

Sustainability and competitiveness in nature tourism: analysis of business management at the local level.

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Keywords: Sustainability, competitiveness, nature tourism, management

JEL Codes: Z32 Tourism and Development. L83. Sports, Gambling, Restaurants, Recreation, Tourism. R11 Regional Economic Activity: Growth, Development, Environmental Issues, and Changes.

Nature tourism has positioned itself as one of the most dynamic alternatives within the global tourism industry, stimulated by interest in authentic and responsible experiences in the face of environmental challenges. In this context, the city of Ibagué (Colombia) is emerging as a territory with high potential, thanks to its rich landscape, culture, and ecology, represented in areas such as the Combeima Canyon and a wide range of adventure and ecotourism activities. However, this potential faces challenges associated with poor institutional coordination, weak long-term planning, and the limited capacity for innovation of local businesses, which are mostly micro-enterprises with financial and organizational constraints. These conditions have hindered Ibagué's consolidation as a competitive destination in national and international markets, where demand is increasingly oriented toward personalized, sustainable, and high-quality experiences.

A special factor that has come to the fore in recent decades is environmental sustainability. The World Tourism Organization, now called UNWTO, affirms that as society advances, tourism, along with other sectors, must evolve to promote global prosperity as a means of improving quality of life, preserving the environment, promoting economic growth, and fostering world peace. Therefore, it is leading sustainable change as a crucial factor for numerous economies (ONU, Turismo 2024). This has enabled a new paradigm for tourist destinations. The natural environment is a fundamental component of the tourism product and is present in destinations around the world. Representations or images of nature can significantly influence tourists' perceptions and travel decisions. In addition, interaction with the natural environment provides opportunities for leisure and enjoyment, which promotes visitor satisfaction and loyalty (Spalding et al., 2023). Indeed, nature tourism can provide a structured framework that facilitates opportunities for well-being. The design of well-structured tourism packages that combine contact and connection with nature, transformative and self-development effects, as well as strategies to foster an ongoing relationship with the natural environment, can be fundamental to the sustainable well-being of people and the planet (Clissold et al., 2022).

The purpose of this research project is to determine the impact of tourism management on the competitiveness of companies offering nature tourism at the local level, with special focus on the identification and characterization of tourism management and competitiveness factors found in theory and their corresponding comparison with the management practices of the organizations under study. Thus, the study addresses the following sub questions: What management is carried out in terms of processes, practices, and strategies by companies providing nature tourism services? What factors determine the competitiveness of the companies under study? How does tourism management affect the competitiveness of companies providing nature-based tourism services? This study analyzes the relationship between sustainability, business management, and competitiveness in organizations dedicated to nature tourism in Ibagué (Colombia).

This research from a theoretical and methodological point of view takes into account the guidelines established in the Ritchie & Crouch (1999) model. In short, the model provides the possibility of analyzing the formalized offer of nature tourism destinations at the local level, its marketing and promotion channels, the characterization of the real demand for certified nature tourism destinations, and last but not least, the identification and analysis of strategies aimed at promoting the competitive improvement of the destination's attractions, resources, and supporting factors. The tourism sector is one of those with the greatest environmental, sociocultural, and economic impact on the territory where it operates. These effects can be both positive and negative and can significantly influence the transformation of a destination. This makes the assessment of competitiveness factors particularly complex. The study incorporates Ritchie & Crouch's destination management model as a reference, which integrates key factors such as the strategic use of resources, marketing, information management, and service quality. It is argued that the competitiveness of a tourism company does not depend exclusively on internal factors over which it has control, but is also influenced by the actors and forces characteristic of both its industry and the general environment at the local-regional, national, and international levels.

From a methodological point of view, based on a descriptive-correlational approach, interviews were conducted with institutional actors and development plans and public policies were reviewed in order to identify strengths, weaknesses, and opportunities in the sector. The study adopts a quantitative approach using stratified sampling with fixed proportions from a population of 137 nature tourism service providers, resulting in a sample of 81. It evaluates destination management factors—resource management and organization, marketing, and information systems and services—based on Ritchie and Crouch (1999), which have not been academically examined for Tolima's tourism sector. These were considered because they constitute the pillars on which tourism in a given destination can be based, as they serve as raw materials or inputs for destination management. They are linked to the way the destination and the decision-making processes regarding marketing and competitive positioning, human resources and training, research and development, capital raising and investment, among others are organized. As the main source of information, a survey was designed for nature tourism service providers and tourists who use these services. There were included in the study five types of nature tourism service providers through a stratified sample: Accommodation establishments (27), travel agencies (37), Food service establishment and similar (2), tour guide (9) and Automotive land transport company (6). To

supplement the quantitative information, interviews were conducted with experts and key players in the region's tourism sector.

According to the research findings in the nature tourism sector, microenterprises were found to be the predominant organizational structure, with around 75% of respondents belonging to this segment. About 45% of businesses have been operating for between 2 and 7 years, which indicates that many of them are vulnerable to various internal and external factors. There is a predominance of domestic tourists, averaging 74% of visitors, compared to foreign visitors averaging 26%. The most representative providers of nature tourism in Ibagué belong to the rural accommodation (farms) category, which also offers restaurant services, followed by travel agencies. The main distinctive activities in nature tourism are hiking and bird watching; among travel agencies, adventure tourism stands out. It was established that the tourism management practices of tourism service providers in the city of Ibagué directly impact the destination's business competitiveness. This was demonstrated using the partial least squares (PLS) model (Vincenzo et al., 2012), where the variable P29.1, "Tourism Promotion," influenced all 26 variables in the study. This highlights the need to jointly strengthen actions to raise the profile of Ibagué as a tourist destination at the regional, national, and international levels through both digital and traditional marketing and sales channels. These are key aspects of tourism promotion. Finally, it is important to point out that "Tourism Promotion (international, national, and regional)," was selected as the dependent attribute. This variable is considered in the findings of this research to be a fundamental mechanism for the development of nature tourism management in the city of Ibagué. The other 26 items related to destination tourism management and competitiveness which were part of the different dimensions of the questionnaire, were selected as independent variables.

Finally, it is concluded that there is a lack of knowledge about the actions carried out in the sector and weak coordination between public and private actors. Therefore, it is necessary to strengthen the destination in a comprehensive manner, since both cultural and nature tourism products are essential and complementary to positioning Ibagué as a tourist destination (Orozco, González, & Blandón, 2025). Improving Ibagué's competitiveness as a tourist destination requires the development of a strategic plan with different components, such as resource management, which takes into account highly relevant factors such as tourism planning and product development, marketing and promotion, organization, information, services, and infrastructure. This depends entirely on the coordination of public and private actors and their ability to successfully implement the strategic plan and lead Ibagué to establish itself as a benchmark for nature tourism in Colombia.

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