

## **Heritage Sites & Eco-Activities in Ecuador and Costa Rica**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This article provides for the ecotourism and heritage dimensions and aims at providing insights into the various eco tourism activities and heritage sites of Ecuador and Costa Rica. It discusses the efforts to long term management and conservation of such areas by using certain international and national legal instruments. This paper also throws some light on the projects implemented by the governments of Costa Rica and Ecuador to maintain healthy ecotourism practices in their countries. These sites possess quite rich biodiversity and marine resources, thus providing for various eco activities. Conservation International has named Ecuador among the world’s mega-diverse countries. Costa Rica is within the top 20 richest in biodiversity (Murillo, 2017). Costa Rica and Ecuador are also included in the UNESCO’s list of world heritage sites. Using government and community-initiated cases from Costa Rica, Brazil and Ecuador, this study examines ecotourism sites with varying degrees of government-community collaboration. This study also reveals that collaboration between the government and community at a

fairly high level is best for conservation success in ecotourism ventures and for protecting the culturally recognized world famous sites.

***Keywords: Ecotourism, Eco Activities, Tourism, Conservation, Ecuador, Costa Rica. UNESCO, Heritage Site.***

## **I. INTRODUCTION**

Eco-tourism is one of the most frequently cited categories of the “new” tourism. It is defined by the International Ecotourism Society as, “responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and sustains the well being of local people.” A number of activities have been labelled eco-tourism, including bird- and whale-watching, helping scientists conduct conservation research, snorkelling off coral reefs, game viewing and nature photography. Eco-tourism is linked to and overlaps with heritage tourism and cultural tourism. Heritage tourism is a broad category that embraces both eco-tourism and cultural tourism, with an emphasis on conserving natural and cultural heritage. It is a category or market segment that includes visits to historic sites, museums and art galleries, and exploring national and forest parks. Heritage tourism, because of the large number of activities it covers, is difficult to define and measure. In recent years city planners interested in urban regeneration have adopted the term to describe many tourism programmes, a strategy that has received support from business and banks.

Many other tourism terms reflect environmental ethics and local interests. Environmental preservation concerns have given rise to what is known as green tourism, conservation-supporting tourism, and environmentally aware or environmentally sound tourism. Generally, such tourism favours minimal

environmental impact and emphasises concern over environmental issues. Urban and rural tourism categories have also been created. However, since few countries have made the distinction, quantification has been difficult.

## **II. ECUADOR**

For any ecotourism, Ecuador is a go to destination. Ecuador is one of the smallest countries in South America but has a significantly rich biodiversity, marine regions as Galapagos Islands and the highest active volcano in the world called Cotopaxi, not to mention that the Amazon forests are found in this country as well. Conservation International has named Ecuador among the world's mega-diverse countries.

The small Andean country of Ecuador is packed full of diverse eco-systems and exotic wildlife. It consists of three distinct terrains: the Andes Mountains, the Amazon rainforest and the Pacific coastline. In addition to the newer ecotours available on the mainland, the Galapagos Islands off the coast of Ecuador have been offering ecotours for many years. Ecuador is one of the most bio diverse countries in the world. Ecuador has over one hundred different types of hummingbirds and thousands of orchid varieties. Cuyabeno Wild Life Reserve, Mindo and San Luis de Pambil are all good places to see many types of flora and fauna. The Galapagos Islands are justly famed for their wildlife. The Cuyabeno Wild Life Reserve is probably the best place to see the Amazon Rainforest in Ecuador, even though there are other national parks which are also interesting (such as the Yasuni National Park). It's a place of high biodiversity and nature lovers should feel in paradise. That's a good way to discover the indigenous communities of Ecuador and to eventually meet a local shaman.

## **III. UNESCO WORLD HERITAGE SITES IN ECUADOR:**

### **Quito:**

Quito which is nestled in the heights of Andes, is the capital of Ecuador. Quito which stands at an altitude of 2,850 m (9,350 ft) was founded in the 16th century on the ruins of an ancient Inca city. It was listed among the first World Heritage Sites declared by UNESCO in the 1970s as Quito has the best-preserved and least altered historical centres in Latin America.

**Cuenca:**

Known for its beautiful colonial Spanish architecture and surrounded by the Andean mountains, Cuenca was named a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Highlights of this heritage site include the Old Cathedral, New Cathedral, the Old Cathedral, the Santo Domingo Church and the Carmelite Monastery.

**Qhapag Ñan:**

Qhapag Ñan which is known for having the oldest Andean Road System, is among newest addition to the UNESCO World Heritage Site list, having been added in 2014. Qhapag Ñan spreading over 30,000 km (18,640 miles) along the Andes, was an extensive road system used as a link from Cusco, the Inca capital, to the rest of its empire. Inca Trail to Machu Picchu is the most famous portion of this heritage site.

**The Galapagos Islands:**

The Galapagos Islands consist of 127 islets and islands and among them 19 are volcanic. The Galapagos Islands are situated around 1,000 km (620 miles) from the coast of Ecuador. The UNESCO World Heritage Site called it a “living museum and showcase of evolution.” Human settlements are confined to only four of the largest islands i.e. 3% of the area. The island is surrounded by Galapagos Marine Reserve, which is the second largest in the world.

**Sangay National Park:**

Sangay National Park has a wide spectrum of ecosystems, from active volcanoes, tropical rainforests, plains, and the snow-capped peaks of the Andes. It is an important refuge for rare species like the mountain tapir and spectacled bears.

#### **IV. ECO-ACTIVITIES IN ECUADOR**

Ecuador is a dream destination for those who want to experience nature to the fullest. There are a number of ecolodges where you can stay close to the nature as well as enjoy a range of activities. Some of the famous ecotourism practices of the place have been listed below:

##### **a. Laguna Quilotoa hike.**

Visitors usually hire a truck to drive up to the lake, and then hike all the way back to the Black sheep inn, the popular ecolodge in the country. The hike normally takes 4-6 hours and the views it offers are truly unforgettable.

##### **b. Iliniza Cloud Forest trek.**

Hiking to the cloud forest takes around 2 hours. Along the way, the road climbs into the paramo – high altitude grasslands above the tree line. Besides stunning view you also have an option to visit a locally run cheese factory. You can hire a local tour guide and hike in the high altitude rain forest where you will be given explanation of plants, bird life, and other natural aspects.

##### **c. Visit local Indigenous markets and Otavalo market**

These markets provide a great opportunity to see how people have been trading for thousands of years. You can find a lot of unique crafts and clothes, and get a chance to bargain a better price. Local markets are there on specific days of the week, it is better to double check with some locals prior to planning.

**d. Horseback riding**

One of the great ways to take in the nature is ride a horse with a local native guide. A good thing here is that you get to feel like you are a local yourself riding across the high paramo, and it doesn't matter whether you are a novice to that or an expert.

**e. Mountain Biking on Cotopaxi Volcano**

This is an adventure activity fit for most people, regardless of age. It is also an easy day trip from the capital Quito. You will go up by car to the parking lot at an elevation of 4500 meters, and then will get on a bike to enjoy the fast downhill ride.

**f. Cruise to Galapagos islands**

This is a must do once you are in Ecuador. Nowhere but there you can go swimming with sea lions, learn geology of the volcanic chains, see where Charles Darwin developed his theories of Evolution. The islands require an island entry fee which goes for the conservation purposes.

**g. White water rafting in Banos**

The Pastaza river is Ecuador's most famous river rafting experience with 5 hour tour through the World Heritage Rainforest. The river is also the main tributary of the Amazon where you also enjoy all the tropical and scenic Ecuador has to offer.

**h. Climbing nearby Tungurahua Volcano**

It is an unforgettable waterfalls and volcano on the jungle edge and also one of the most active ones in the country. One can hike it in a day trip from Banos and enjoy the beautiful nature of the Sangay

national park and the surrounding mountains. Prior to climbing it is important to check with local people in terms of the weather conditions, and even better, bring a local guide along.

## **V. COSTA RICA**

Costa Rica is one of the pioneers in ecotourism, and their ability to largely focus on this sector is due to the political stability in the country. Although the territory of the land takes only 0.03% of the planet’s surface, however it is within the top 20 richest in biodiversity (Murillo, 2017). From the country with a high rate of deforestation it turned into the one with 25 national parks as it was recognized that protecting the environment and encouraging tourism can improve economic status.

Pioneering Green Challenge, Costa Rica is also en route to becoming the first carbon neutral country by 2021. In 2007, Costa Rican government vowed to become the first carbon neutral destination thus raising the standard for the global ecotourism community.

Costa Rica was included in both the 2011 and 2012 lists of The Developing World's 10 Best Ethical Destinations. This is an annual ranking produced by Ethical Traveller magazine, which is based on a study of developing nations from around the world to identify the best tourism destinations among them. The benchmarking uses categories such as environmental protection, social welfare, and human rights.

## **VI. UNESCO WORLD HERITAGE SITES IN COSTA RICA**

### **1. Talamanca Range Reserve – La Amistad National Park**

In 1983 around 30 years ago, this natural wonder was declared a World Heritage Site in Costa Rica. Collaborating with neighbouring country Panama is necessary for its conservation, representing one of the first attempts at creating and maintaining internationally protected areas. The park spans across the provinces of Limon and Puntarenas, Cartago and San Jose.

## **2. Cocos Island National Park**

Cocos Island a lush paradise, which stands in the middle of the ocean, is an area with very rich landscapes. Cocos Island was declared a World Heritage Site in 1997, due to the protection island provides for the vital habitats of marine wildlife, including large deep-sea species, especially sharks. Because of the protection, the sea beds around this incredible spot are considered to be the best in the world for observing large, fantastic inhabitants of the ocean, such as sharks, manta rays, and dolphins. Spanning across 2,400 land hectares and 97,235 marine hectares, there's an abundance of bromeliads, ferns, streams, waterfalls and rivers.

## **3. Guanacaste Conservation Area**

It was in 1999 when Guanacaste Conservation Area was declared a World Heritage Site. And in 2004, this site was subsequently broadened to include the Santa Elena area. The main reason why this is important for nature is that it preserves biological diversity. Highlights of the area include the main tropical dry forest habitats in the region extending from Central America to the north of Mexico, which are essential for the conservation of rare animal and plant species, and those that are at risk of extinction.

## **4. Pre-Columbian Chiefdom Settlements with Stone Spheres of the Diquís**

The term Stone Spheres of the Diquís refers to four locations that have recently stood out worldwide as archaeological heritage sites in Costa Rica. These sites are: Finca 6, Batambal, El Silencio, and Grijalba-2, all of which are located on the Diquís Delta in the Osa canton, and were declared World Heritage Sites by UNESCO in 2014.

## **VII. ECO-ACTIVITIES IN COSTA RICA**

Costa Rica offers an absolutely wide range of activities that can hardly leave anyone indifferent. Some of the famous ecotourism practices of the place have been listed below:

### **a. Arenal Volcano park hike**

The park is over 7114 acres with incredible views throughout the volcano. One gets an opportunity to hike over old lava flows and through the original rainforest. There are trails that can take you through acres of regenerating nature where the biodiversity is particularly unique.

### **b. Heliconia hanging bridges hike**

This hike stands out as it offers a series of trails with hanging bridges taking you in a loop through the private rainforest reserve neighbouring Tenorio Volcano National Park with splendid view of Lake Nicaragua. It is advisable to bring along a naturalist guide who will be able to point out specific animals and plants.

### **c. Nocturnal jungle walk**

Hiking is not only for day time - you can experience something totally breathtaking during the night time as the tropical rainforests of Costa Rica are home to a great number of nocturnal creatures. This sort of night walks can be arranged in any part of Costa Rica, as the whole country is just like a national park!

**d. Pure Trek Canyoning**

For those willing to get ultimate Costa Rican adventures, this experience includes 4 Rappels (3 waterfalls and 1 rock wall), Monkey Drop (zip line and rappel) and a Rock climb, all of it in a beautiful rainforest slot canyon. This adventure can be experienced by a wide age range.

**e. Twilight Safari Float**

This tour can be experienced both in the day and night time, and in the evening it can be not only fascinating but also a bit scary, which can make it even more memorable. The adventure offers a unique prospective as visitors will meander along the Penas Blancas river accompanied by the local tour guide who will always identify the sounds and sights of the rainforest. The float takes around 2 hours and gives a perfect chance to observe the environment of forest creatures.

**f. Sunset cruise**

Probably one of the most relaxing things to do in Costa Rica and it could be the best way to finish the day full of adventures. It is particularly popular in Guanacaste because of the stunning beaches along the Pacific coast. Most of the cruises from nearly every beach offer snorkelling, drinks and snacks, and there is a great chance to see whales, dolphins and other marine wildlife.

**g. Mountain Biking**

Mountain biking in Costa Rica is one of the most remarkable ways to explore the country with different trails starting at a volcano and finishing at the beach. For those athletically prepared, the Ruta de Conquistadors is deemed the toughest in the world as it stretches all the way from Atlantic to Pacific. However, you can also get around beach towns by bike, and it is a great way to connect with locals.

#### **h. Sky tram**

There is a more relaxing way to admire the beauty of the rainforests in Costa Rica and it is by a cable car, or the so called sky trams. Along the way it is very possible to see birds, monkeys and all sorts of wildlife. Having a local guide with you would be even better as they can point out all the exotic plants and wildlife along the way.

### **VIII. CONCLUSION**

Ecotourism operations occasionally fail to live up to conservation ideals. It is sometimes overlooked that ecotourism is a highly consumer-centered activity, and that environmental conservation is a means to further economic growth. Although ecotourism is intended for small groups, even a modest increase in population, however temporary, puts extra pressure on the local environment and necessitates the development of additional infrastructure and amenities. The construction of water treatment plants, sanitation facilities, and lodges come with the exploitation of non-renewable energy sources and the utilization of already limited local resources. Aside from environmental degradation with tourist infrastructure, population pressures from ecotourism also leaves behind garbage and pollution associated with the Western lifestyle. Although ecotourists claim to be educationally sophisticated and environmentally concerned, they rarely understand the ecological consequences of their visits and how their day-to-day activities append physical impacts on the environment. Ecotourism also causes displacement of local people, threat to indigenous cultures and leads to mismanagement. Thus there is a dire need to keep the eco activities under proper surveillance in order to reduce or negate the negative effects of such activities.

Costa Rica and Ecuador are included in the UNESCO’s list of world heritage sites. These sites provide for various eco activities and hence attract a lot of tourists. So it becomes an obligation on the part of these governments to provide for the maintenance of healthy ecotourism practices in order to protect such heritage sites .Accordingly, certain projects have been implemented by these countries to mitigate

negative the effects of ecotourism eg The "Bandera Azul Ecológica " Program (Costa Rica) is intended to promote development while curbing the negative impacts of mass tourism by helping the local community to work against pollution and protecting the environment, Voluntary Certification Program (Costa Rica), a voluntary Certification for Sustainable Tourism Program (known as CST) was introduced in order to turn "the concept of sustainability into something real" by "improving the way in which the natural and social resources are utilized, to motivate the active participation of the local communities, and to support the competitiveness of the business sector.

In Ecuador, conservation and sustainable tourism are priorities. The Ecuadorian government and its Ministry of Tourism are focused on promoting ecotourism opportunities to travellers, and also engaging travellers by inviting them to be a part of ecotourism projects. There is also the acknowledgement that not only is sustainable infrastructure important, but the effective management of the sustainable industry as a whole, and its parts, is elemental in the overall success of sustainable tourism and ecotourism in Ecuador. Ecuador's government and, subsequently, its tourism industry, have received significant support from organizations like the Rainforest Alliance, allowing Ecuador to experience success in its ecotourism development. This success has emerged through trust and faith in Ecuador's ecotourism by local businesses and travellers - it demonstrates that Ecuador is serious about sustainable tourism development, and understands that an holistic approach is the best way forward. One of Ecuador's leaders in ecotourism is Yachana Lodge and Centre for Geotourism Training, an ecotourism project in the Amazon rainforest that seeks to "achieve sustainability through education". Their philosophy is that if travellers, industry members, the community, and youth are educated on the implications of tourism and both its benefits and negative impacts, they will be equipped and empowered to forge a positive future for the rainforest.

Likewise, the Eastern Tropical Pacific Seascape Project, a 3-year project by UNESCO World Heritage Centre and Conservation International, and with financing from the UN Foundation and Global Conservation Fund, calls for the promotion of long-term management and conservation of five marine

protected areas within the Eastern Tropical Pacific through using the World Heritage Convention and other international and national legal instruments.

It is argued that the Costa Rica has acquired a reputation as an international ecotourism leader, and suggests that by examining visitor profiles, motivations and activities, as revealed in recent visitor surveys, this reputation appears slightly undeserved. The rapid development of business/convention, cruising and 3s" (sun, sand and sea) tourism reveal that Costa Rica is also highly dependent on the mass tourism sector. Secondly, the much vaunted protected area system is being seriously threatened by visitor overcapacities within certain parks, haphazard adjacent development, chronic underfunding, uncertain government commitment, reliance upon non-government funding sources, and illegal intrusion. Many of its near neighbours, such as Belize and Ecuador, are establishing ecotourism projects that will rival those of Costa Rica in their sustainability.

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