



## Wetland tourism in natural protected areas: Santay Island (Ecuador)



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### ABSTRACT

The main objective of this paper is the analysis of the relationship between two important factors in the decision making process of a tourist when choosing a destination: motivation and satisfaction. This research is done in a wetland protected area named Santay Island located in Ecuador. The results show evidence that there are two motivational dimensions to visit the place: an Ecological-Hedonic and a Social-Gastronomic motivation. The first dimension is the most important, which is a very common fact in these types of destinations. Both dimensions discriminate each other in the degree of satisfaction perceived by the visitors. The analysis of the motivations allows identifying three different typologies of visitors that are of great importance to segment the market in order to consolidate Santay Island as a wetland ecotourism destination: The eco-social-hedonic tourist, the eco-hedonic tourist and the social tourist. The conclusions highlight the need of considering the motivational profile of the satisfied tourist as managerial instrument to the community of Santay in order to help them obtain better profits, not only economic, but social and cultural benefits.

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### 1. Introduction

Wetlands are considered as some of the most productive ecosystems of the world because they supply water, food, building materials, transportation, coast protection, and also they bring important opportunities for tourism and recreation (World Tourism Organization–WTO, 2012). The uniqueness of wetland tourism has become a significant component in the tourism industry, particularly in developing countries (Koshkam, Marzuki, & Arzjani, 2014). Wetland areas have a lot of capabilities to attract tourists; this implies the possibility to become in important tourist destinations for travelers due to the delighting resources of these zones. Likewise, the correct management of these areas may generate economic incentives, as well as social and environmental benefits (Bego & Malltezi, 2011). On the other hand, public perception of wetlands and the search for new experiences is boosting the development of these zones as tourist areas. Wetlands become part of the experiences searched for by tourists. In that sense, the relationship between wetlands and tourism was analyzed at the 11th meeting of

the conference of the Ramsar parties in 2012 where the important and closed relationship among wetlands, tourism and recreation was established. It also intended to give answer to three questions: First, which factors influence in the success and sustainability of tourism in wetlands; second, which are the best practices of tourism that preserve wetlands; and third, how the different stakeholders that work in wetlands help its conservation (WTO, 2012).

Many wetland tourism destinations are located in developing countries. This may help maximize and foster a sustainable development of tourism. In this sense, Latin America has experienced an exponential growth in the number of receptive tourism through the years, although this has not necessarily enabled the local community to gain greater economic or social, cultural, and environmental benefits (Novelli & Gebhardt, 2007). In order to prove those benefits, it is necessary to consider 2 aspects: first, the determination of the management to accomplish the tourist planning as well as the degree of involvement of the members of the local community; and second, the tourist profile, the motivations and the number of visitors that arrive to a certain geographic area (Nyaupane, Morais, & Dowler, 2006). Tourism may also have positive effects in preserving local culture (Giampiccoli & Kalis, 2012) and may recover cultural facts that might be already lost (Al-Oun & Al-Homoud, 2008).

In the case of Ecuador, there is some academic research that deals with this economic sector. The most relevant are from Ruiz-Ballesteros

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(2011), Erskine and Meyer (2012), Ruiz-Ballesteros and Brodzio (2013), Everingham (2015) and Gascón (2015).

This paper aims to present the analysis of the situation of wetland tourism that is planned and managed by the local community in a natural protected area, considered a Ramsar Site of International Importance: Santay Island, located in Ecuador (South America), through the discussion of a field study based on a survey conducted throughout the year 2015. This paper purports to determine the motivations and degree of satisfaction of the tourists that visit the isle; and in this manner contribute to cover an area little discussed in the literature in the region. In addition, the material may foster the debate about the tourist structuring in this geographical zone. The rest of this paper is organized as follows: After this introduction, we provide the theoretical framework; the third section presents a description of the wetland; the fourth section introduces the methodology used in the research; a fifth section reports the results of the empirical study and finally, the last section concludes about the objective proposed.

## 2. Background

Tourism can be conceived as a main tool to improve the socio-economic conditions of determined rural communities. The *World Tourism Organization* (2002) program named Sustainable Tourism-Eliminating Poverty (ST-EP) searches, through tourism, for the socio-economic development of depressed geographical areas. It also supports that the reduction of poverty in rural zones can be accomplished by establishing small businesses that are managed by the local community, which can provide goods and services to travelers, and can lay bare their cultural and environmental resources. Moreover, this implies the possibility of generating new jobs, mostly for women and young people, and creating complementary activities, but never substituting the traditional economic sectors of that zone (WTO, 2012). In this sense, wetlands tourism is a good manner to achieve these objectives.

Tourism and wetlands have a complex and deep relationship. Besides the fact that tourism brings development and conservation of the space, it also promotes health, community participation and education. Also, the stakeholders involved in the management of this economic endeavor may include the development of activities such as tourist guidance, restoration, handcrafting or cultural performances (Ling et al., 2013).

There are three different lines of research that expose the relationship between wetlands and tourism (WTO, 2012). The first one is the analysis of wetland tourism management, which examines the maximization of economic benefits that this activity can generate, the reduction of adverse environmental effects or the accommodation systems that tourists may opt in the most sensible and fragile zones. The second is the analysis of the relationship between wetlands and the tourist sector is addressed on the side of tour operators' work, the study of the access to the zone or the creation of additional services for tourists that are provided by the local community. Third is the analysis of the planning and structuring of the policies that rule wetland tourism. According to these three research guidelines, the analysis of the zones where wetland tourism is performed involves different subjects such as ecotourism, wildlife tourism, landscape and place enjoyment and gazing on landscapes (Ryan, Ninov, & Aziz, 2012).

The available literature on wetland tourism attempts to give answer to three questions: Who is visiting wetlands? Why are these people visiting wetlands? When do they tend to visit wetlands? (Do et al., 2015). In this context, the increasing number of tourists visiting wetlands is a consequence of the development of ecotourism; and, for this reason, it is of great need that travelers perceive the authenticity of the zone as a necessary condition to satisfy the tourist expectations about this natural location. (Ryan et al., 2012).

Wetland tourism can bring many benefits that depend on the relationship among the local community, natural resources, cultural conservation and tourism itself (Zhang & Lei, 2012). This presupposes the

conservation and sustainable development of wetlands (Macharia, Thenya, & Ndiritu, 2010), which can be achieved through the settlement of control indicators such as: classification of tree ages, harvesting season, presence of endangered fauna, wetland's proximity to natural land use, habitat area and water quality control. Among of them, it is necessary to determine the interdependence between wetlands conservation, poverty reduction and institutional development (Van der Duim & Henkens, 2007).

The scientific literature glances through different studies conducted in wetlands. Hornoiu et al. (2014) and Do et al. (2015) illustrate the analysis of the demand. There are other contributions about wetland tourism in Iran (Koshkam et al., 2014), Malaysia (Aminu et al., 2013) and Dubai (Ryan et al., 2012).

Wetland tourism can bring positive and negative effects (Van der Duim & Henkens, 2007; WTO, 2012). The positive aspects are the improvements over local, regional and national economies, the support on the local community's socio-cultural heritage conservation and the creation of resources for wetlands' conservation. On the other side of the spectrum, negative impacts of tourism over wetlands may be the building of facilities and the direct outcome resulted from the mere presence of tourists in the wetland ecosystems.

## 3. Description of the geographical area

In recent years, Ecuador is becoming a more appealing destination in Latin America, mainly because of its patrimony richness (with 2 cities recognized as Cultural Patrimony of Humanity by UNESCO-Quito and Cuenca-), its variety of gastronomy, its natural protected areas and its cities with some relevance for business activities (the case of Guayaquil). In the year 2014, Ecuador received 1,557,000 foreigners, mainly coming from Colombia, United States, Peru, Argentina, Chile, Spain and Germany. This implies that tourism represents a great economic engine for this country with a level of contribution to the economy of \$ 1487.20 million in 2014 (Ministry of Tourism of Ecuador, 2015). Tourism is the third contributing sector for the national economy after banana and shrimp, without considering the oiling sector. The evident economic importance of tourism and its development has been reflected in the academic researches performed by Erskine and Meyer (2012), Everingham (2015), Gascón (2015) and Croes and Rivera (2015).

Santay Island is located at the delta of Guayas River. The island is 800 m from the city of Guayaquil. This continental space has 4705 ha of halophytic vegetation, flooding forest and tropical dry forest which provides a habitat to various protected-by-national legislation species of animals and biological diversity. Despite being in a developed area, this terrain provides refuge for a great number of aquatic breeds that migrate to the rivers and the sea. These unique characteristics make this Ramsar Type "I" (Intertidal forested wetlands, including mangroves swamps, etc.) site account the designation of #1041 world's Ramsar of International Importance since year 2000. (See Fig. 1)

Santay Island is the homeland of five species of existing mangroves in Ecuador, which cover almost half of its territory. The fauna of the island has a diverse array of birds, reptiles and mammals. Some birds such as parrots, macaws, turkey vultures, herons, hummingbirds and woodpeckers make part of the fauna. The identified reptiles are iguanas, frogs, toads and turtles. Among the mammals, fishing bats, "jamaicensis" bats, mice and badgers can be found. This wetland guards 60 vegetable species, 12 reptile varieties and 128 kinds of birds, which 12 are registered as vulnerable and threatened in the List of International Trade in Endangered species and the World Conservation Union (Rodríguez et al., 1995).

The designation of the island as a Ramsar Site has incited an Environmental Management Plan dependent on the conservation and sustainability of the location. Thus, policies and objectives were set in order to control the interventions of the community of San Jacinto of Santay over the wetland. In the framework of national and international

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