

## Potential for adventure sports tourism in biodiversity zones in Ecuador

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**Abstract:** Adventure sports tourism in Ecuador's highly biodiverse areas has become a key option for promoting sustainable economic, social, and environmental development. This study aimed to evaluate the potential of activities such as hiking, rafting, mountain biking, and birdwatching in the country's megadiverse regions, including the Amazon, the Andes, the coast, and the Galapagos Islands. A mixed-method approach was used, combining document analysis with surveys of 250 tourists, both domestic and international, in addition to conducting semi-structured interviews with 30 local stakeholders involved in the tourism and environmental sectors. The results highlighted strengths such as natural wealth, ecosystem diversity, and continuous improvement in road infrastructure, along with challenges such as limited international promotion and a lack of training in host communities. It was also found that adventure tourism has generated sustainable income, fostered ecosystem conservation, and contributed to local well-being in places such as Napo, Chimborazo, and Quito. In conclusion, Ecuador has great potential to become a leading destination for adventure sports tourism, provided comprehensive strategies are implemented to strengthen promotion, optimize the training of local stakeholders, and minimize environmental impacts, aligning with the principles of national sustainable development.

**Keywords:** Adventure tourism, biodiversity, sustainability, ecotourism, local communities, conservation

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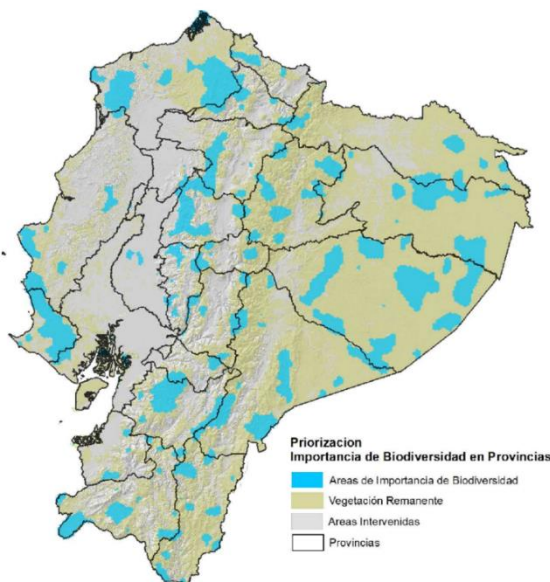
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**Introduction**

Ecuador, recognized as one of the 17 megadiverse countries in the world, harbors unique natural wealth distributed across four geographical regions: the Amazon, the Andes, the Coast, and the Galapagos Islands. This biodiversity, combined with a growing global demand for authentic and sustainable tourism experiences, positions the country as an ideal destination for adventure sports tourism. The ecosystems of this country include tropical jungles, Andean páramos, coastal forests, and island archipelagos, granting it unique advantages for developing tourism related to sports, nature, and adventure (Vega Falcón et al., 2019; Toledo Villacís et al., 2021).

This rich diversity, along with the growing global demand for authentic and sustainable tourism experiences, places the country in an excellent position as a destination for adventure and sports tourism, as shown in Figure 1, the biodiversity zones by province are distributed throughout the continental area (Mangrove Alliance, 2016).



Adventure tourism, defined as the combination of physical activities in natural environments with a touch of exploration, a bit of controlled risk, and deep contact with nature, has seen notable growth in recent decades. This boom has been driven by a new type of traveler who seeks not only personal well-being but also a

deeper connection with the environment (Carvache-Franco et al., 2022; Sarmiento et al., 2024). In Ecuador, this type of tourism is integrated into a development agenda that seeks to balance economic, social, and environmental objectives, while creating opportunities for local communities and fostering the conservation of vulnerable ecosystems (Mestanza-Ramón & Jiménez-Caballero, 2021), because with its diversity of landscapes it offers opportunities to practice rafting in the Amazonian rivers, mountain biking in the Andean páramos, kayaking in the lakes of the Sierra, or birdwatching in the tropical forests, highlighting the versatility of the territory for this type of activity. According to the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO, 2023), this segment has shown constant growth in Latin America, boosting local economies and generating employment both directly and indirectly.

However, the consolidation of this sector faces several structural challenges. Research in Ecuador has revealed problems such as the lack of adequate infrastructure for adventure sports, limited international promotion, scarcity of local technical training, and a nature tourism governance that is quite dispersed (Castro Salcedo & Calle Lituma, 2023; Aldáz Hernández et al., 2024). Despite everything, the Ministry of Tourism points out that the country has approved 21 ways to practice risk sports (Primicias, 2023). Furthermore, the presence of protected areas, covering almost one-fifth of the country, and the effort of communities to promote active and ecological tourism, open the possibility of merging tourism, sport, and environmental care (Plua-Parrales, n.d.; Martínez, 2023).

Faced with this panorama, it is important to conduct a comprehensive study that carefully examines the unique characteristics of adventure and sports tourism in places with rich biodiversity, like Ecuador. This means we must analyze the opportunities, challenges, and most effective strategies to promote responsible growth that takes into account both environmental and social development. Therefore, this study will focus on evaluating the potential of adventure and sports tourism in Ecuador's biodiversity areas, highlighting opportunities, barriers, and key strategies for its sustainable development.

By applying this strategy, in addition to boosting financial growth, it also promotes national culture and the participation of community inhabitants, as seen in the

group in Trigoloma (Chimborazo), who aspire to develop offerings based on tourism offerings in the sports and recreational sphere (Martínez, 2023).

**Materials and Methods**

The study adopted a mixed approach, combining both quantitative and qualitative methods, to comprehensively assess the potential of adventure sports tourism in Ecuador's biodiversity areas. This strategy allowed capturing both the perceptions of tourists about sports activities and the experiences and strategies of local actors involved in the management of this type of tourism (Gibson, 2018; Weed, 2020). The methodological components are detailed below:

**Bibliographic Review:**

Scientific articles, government reports, tourism development plans, and academic publications published between 2018 and 2025 were compiled and analyzed, focusing on sports tourism, recreational sports, sustainability, and community development.

Sources were obtained from databases such as Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar, and national repositories such as those of the Ministry of Tourism of Ecuador and the Ministry of Sport.

Studies related to adventure tourism, biodiversity, sustainability, and community development were prioritized, with a focus on the Ecuadorian context.

Content analysis was used to identify trends, challenges, and opportunities, organizing the information into thematic categories.

**Tourist Surveys:**

A structured questionnaire with 20 questions was designed, divided into three sections: demographic data, tourist preferences and motivations related to sports and adventure activities, and perceptions about sustainability, safety, and sports experience.

250 face-to-face and online surveys were administered to national (60%) and international

(40%) tourists in three key destinations: Tena (Amazon), Baños de Agua Santa (Andes), and Mindo (Chocó Andino).

The destinations were selected for their relevance in adventure sports tourism and their location in high biodiversity areas.

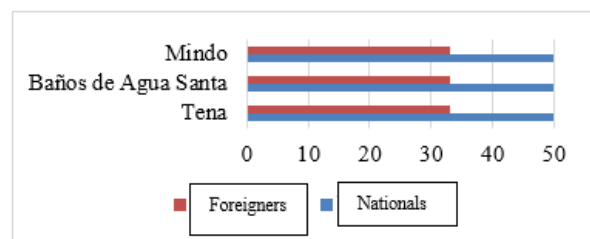
The surveys were conducted between June and September 2024, with non-probabilistic convenience sampling.

The reliability of the instrument was verified with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.85.

Assuming an equal distribution of the 250 surveys among the three destinations (250/3 approx. 83 surveys per destination), it is calculated: nationals 83 x 0.6 = 50 (approx.) and international: 83 x 0.4 = 33 (approx.), which can be represented in the following Figure 2:

**Figure 1**

*Distribution of national and international tourists by destination*



**Semi-structured Interviews:**

20 interviews were conducted with key actors, including tourism operators (8), local guides (7), and representatives of indigenous communities (5) in the studied regions.

The interviews explored topics such as socioeconomic impact, operational challenges, community participation, and conservation strategies.

Each interview lasted an average of 45 minutes and was conducted in Spanish, with translation into Kichwa in two cases to ensure inclusion.

The interviews were recorded with prior consent and transcribed for analysis.

This yielded the following result represented in a bar chart:

**Figure 2***Number of interviews***Data Analysis:**

Quantitative data from the surveys were processed with SPSS v.26 software, generating descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages) and bivariate analyses to identify correlations between variables such as age, nationality, and tourist preferences.

Qualitative data from the interviews were analyzed with ATLAS.ti v.9 software, using thematic coding to identify patterns and emerging categories.

The results of both approaches were triangulated to ensure the robustness of the conclusions.

**Study Areas:**

Three high biodiversity regions were selected: the Sumaco Biosphere Reserve (Amazon), Cajas National Park (Andes), and the Chocó Andino Biosphere Reserve.

These areas were chosen for their ecological richness, their potential for adventure activities, and their relevance in national sustainable tourism policies.

The methodological design allowed for a holistic assessment, integrating perspectives from multiple actors and updated data, with a focus on sustainability and community participation.

**Results**

The findings are organized into three categories: strengths, challenges, and opportunities, based on the triangulation of quantitative and qualitative data.

**Strengths**

- **Wealth of biodiversity and sports variety:** Ecuador concentrates a high level of biodiversity and diverse

ecosystems that allow the practice of multiple adventure sports, approximately 60-70% of global biodiversity in a territory of 283,561 km<sup>2</sup>, with ecosystems ranging from tropical jungles to Andean páramos. This allows for a wide range of activities, from rafting on the Napo River to birdwatching in Mindo, where more than 400 species of birds have been recorded.

- **Improved infrastructure:** Investment in road infrastructure, such as the Puyo-Tena highway (Amazon) and the Cuenca-Molleturo road (Andes), has increased access to tourist destinations by 50% since 2015, according to data from the Ministry of Transport (2022), which highlights that this facilitates the carrying out of sports activities that need safe and efficient transportation for both tourists and equipment.
- **Demand for sports tourism:** According to the surveys applied, 72% of respondents expressed significant interest in land activities (trekking, mountain biking), while 58% showed a preference for water activities (rafting, kayaking). Birdwatching stood out as an emerging activity, with 48% interest, especially among European tourists.
- **Community participation in sports activities:** Initiatives such as the *Emprende Turismo* program have trained more than 500 local entrepreneurs since 2020, allowing the creation of tourism micro-enterprises in communities such as Sarayaku (Amazon) and San Juan (Andes), contributing to the local economy and strengthening the management of adventure sports (Martínez, 2023).
- **Legal framework and conservation policies:** The National System of Protected Areas covers 20% of the Ecuadorian territory, providing a legal framework for the development of sustainable tourism activities.

**Challenges**

- **Limited promotion of sports tourism:** Only 25% of international tourists knew of adventure destinations outside the Galapagos Islands before their visit, according to the surveys. The lack of international campaigns reduces competitiveness compared to destinations like Costa Rica or Peru.

- **Insufficient training of sports guides:** 65% of local guides lack certifications in sustainability, first aid, or group management, which affects service quality and safety.
- **Environmental impacts associated with adventure sports:** Activities such as rafting on the Quijos River and cycling in Cajas National Park can generate erosion and habitat disturbance if not regulated. For example, an operator in Tena reported a 30% increase in plastic waste on tourist routes between 2022 and 2024.
- **Unequal community participation:** Although indigenous communities are involved in tourism, only 15% of projects are managed directly by them, limiting economic benefits and autonomy.
- **Lack of specific infrastructure:** Some areas, such as the Sumaco Reserve, lack adequate signage, well-maintained trails, or interpretation centers, which hinders the tourist experience.

### Opportunities

- **Sustainability and sports safety certification:** Adopting international standards, such as those of the Global Sustainable Tourism Council, could attract the 70% of respondents who prioritize sustainable destinations.
- **Digital promotion of adventure sports:** 80% of the tourists surveyed use social media (Instagram, TikTok) to discover destinations. Digital marketing strategies could increase the visibility of lesser-known destinations, such as the Chocó Andino.
- **Diversification of sports activities:** Incorporating new low-impact activities, such as canopy, paragliding, or outdoor yoga, could attract new market segments, especially millennials and Generation Z.

- **Community strengthening:** Training programs in tourism management and international certifications for local communities could increase their participation in the value chain, as seen in successful projects in Costa Rica.
- **Investment in sustainable sports infrastructure:** The creation of eco-lodges, certified trails, and interpretation centers in protected areas could improve the tourist experience without compromising ecosystems.
- Sports activities and destinations:
  - Napo: Class IV-V rafting on Jondachi and Hollín, with operators offering packages from \$65 (Polo del Conocimiento, n.d.).
  - Chimborazo: Trekking on El Altar, combined with camping and kayaking in volcanic lagoons (Primicias, 2023).
  - Quito: Trails like Yanacocha and Pasochoa, ideal for trekking and bird watching (Quito Informa, 2022).

### Economic and social impact of adventure sports:

- In Trigoloma (Chimborazo), sports tourism is linked to the National Development Plan to generate employment and food sovereignty (Martínez, 2023).
- In Napo, the integration of Kichwa communities into tourist centers promotes local gastronomy and crafts.

### Challenges:

- **Limited promotion:** Lack of tourist information in areas like Trigoloma (Martínez, 2023).
- **Training:** Need for training in specialized guides and safety.

### Discussion

The study reveals that promoting adventure and sports tourism in high biodiversity areas represents a valuable opportunity to foster sustainable development in Ecuador. This aligns with the global trend that desires active, authentic, and environmentally respectful tourism experiences. This notion coincides with what was stated by Weed (2020), who states that sports tourism could be a catalyst for the economy and society in nations with

natural wealth, provided it is managed sustainably and with the collaboration of the local population.

Ecuador, with its varied geography that enables adventure sports such as rafting, paragliding, or mountain biking in diverse natural environments, has greater advantages than Peru or Colombia, countries where these practices are limited to certain areas (Carvache-Franco et al., 2022). However, according to Lozano and Rodríguez (2021), to make the most of these places, it is essential to have good facilities, specialized instruction, and care for the environment. In Ecuador, the lack of advertising abroad and professional preparation hinder the country's worldwide recognition, something that coincides with Castillo and Gómez (2023), who point out that Ecuador still needs to develop a strong tourism image based on sport.

Community participation is presented as a key factor for the success and sustainability of adventure tourism. Research conducted in Ecuador, such as that by López and Cedeño (2023) on tourism projects in the Amazon, shows that involving local communities in sports management not only generates sustainable economic benefits but also helps curb rural migration. Similarly, Buitrago and his team (2022) found that sports tourism in Colombia has fostered the creation of green jobs in rural areas, which in turn strengthens social cohesion. In Ecuador, initiatives like the one in the Chocó Andino demonstrate that effective community management can improve biodiversity conservation by replacing extractive activities with more responsible tourism (Ministry of the Environment, 2023).

However, despite these advantages, the literature also points out the risks involved in poor management of sports tourism, such as increased waste and degradation of fragile ecosystems. According to Gibson (2018) and Zamora et al. (2021), the uncontrolled growth of adventure tourism can increase the ecological footprint, especially in protected areas where regulation is scarce. Examples such as the 20% increase in solid waste in the Galapagos Islands between 2018 and 2023 underscore the urgency

of implementing environmental monitoring models and controlling tourist carrying capacity (Ministry of the Environment, 2023).

Compared to Costa Rica, which has managed to consolidate its international image through the certification of sustainable destinations and environmental education, Ecuador has quite advanced legislation—such as the Tourism Law (2002) and the National Tourism Development Plan 2030—although its application has been somewhat irregular, especially in rural areas. If policies such as the zoning of protected areas or the reinvestment of tourism income in conservation were effectively implemented, this could strengthen the country's competitiveness (Martínez, 2023). Furthermore, the incorporation of technology and digital marketing is another key aspect to boost sports tourism. Recent studies in Latin America (Gómez & Villacrés, 2024) highlight that social networks and online booking platforms have become strategic tools for promoting emerging destinations and attracting young tourists interested in outdoor activities. In Ecuador, leveraging these tools could increase the visibility of cycling and trekking routes in provinces such as Napo, Chimborazo, and Pichincha.

This study has certain limitations to consider. Mainly, the reduced number of participants, limited to three tourist locations, and the non-random selection method, complicate the application of the conclusions to the entire country. On the other hand, the numerical data depend on the personal opinion of the visitors, which could generate some distortions. Despite this, these same weaknesses open the door to new research that compares different areas or Andean nations, including aspects such as the effect on the economy, environmental care, and the quality of life of the inhabitants.

In conclusion, adventure and sports tourism in Ecuador provides a viable economic option, while serving as a key tool for environmental preservation and community progress. For it to thrive, logical regulations, constant training, and worldwide marketing plans are required that link the country's abundant nature with the boom in the search for sports experiences that respect the environment.

## Conclusion

This research analyzed the options offered by adventure and sports tourism in Ecuador's biodiverse spaces, showing that this option represents a feasible path to

stimulate lasting economic, social, and ecological progress. The data revealed that the country's natural assets and territorial variety—especially in places like Napo, Chimborazo, and Pichincha—are fundamental elements for promoting sports practices such as river descent, hiking, mountain biking, and bird watching, which not only strengthen the local economy but also encourage the care of the natural environment.

Likewise, obstacles were detected both in the organization and in the way the sector is structured, including scarce global diffusion, the lack of specialized training for local professionals, and a specific material base that falls short. These problems diminish the capacity of Ecuadorian adventure tourism to compete with established places like Costa Rica or Peru. Nevertheless, the collected data suggest that, through lasting and collaborative approaches, it is possible to create an adventure tourism system that unites natural wealth with the conscious development of risk sports.

Thus, it can be concluded that implementing environmental certifications, strengthening community training, promoting segmented digitalization, and regulating environmental impact are key elements to ensure the sustainability of the sector. Furthermore, it is essential to articulate public policies that integrate conservation, recreation, and local development, ensuring that the benefits of sports tourism are distributed fairly among the communities.

It is recommended, in conclusion, to continue with extensive studies. These should evaluate how this practice affects the economy and the environment. This way, robust strategies will be created that promote Ecuador as the best destination for sports tourism.

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