

EXPLORING THE SATISFACTION OF ECOTOURISM IN PROTECTED NATURAL AREAS

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Abstract: Enhancing the tourists' visit to protected areas is vital for destinations that have natural and cultural wealth. The objective of this study is to analyze the aspects of satisfaction with ecotourism in three important protected areas. The empirical study was conducted in situ at Morro Mangroves Wildlife Refuge, Santay Island National Recreation Area and Samanes National Recreation Area in Ecuador. Hence, with the use of quantitative correlational techniques, 382 questionnaires were analyzed. Findings reveal high satisfaction and loyalty in ecotourism. The most valued factors in the satisfaction were the tranquility, conservation of the natural and monumental heritage, the humane treatment received and the access to the infrastructure. In ecotourism, general satisfaction influences the intentions of returning, recommending and expressing positive things about the destination. These findings will contribute to the development of efficient marketing plans in destinations related to ecotourism.

Key words: Ecotourism, satisfaction, loyalty, demand, Ecuador

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INTRODUCTION

Ecotourists, on average, show high satisfaction with their ecotourism experiences (Buckley, 2009; Butler & Boyd, 2000; Lawton, 2001; Weaver, 2008). Also, managers increasingly realize the economic importance of meeting the needs of their visitors and providing them with memorable experiences (Fletcher & Fletcher, 2003). In this sense, visitor satisfaction is a vital aspect of the marketing and management practices of national

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parks (Hwang et al., 2005; Ramkissoon et al., 2013). Most studies of protected areas evaluate some necessary attributes of the site, such as boats or trails, identifying a similar trend of high satisfaction (Fletcher & Fletcher, 2003). Likewise, finding megafaunas and impressive ecosystems are key expressive attributes of satisfaction in protected areas (Curtin, 2003; Hvenegaard, 2002). Furthermore, understanding the concept/perception of satisfaction allows managers to provide facilities and services that match the expectations of visitors (Borrie & Birzell, 2001; Tonge & Moore, 2007). Similarly, understanding the expectations and satisfaction of visitors helps to plan the allocation of resources and provision of services (Bushell & Griffin, 2006). It also allows visitors to obtain the natural and relaxation benefits they expect (Crilley et al., 2012). Therefore, the efficient management of visitor satisfaction is often a significant goal that park managers seek to achieve (Tonge & Moore, 2007). Additionally, in tourism marketing, visitor satisfaction and behavioral intentions remain an essential area of research (Prayag et al., 2013). However, research in destinations related to nature and protected areas have been scarce in the scientific literature (Castellanos-Verdugo et al., 2016).

In this framework, the three protected areas are located in Guayas province in Ecuador, where ecotourism is a relevant modality due to the diversity of species of flora and fauna in the areas that belong to the National System of Protected Areas of Ecuador (SNAP). These were Morro Mangroves Wildlife Refuge, Santay Island National Recreation Area and Samanes National Recreation. This manuscript aims to analyze satisfaction in ecotourism and provide information to tourism marketers. Thus, it contributes to the planning of efficient marketing strategies. This paper is divided into six sections. The first section contains the introduction. The second section describes the literature. The third section displays the study area. The methodology appears in the fourth section. The fifth section shows the results. The manuscript ends with a sixth section with the discussion, conclusions, limitations and future lines of research.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Satisfaction is an emotional response derived from a consumer experience (Spreng et al., 1996). Similarly, satisfaction is as a post-consumer assessment that determines whether it meets or exceeds the expectations of tourists (Engel et al., 1993). Another definition for satisfaction is the cognitive-affective state derived from a consumer experience (Bosque & Martin, 2008). Tourist satisfaction refers to the positive feeling or pleasure obtained after experiencing or consuming any tourist product (Beard & Ragheb, 1980). Furthermore, satisfaction is a psychological aspect that derives from visiting an environment and an emotional state of mind after exposure to an opportunity (Howat & Crilley 2007; Zabkar et al., 2010). In addition, the satisfaction of tourists who visit a national park or a protected area can be measured indirectly through the stimuli that tourists receive from that area. Moreover, satisfaction results from the experiences of visitors who are in contact with the natural characteristics and identity of a protected area (Chhetri et al., 2004; Bigné et al., 2005). Several researchers have recognized that satisfaction depends on the products, prices, quality of the services provided and the friendly attitude of the local inhabitants (Qu & Li, 1997; Ryan, 1999; Stevens, 1992).

Some researchers have found that satisfaction is a general evaluation after purchase (Devesa et al., 2010; Sun et al., 2013; Yoon et al., 2010), which increases the likelihood that tourists will return to visit and recommend the destination to friends and family (Prayag & Ryan, 2012). Furthermore, satisfaction comprises the choice of destination, the consumption of products and services, and the decision to return (Prayag & Ryan, 2012; Žabkar et al., 2010). Hence, satisfaction is fundamental for tourism given the strong relationship between satisfaction and future customer behavior. This means that a satisfied consumer

will repeat the visit and communicate the positive experiences to others (Emir & Kozak, 2011). Therefore, satisfaction is conducive to repeat visits (Seetanah et al., 2020; Tonge et al., 2011; Zhang et al., 2018), achieve visitor loyalty (Abd Razaka et al., 2020; Chen & Tsai, 2007), and promote frequent visits (Sivalioğlu & Berköz, 2012).

Several studies reveal that satisfaction has a positive influence on post-purchase behavior (Abd Razaka et al., 2020; Cronin & Taylor, 1992; Fornell, 1992; Keaveney, 1995). In addition, some studies have shown that repeated visits to a tourist destination are related to higher levels of visitor satisfaction because it motivates people to return to the same destination again (Carvache-Franco et al., 2019; Rittichainuwat et al., 2002; Tian-Cole et al., 2002; Yuksel, 2001). In addition, other studies have found an impact between general satisfaction and satisfaction with different aspects with the intentions to return and recommend (Alegre & Cladera, 2006; Carvache-Franco et al., 2020; Um et al., 2006). For Carvache-Franco et al. (2020), there is a significant and positive correlation between general satisfaction with the intentions to return and recommend an ecotourism destination. Regarding ecotourism satisfaction studies, the study by Tsiotsou & Vasioti (2006) on tourism services in Greece identified several factors related to the satisfaction that include "staff satisfaction," "satisfaction with food," "satisfaction with the excursion," "satisfaction with socialization," and "satisfaction with the landscape." Furthermore, Meng et al. (2008) in their study on the satisfaction of nature-based tourist complexes in Virginia, identified some satisfaction factors, among them: friendly service/quality, outdoor activities, accommodation and natural landscapes.

In addition, Lee (2015) found the following satisfaction factors: information services, recreational facilities, and safety and sustainability. Similarly, Dolnicar et al. (2015) mentions that it is necessary to identify which attributes or factors of the service are more important and should improve to increase satisfaction and which attributes are not as important or have little influence on customer satisfaction. On the other hand, Adam et al. (2019) investigated the satisfaction and motivation of ecotourists visiting the Kakum National Park, and found the following factors: "educational satisfaction," "social satisfaction," "satisfaction with sanitation," and "satisfaction with relaxation". Moreover, representative examples in ecotourism include a high satisfaction rate of 66% in the Pirongia Forest Park of New Zealand (Pan & Ryan, 2007) and a 60% satisfaction level in the Amboseli National Park of Kenya (Okello et al., 2008). For Abd Razaka et al. (2020) understanding the factors of tourist satisfaction leads to long-term relationships with customers and positively contributes to business growth.

STUDY AREA

In this section, the authors describe the protected areas with ecotourism potential: Morro Mangroves Wildlife Refuge, Santay Island National Recreation Area and Samanes National Recreation Area. These sites are located in Ecuador.

Santay Island National Recreation

It is located on the Guayas River, between the cities of Guayaquil and Duran in the Guayas Province. This protected area has international recognition as a wetland.

It is a Ramsar site since 2000. This declaration has made this site of global interest and a priority for nature conservation. Waterfalls visit this wetland for resting, sheltering and nesting. Moreover, the area houses 60 plant species, 12 reptile varieties and 128 types of birds, of which 12 are listed. This site is also notorious for its mangroves and, some trees protect unique mammals. Flora and fauna are the main ecotourism attractions, and tourists admire mangrove marine birds. Another attraction of the island is the Ecovillage, where visitors can observe crocodiles and observe the typical homes of the community of this site (Figure 1).

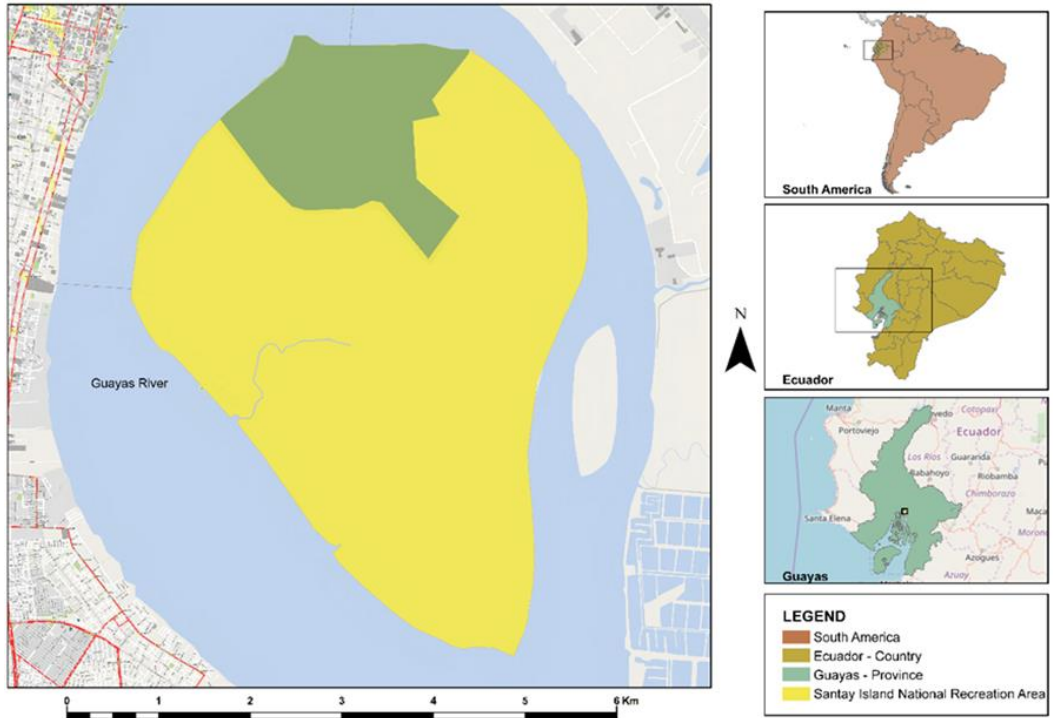


Figure 1. Geographical location of the Santay Island National Recreation

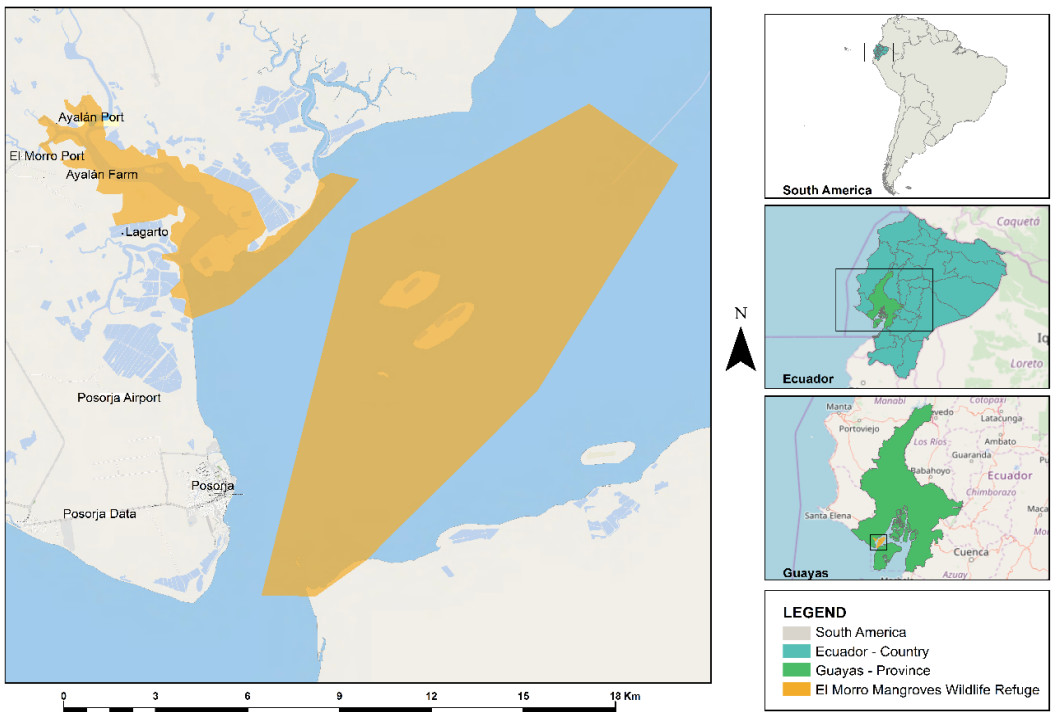


Figure 2. Geographical location of the Morro Mangroves Wildlife Refuge

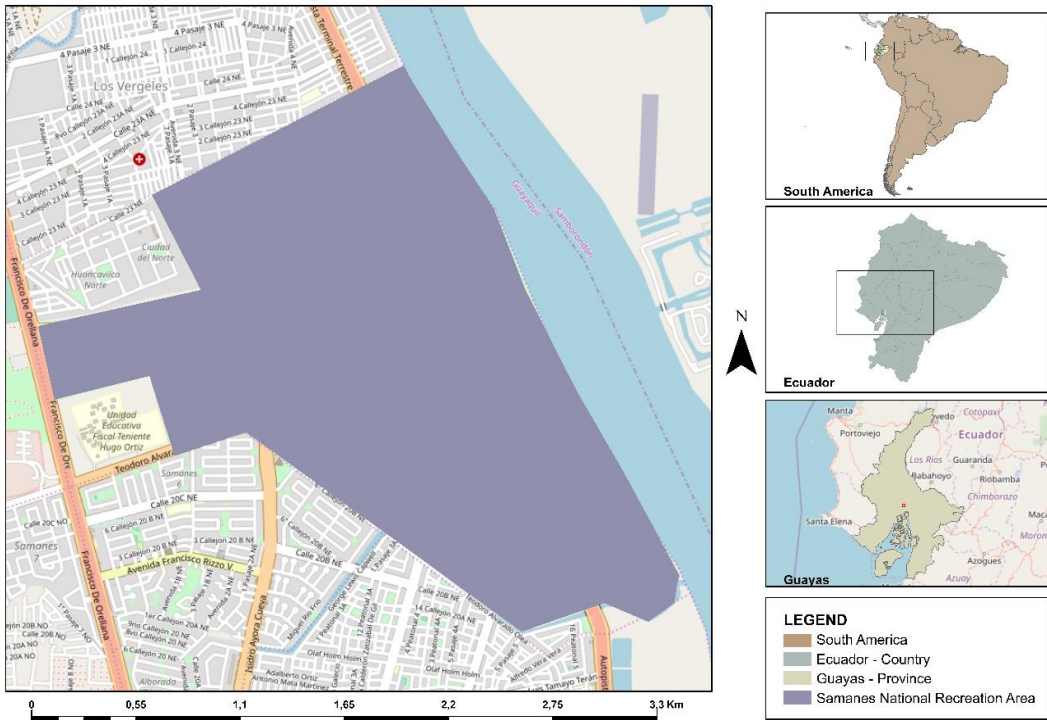


Figure 3. Geographical location of the Samanes National Recreation Area

Morro Mangroves Wildlife Refuge

It is located in the north of the Gulf of Guayaquil in Ecuador. A large population of dolphins inhabits the Morro Canal, and a frigate colony occupies Manglecito Island. The frigate colony contains approximately 6,000 individuals, which makes this site one of the highest concentrations of these birds in the world. There are four types of mangroves on this site: red, white, black and button. On its mainland, the refuge protects a small parcel of dry forest. More than 80 species live on this site, and seabirds are the most abundant in the refuge. Among the main attractions, visitors can observe dolphins, frigates, pelicans, blue-footed boobies, pink spoonbills, white ibis and cormorants. There are also shelters and nesting sites for frigates, pelicans and blue-footed boobies on Manglecito Island (Figure 2).

Samanes National Recreation Area

It is located in the north of Guayaquil, Ecuador. Remains of dry coastal forest and alluvial plains, which preserve the characteristics of the Guayas river basin, endure this area. The coastal dry forest is particularly frequent in the highest areas, where tourists can see trees such as Kapok, *Vytex cymosa*, Bototillo, Guasmo and even Guayacan, as well as the tree that gives the area its name, the Rain tree. The Samanes National Recreation Area is also home to many species of waterfowl such as cormorants, whistling ducks, coots and herons. On this site, visitors can enjoy several sports and leisure facilities (Figure 3).

METHODOLOGY

The questionnaire used in this study was adapted from previous studies on ecotourism satisfaction (Adam et al., 2019; Devesa et al., 2010; Lee, 2015; Meng et al., 2008; Tsiotsou & Vasioti, 2006). The instrument contained two sections. In the first section, the researchers collected sociodemographic information. The second section

dealt with the satisfaction and intentions of returning, recommending and making positive commentaries about the destination. Several types of questions, such as closed and five-point Likert scale were used to obtain reliable results. The satisfaction scale contained 13 items with a Likert scale of five points, corresponding to the different aspects of the destination. The Cronbach Alpha coefficient for the final scale resulted in a robust value of 0.89 (close to 1). Surveys were conducted in situ during January and July 2018 in the three protected areas. The authors trained the interviewers who completed the surveys when the tourists did recreational or leisure activities. The tourists surveyed were Ecuadorian adults and foreigners visiting one of the protected areas studied. The visitors completed the surveys while they rested after their ecotourism activities. The surveys were anonymous, and the interviewers assisted the visitors whenever they had questions. The interviewers collected a total of 382 valid questionnaires, and the infinite population was used. The researchers considered the sample performed the study with a margin of error of +/- 5%, a confidence level of 95% and variability of 50%. The Spearman correlation coefficient was used to know the significant relationships between the different variables. The statistical data was collected, organized, tabulated and analyzed through the SPSS program, version 22.

RESULTS

The sample consisted of 90.8% national tourists and 9.2% foreign tourists. Of the study population, 42.7% were men and 57.3% were women. 61.3% were in the age group between 20 and 29 years old, and 19.4% were in the group of 30 to 39 years old. The vast majority of tourists had university education at 77.0%. From the tourists who visited the protected areas, 49% did so in the company of their family and 35.1% with friends. The visitors mostly arrived in groups of 3 to 5 people (58.1%), followed by those who arrived with less than three people (26.70%).

General satisfaction and loyalty

General satisfaction and loyalty was measured with a 5 point Likert scale (one means little, and five means a lot), the general satisfaction of the experience of visiting the destination in ecotourism had an average of 4.22. The response suggests the high potential of the resources in these three protected areas. Regarding aspects of future behavior, the intention to return to the destination obtained an average of 4.3, and the intention to recommend the protected area obtained an average of 4.34. The variable "when I speak of these protected areas I mention positive things" obtained an average from 4.33. Hence, findings show the high loyalty of visitors and the potential of ecotourism as a modality.

Table 1. Satisfaction and loyalty

Variable	N	Min.	Max.	Mean
Satisfaction				
General satisfaction	382	1	5	4.22
Loyalty				
I intend to return to these protected areas	382	1	5	4.30
I have the intention to recommend these protected areas	382	2	5	4.34
When I talk about these protected areas, I will give positive comments	382	2	5	4.33

Relationship among general satisfaction and the intentions to return, recommend and say positive things

Through a Spearman correlation, the relationship among general satisfaction with intentions to return, recommend and say positive things about the ecotourism destiny has been analyzed. As shown in Table 2, overall satisfaction presented a significant and

positive correlation with the intentions of returning, recommending and saying positive things about the destination. Therefore, by improving the level of general satisfaction of tourists, the intentions to return, recommend and say positive things about the ecotourism destination will increase. Hence, to increase the level of general satisfaction of tourists, there must be an analysis of the relationship between general satisfaction with satisfaction in the different aspects of the service. In addition, the aspects of the service that have the most significant influence on the overall satisfaction should be known.

Table 2. General satisfaction with the intentions to return, recommend and say positive things

Variable	Correlation
I intend to return to these protected areas	0.552**
I have the intention to recommend these protected areas	0.606**
When I talk about these protected areas, I will give positive comments	0.579**

**Significance 1%

The satisfaction with the appearance of the site

The satisfaction in protected areas was measured with a 5 point Likert scale (one means little and five means a lot). Findings reveal that the most valued aspects were: tranquility with an average of 4.19, followed by conservation of the natural heritage and monumental with 4.09, the human treatment received with 4.04 and access to infrastructure with 3.96. These results indicate that the natural and cultural resources of the destination are well-preserved. Moreover, there is vast tranquility forecreation in natural areas, and there is adequate access to infrastructure (Table 3)

Tables 3. The satisfaction with the appearance of the site

Variable	N	Min.	Max.	Mean	Stand. Dev.
Calmness	382	1	5	4.19	0.886
Conservation of natural and cultural heritage	382	1	5	4.09	0.893
How locals treat tourists	382	1	5	4.04	0.928
Accessibility and infrastructure	382	1	5	3.96	1.013
Traffic signs	382	1	5	3.92	1.049
Parking	382	1	5	3.92	1.031
Prices	382	1	5	3.89	0.991
Tourist information and signs	382	1	5	3.87	1.013
Sport facilities	382	1	5	3.85	1.159
Gastronomy	382	1	5	3.79	1.029
Restaurant facilities/equipment	382	1	5	3.74	1.013
Complimentary leisure activities (festivals, shows)	382	1	5	3.41	1.264
Guided tours	382	1	5	3.21	1.725

Relationship of different aspects of satisfaction with general satisfaction

The relationship between the different aspects of satisfaction and general satisfaction was analyzed with the Spearman correlation coefficient. The results are shown in Table 4. According to Table 4, all the satisfaction aspect variables presented a significant and positive correlation with the overall satisfaction.

Therefore, the variables that had a more significant influence on the overall satisfaction are the equipment and facilities of the restaurants, gastronomic quality, prices and local's behavior with tourists. These were the service variables that should be improved to increase the level of overall satisfaction in this destination.

Relationship of satisfaction by aspect with the intention to return to the destination

Table 4. Different aspects of satisfaction related to general satisfaction

Variable	Correlation
Restaurant facilities/equipment	0.464**
Gastronomy	0.439**
Prices	0.431**
How locals treat tourists	0.410**
Parking	0.401**
Accessibility and infrastructure	0.400**
Tourist information and signs	0.397**
Conservation of natural and cultural heritage	0.395**
Calmness	0.378**
Sport facilities	0.367**
Traffic signs	0.361**
Complimentary leisure activities (festivals, shows)	0.352**
Guided tours	0.351**

**Significance 1%

The relationship of satisfaction by aspect with the intention of returning to the destination was analyzed with the Spearman correlation coefficient. The results are shown in Table 5.

Table 5. Satisfaction by aspect with intentions to return to the destination

Variable	Correlation
Accessibility and infrastructure	0.432**
Prices	0.429**
Parking	0.418**
Traffic signs	0.401**
Conservation of natural and cultural heritage	0.384**
Calmness	0.368**
Restaurant facilities/equipment	0.360**
Sport facilities	0.349**
How locals treat tourists	0.341**
Gastronomy	0.340**
Tourist information and signs	0.338**
Guided tours	0.236**
Complimentary leisure activities (festivals, shows)	0.296**

**Significance 1%

According to Table 5, all the satisfaction aspect variables, except for guided visits, presented a significant and positive correlation with the intentions of returning to the destination. Thus, the variables that had more considerable influence on the intentions of returning to the destination were: access to infrastructure, prices, parking, and signaling on roads. These were the service variables that could be improved to increase the level of intention to return to this destination.

Relationship of satisfaction by aspects and the intentions to recommend the destination

The relationship of satisfaction by aspect and the intention of recommending the destination was analyzed with the Spearman correlation coefficient. The results are shown in Table 6. According to Table 6, all the satisfaction aspect variables present a significant and positive correlation with the intention of recommending a destination. In this sense, the variables that had a more significant influence on the intentions of recommending the destination were: Prices, parking, human treatment received and

access to infrastructure. The findings show that these were the service variables that should be improved to increase the level of intentions to recommend the destination.

Table 6. Satisfaction by aspect and the intention to recommend the destination

Variable	Correlation
Prices	0.445**
Parking	0.430**
How locals treat tourists	0.424**
Accessibility and infrastructure	0.423**
Calmness	0.421**
Traffic signs	0.415**
Conservation of natural and cultural heritage	0.385**
Restaurant facilities/equipment	0.381**
Tourist information and signs	0.378**
Gastronomy	0.361**
Complimentary leisure activities (festivals, shows)	0.325**
Guided tours	0.317**
Sport facilities	0.286**

**Significance 1%

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The findings show that overall satisfaction was high, along with the intention to return, recommend and say positive things. The most valued factors in the satisfaction by aspect were tranquility, conservation of the natural and monumental patrimony, the humane treatment received and access to the infrastructure. Therefore, in ecotourism, general satisfaction influences the intention of returning to the destination, similar results were found in other studies (Abd Razaka et al., 2020; Carvache-Franco et al., 2020; Seetanah et al., 2020; Zhang et al., 2018). Moreover, satisfaction influences the intentions of recommending a destination. Similar findings were presented in other studies (Carvache-Franco et al., 2020; Prayag & Ryan, 2012). Additionally, satisfaction influences the intention of saying positive things about the destination. Analogous results were identified in studies (Carvache-Franco et al., 2020; Emir & Kozak, 2011).

Furthermore, all the variables of satisfaction by appearance influenced general satisfaction. Also, all the variables of satisfaction by aspect influenced the intention of returning to the destination and the intention of recommending the destination. Similar results were observed in other studies (Alegre & Cladera, 2006; Carvache-Franco et al., 2020; Um et al., 2006). In ecotourism, general satisfaction is more influenced by the equipment and facilities of the restaurants, gastronomic quality, prices and the humane treatment received. While the intention to return to the destination is affected by access to infrastructure, prices, parking and signaling on roads. On the other hand, the intention of recommending the destination is more influenced by prices, parking, the humane treatment received and the access to the infrastructure. Therefore, to improve the service, it is necessary to increase the level of general satisfaction of tourists.

Thus, the intention to return and recommend a destination increases. Above all, improving prices, access to infrastructure, and treatment received will increase overall satisfaction and future visits to ecotourism destinations. Among the practical implications, companies related to ecotourism should plan strategies to improve the level of satisfaction in the different aspects of the service. In this way, they should be able to improve the level of general satisfaction of tourists, increase future visits of tourists, and enhance the recommendation of the destination. Thus, the companies contribute to the development of the destination and the community. Finally, the main

limitation of the present study was the temporality of the information gathering because the demand can vary depending on the tourist season. A future line of research is the relationship between satisfaction and demand segments.

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