue growing in this sector. The current circumstances lead to restructure the tourism planning of each country to provide confidence, security and favorable experience to tourists who begin to travel. For Ecuador, the Imbabura geopark is one of the destinations with the greatest potential to initiate this reactivation; the application of strategies and initiatives based on the new behaviors of visitors will be fundamental in this aspect. One of the proposals by Graci is to enable a collaborative partnership with a holistic approach that allows all interested and involved parties to participate<sup>[16]</sup>. Some authors apply the theory of collaboration with factors such as transparency, participation, trust, organizational support, crisis, awareness, stage of tourism development, among others, defining that the collaboration of interested parties or stakeholders, can lead to a clear, sincere, functional and long-term partnership<sup>[17]</sup>. The greatest responsibility falls on local governments, which are the ones that have in the first instance financial availability, most of them have laws to support sustainable tourism, but, they are not effectively executed because they focus purely on economic aspects, leaving aside the social, cultural and environmental<sup>[18]</sup>. The entire tourism environment produces relationships at all times. In the six lines of research analyzed by Merinero-Rodríguez and Pulido-Fernández<sup>[19]</sup> specific aspects are denoted within the factors that make relationships possible, the structural

characteristics of relationships, the links in the tourism production process and the impacts of the characteristics of relationships on tourism activity. These confirm that in the industry it must work collaboratively, exploiting relationships and interactions with all those involved.

For sustainable development through tourism, it is very important to know what the stakeholders who are in the place day by day think and how they experience it. If they are totally in agreement with the application of tourism projects in their sectors, to know their perceptions of the impacts that are produced and if these are positive or negative, Wu et al.<sup>[20]</sup>, in their research applied in Hainan Island details relevant results of the expectations of its inhabitants, that being mostly positive, the communities are not convinced that sustainable tourism generates a total benefit, this because of the negative impacts that occur in the aspect of environmental conservation and especially in the scarce political conditions and agreements<sup>[21]</sup>. The development of sustainable or sustainable tourism must be “ecologically responsible, socially compatible, culturally appropriate, politically equitable, technologically favorable and economically viable for the host community”, based on indicators<sup>[22]</sup>; indicators that currently have to change and transform the way tourism is done and promoted. Cheer<sup>[23]</sup> determines that the human flourishing in host communities, the profound change in values, actions of commoners and the impulse to change the paradigm of openness in their minds, is mandatory in post-emergency tourism, as well as a transformation in the way of evaluating and measuring impacts. The new forms of forced behavior make the whole tourism sector rethink how to present and reactivate their economies, as most countries worldwide begin to open their airports, restrictions, such as distancing, use of protection, avoidance of crowds and the non-existence of a cure, keep tourist sites empty-handed, mobile tourists are absent.

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tourist areas, resulting in tourism reaching six feet of separation per visitor, due to the need for distancing<sup>[2]</sup>. Alternatives that in destinations that live only from tourism activity are violated and visits are generated as marketing. They are the creation of documents or educational materials to support parents who must educate their children at home, also involving private companies such as tour operators. This opportunity to restart the tourism industry can lead to the correction of the path in which it was, although it was in constant growth, it was not benefiting and satisfying all those involved.

Tourism and all sub-sectors, will find unlimited opportunities to reuse the language of evolutionary economic geography and an unbeatable opportunity for sustainable tourism, to be more attentive to the environment, less exploitative and greedy, more respectful of the host communities, their cultures and traditions<sup>[24]</sup>. It is imperative to start with the changes and preparations to revive the tourism industry. One of the factors to be taken into account is to understand and comprehend the psychological and emotional dynamics of consumer tourist behavior including the persistent attitude-behavior gap in relation to sustainable tourism based on the psychology of environmental distress<sup>[4]</sup>. The matrix of possible evolutionary pathways by Brouder<sup>[25]</sup> tells us that this transformation can occur as long as there is an institutional innovation, both on the supply and demand side, which will require a change in collective tourism behavior different from the one experienced. It is necessary to work on the mandatory inclusion of local businesses that are the ones who begin the development of new conditions for tourists; tourism is needed in the service to the public and be accountable to them<sup>[26]</sup>. The objective to “integrate biodiversity” establishes a vision of shared responsibility between the public and private sectors for nature conservation in balance with sustainable development. Most research has covered the topic of geoheritage, revealing that geoparks and their landscapes are positioned separately; additionally, there is an academic deficiency about these institutions<sup>[27]</sup> and, also, the lack of a connection with all those involved in the tourism

environment, such as communities with their products and services, private companies and governmental institutions. Adiyia studies governance in value chains and the tourism bubble, concluding that the involvement and interests on the part of the sectors involved must change focus so that the strengths of the destinations can be taken advantage of and different tourism bubbles can be created or modified to integrate both rich and poor sectors for their benefit.

UNESCO Global Geoparks have a comprehensive bottom-up process of all stakeholders (communities, landowners, indigenous people, local organizations, service providers, among others), firmly committing them to support for the evolution of the related areas and, through geotourism, reduce the rate of migration and unemployment of rural areas with opportunity for isolated localities to join the productive part of the Country<sup>[28]</sup>. In Thailand they had the experience that the Pha Chan-Sam Phan Bok geopark, was not successful in its management or exploitation being led only by its Department of Mineral Resources. This confirms us the implication and importance that all the departments involved should have, which will allow achieving the concept of sustainability or sustainability, among these, humanity and society for its history, culture, local lifestyle, historical and cultural tourism, complemented with a quality infrastructure in accommodation, restaurants and professional guides, to leave imprinted the fascination of tourists visiting the areas<sup>[29]</sup>, which currently must be adapted to the so-called new normal due to the effects of COVID-19. Costa and Amrikazemi<sup>[30]</sup> detail findings that can be used in the different geoparks worldwide through strategies for the conservation of natural heritage, involvement in activities to the community and educational activities to meet clear objectives within geotourism and geocognition, maximizing employment sustainability and social innovation.

### **1.3. Imbabura geopark**

“UNESCO Global geoparks are unique and

unified geographic areas where sites and landscapes of international geological significance are managed with a holistic concept of protection, education and sustainable development”<sup>[31]</sup>. Imbabura geopark proposes geoconservation and tourist interpretation respectful of the real life of the native communities as a way to impact and, at the same time, transform the life of the visitor to the province, thus safeguarding that environment. Sustainable tourism, moreover, can be developed by integrating nature-based geological and biological diversity supported by conservation actions<sup>[32]</sup>. Encouraging

and striving for sustainable tourism, through the commitment and participation of all the actors that subsist or depend on this economic activity, entails a structured and very conscious action of the cultural and natural diversity that exists. It also allows perceiving the value of an adequate management and the benefits of safeguarding the integrity, both environmental and socioeconomic<sup>[33]</sup>.

Below is a geographic map of the province of Imbabura where it is possible to visualize the places that make up the geopark (**Figure 1**).



**Figure 1.** Map of Imbabura geopark.

Source: Imbabura geopark project.

“The tourism activity in Imbabura has potential for the enhancement of the tangible and intangible heritage of assets and productive capacities of the province, in addition, it can facilitate the incorporation of new jobs for less favored sectors. However, its development is incipient. Previous research confirms the province’s preference for providing tourism services privately, individually and not linked to the country’s tourism system or conventional distribution channels.

The Universidad Técnica del Norte, as part of its outreach work with society, presents proposals for micro, small and medium enterprises (MSMEs) to provide tourism services, but it has been evident that

there are limited resources to implement them. There is a working group for Imbabura geopark that is formed by a Management Committee made up of delegates from the Prefecture, the Mayor’s Office, the Ministry of Tourism, Zone 1, and academia. In this way strengthening the integration of the actors of the territory in the purpose of functioning as GMU”<sup>[34]</sup>

## 2. Methodology

A qualitative-exploratory methodology was applied, which allowed a study of reality in its natural context, interpreting the phenomena according to the meanings they have for the people

involved; in addition, the use and collection of a wide variety of materials, using observation, texts and images that describe the routine and current situations. Databases such as WOS, SCOPUS and GOOGLE SCHOLAR were used to obtain information on studies related to the constructs, with the objective of knowing and relating the environments, strategies, impacts and behaviors in tourists, in order to identify possible solutions that can be executed for the reactivation of the tourist sites of Imbabura and maintain the UNESCO world geopark designation. An in-depth interview was conducted with the project executor and director of international cooperation on behalf of the provincial government of Imbabura, who is leading the project, and three face-to-face meetings were held with the expert at the local government facilities, under the conditions and consent of the parties. The questions posed were of an open type with the objective of knowing in depth the problems and situation of the geopark, detailing the process followed to obtain this designation, the relationship between the interested parties, the current situation of the areas involved, especially the communities, the situation of the geosites and the strategies applied before the health emergency caused by COVID-19.

### **3. Results**

Positioning is important to know how to generate and direct it to reach tourists, as well as the relationships and participation of all those involved and interested in the industry. Individual management will not be easy to adapt or control. Therefore, it is important to share this responsibility through a partnership that works holistically with the collaboration of all. Timothy<sup>[35]</sup> proposes four types of cooperation to improve stakeholder integration: 1) cooperation between government agencies, reducing their competition and mismatches, 2) cooperation between levels of administration in tourism planning, 3) transboundary cooperation, dealing with potential border resources and environmental, social and

economic imbalances between areas, and 4) public-private sector cooperation, addressing the diversity of tourism-related stakeholders.

With the changes in the behavior of the tourist consumer, it is necessary to transform the strategies for presenting the offer, the media and the experiences, marketing, smart tourism and slow tourism, have a greater opportunity to be exploited by tourist destinations, focusing, in the first instance, on local tourists, to later connect with foreign tourists. For this reactivation, it is essential to develop an efficiently structured marketing strategy with research and current and real knowledge of tourist behavior. Receptive strategies, collective strategy, proactive strategy and partnership strategy are the proposals<sup>[6]</sup>. Also use technology, especially direct communication channels such as social networks and alternative means of interaction such as QR code, 3D, VR, Augmented Reality.

The content, format and strategy will make the difference in the impact generated in the public to motivate their mobilization to destinations. It should be understood that, although the trend today are digital media for telecommuting, study, marketing, training and others, they are also saturated with advertising and promotion of all industries, this tires the user and the impact can be very low and runs the risk of not reaching the right way and the right user. The actions identified as basic and necessary lead to understand the relationship between constructs, where to position a destination place they must be fulfilled in a structured way, thus, in order to reach the ideal tourists through a strategic marketing proposal and the use of digital tools, a tourist destination must be fulfilled in favorable conditions to serve them. The relationship approach can be verified in a future quantitative research that allows us to confirm the following model(**Figure 2**).

The following table shows the conditions in which the geopark is located, specifically in terms of research.



**Figure 2.** Relationship between sustainable tourism/marketing.

Source: research results.

**Table 1.** Strengths and weaknesses

| Strengths                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               | Weaknesses                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Positioning thanks to the appointment by UNESCO as a World geopark.</li> <li>• 67 All-natural geosites.</li> <li>• Early childhood education programs.</li> <li>• Geopark Friends Campaign.</li> <li>• Excellent articulation and relationship with local communities and towns.</li> <li>• Training of local guides in geology.</li> <li>• Biodiversity potential.</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lack of integration and collaboration on the part of those involved (public/private).</li> <li>• Lack of interest on the part of the local population to become involved in geopark-related issues.</li> <li>• There is no record of the number of tourists visiting the geosites established in the geopark.</li> <li>• Lack of education and training of the communities' population.</li> <li>• Lack of marketing strategies.</li> <li>• Lack of creation of local tourism products and geo-products.</li> <li>• Lack of adequate service to tourists</li> </ul> |

Note: Prepared by the authors

**Table 2.** Prioritization Matrix

| Strengths                                                                                   | Site requirements                                   | UNESCO Assessment             | Benefit                                |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------|----------------------------------------|
|                                                                                             | Requirement by the sectors that make up the geopark | UNESCO qualification criteria | Level that contributes to the solution |
| • Positioning thanks to the appointment by UNESCO as a World geopark.                       | P. LOW                                              | P. ALTA                       | P. ALTA                                |
| • 67 All-natural geosites.                                                                  | P. HIGH                                             | P. ALTA                       | P. ALTA                                |
| • Early childhood education programs.                                                       | P. HIGH                                             | P. LOW                        | P. ALTA                                |
| • Geopark Friends Campaign.                                                                 | P. MEDIA                                            | P. MEDIA                      | P. ALTA                                |
| • Excellent articulation and relationship with local communities and towns.                 | P. HIGH                                             | P. ALTA                       | P. ALTA                                |
| • Training of local guides in geology.                                                      | P. HIGH                                             | P. MEDIA                      | P. ALTA                                |
| • Biodiversity potential                                                                    | P. LOW                                              | P. ALTA                       | P. ALTA                                |
| <b>Weakness</b>                                                                             |                                                     |                               |                                        |
| • Lack of integration and collaboration on the part of those involved (public and private). | P. HIGH                                             | P. MEDIA                      | P. ALTA                                |

**Table 2.** (Continued)

|                                                                                                      |         |          |         |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------|----------|---------|
| • Lack of interest on the part of the local population to become involved in geopark-related issues. | P. HIGH | P. ALTA  | P. ALTA |
| • There is no record of the number of tourists visiting the geosites established in the geopark.     | P. HIGH | P. LOW   | P. ALTA |
| • Lack of education and training of the community's population.                                      | P. HIGH | P. MEDIA | P. ALTA |
| • Lack of marketing strategies.                                                                      | P. HIGH | P. ALTA  | P. ALTA |
| • Lack of creation of local tourism products and geo-products.                                       | P. HIGH | P. ALTA  | P. ALTA |
| • Lack of adequate service to tourists                                                               | P. HIGH | P. MEDIA | P. ALTA |

Source: Strength and threats mentioned above Prepared by authors.

The matrix (**Table 1**) indicates the main factors to consider within the Imbabura geoparque, which means that in order to generate a proposal for improvement in the place, it is necessary to start by maintaining or reinforcing the strengths and overcoming the weaknesses, transforming them into new strengths. This matrix is created by crossing information obtained according to the research methodology, especially the observation and the interview, which allowed confronting the in situ observation and the interaction with the communities with what was expressed by the project leader. For the valuation of the factors mentioned above, a prioritization matrix was considered under the analysis of the research team, with valuation criteria such as: needs of the place, UNESCO's valuation, benefit, a weighting, high priority, medium priority, low priority (**Table 2**).

## 4. Discussion

Currently, innovation is in the optimization of resources, meeting the needs of society and the care of the environment. Geoparks have great resource values (geological, geomorphological, hydrographical, edaphic, edaphic, biological diversity, historical structures, culture) included, because of such situation, it has a potential of activities and attractiveness for different segments of tourism consumers, among them, scientists, nature and adventure lovers<sup>[32]</sup>, particular demonstrated by the analysis of the current research, showing that

there is an unparalleled opportunity, being a solid model to reactivate and develop tourism or sustainable tourism in Imbabura geopark.

The integration of all these resources should be the basis for the beginning of planning to produce impact tourism products. This integration must also take place in the organization and interests of the parties involved, where the benefits and participation of the communities are the first priority. This link is very difficult due to the complexity of the tourism system and especially in developing countries, where empowered stakeholders plan the value chain in a vertical manner in which tourists are guided in a spatially and socially limited trajectory in the destination, called "tourist bubble". Integration in Ecuador still needs to be applied in a holistic way, raise awareness among the local population, train people in geosciences to understand the social value of the geopark and of its potential for sustainable development<sup>[27]</sup>.

One example is in the links between communities and tour operators that are almost null; the interest of the tour operator being private, its objective is to maximize its income at the expense of the community and the ecotourism resource<sup>[12]</sup>. With the new normal, one of the proposals in accordance with the new behaviors is "slow tourism", which allows tourists to value more the enjoyment of all the goodness presented by the destination. Lin<sup>[36]</sup> incorporates a model with three central elements: the slow travel mode, the tourist experience and



environmental awareness, seeking a way to market slow travel as a form of sustainable tourism and alternative to conventional leisure. Any strategy or action that can be applied or carried out for the revival of tourism, especially sustainable tourism, will be indispensable the implementation of innovation strategies in marketing, analyzing and investigating the influence of internal and external environments; especially, dynamic capabilities and resource dependence<sup>[6]</sup>, so that they can adapt to any type of environment and develop a competitive advantage<sup>[37]</sup>.

## 5. Conclusions

Regarding the analysis of other geoparks and the methodology applied, we can highlight the bottom-up approach in which local communities are empowered to develop partnerships with the common goal of promoting significant geological processes in the destination sites. By focusing on marketing strategies, trends and possible solutions to the impacts of COVID-19 we can identify and adopt the initiative launched by the global geoparks network and the UNESCO Montevideo office determining geoparks as territories of resilience, since these territories of sustainable development and resilience is fully integrated by institutional, social, economic and environmental dimensions, in addition to considering culture and local identity, education and social cohesion as fundamental keys to resilience.

The development or application of technology, will be important in the strategy, currently the use of different smart devices and the use of internet is total for daily activities and is one of the factors where it should be developed in depth to apply a smart tourism, through the use of platforms and formats such as virtual reality, creating curiosity to tourists to be immersed in reality based on images. Lin et al.<sup>[36]</sup> suggests that if they are not known places choose appropriate topics, if this tool is used as a marketing strategy. The strengthening of links and the new opportunities provided by the pandemic, especially for the development of sustainable tourism, can lead to face an aversion in the fast daily life, with the intention of seeking a purer mind and a simpler life,

co-creating a travel experience with the encountered inhabitants and the known stories of the destination places. The interactions that occur in these experiences with the variety of cultures that exist in Imbabura, in addition to the beauty of its geosites, the place can be appreciated to be able to recommend and reach happiness, a better quality of life and a general sense of well-being<sup>[36]</sup>.

## Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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