

THE END OF A WAR = THE EXPLORATION OF UNTOUCHED LANDS: AN INVESTIGATION INTO HOW ECOTOURISM CAN PLAY A KEY ROLE IN BUILDING A LASTING PEACE IN COLOMBIA

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ABSTRACT

In 2016, a peace treaty was signed in Colombia which was intended to signal the end of more than 100 years of conflict in the country. As a result, it was possible to enter lands which had been inaccessible and untouched by human development during the war and the potential to exploit these for ecotourism became apparent. The aim of this study was to see how, through sensitively interviewing 12 actors in the field of Colombian ecotourism, Colombia could use this form of tourism to its advantage in a meaningful way, preserving the phenomenal diversity of the country's nature and cultures, and moving towards a peaceful resolution of the war. The interviewees' pride for Colombia's natural and cultural treasures was evident as they expressed a clear desire to see ecotourism boom while respecting these assets. The picture the participants painted is a nuanced one with the unrivalled ecotourism potential of the country balanced against many challenges including a population uneducated in hospitality and a perceived lack of infrastructure and strategy. Several recommendations are made including marketing, preferably digitally, to specific niches, educating locals, improving national security and infrastructure and creating a solid strategy for ecotourism so that the Colombian population may finally benefit from its virgin lands.

Keywords: ecotourism, peacebuilding, reconciliation, Colombia, tourism development, post-conflict, environmental conservation, social cohesion, community empowerment.

1 INTRODUCTION

The signing of the peace treaty in 2016 marked a turning point in Colombia's history, opening new opportunities and instigating transformations in a land marked by internal conflict. Ecotourism is one of the areas significantly affected by this historic agreement. This paper explores the evolving relationship between the peace treaty and the subsequent development of Colombia's ecotourism industry through in-depth interviews with a wide range of stakeholders, including investors in ecotourism, politicians, a traveller and ecotourism providers. Their perspectives shed light on the potential of ecotourism to contribute to post-conflict reconciliation and the establishment of meaningful and enduring peace in Colombia. The participants' recommendations offer valuable guidance for the tourism industry with a view to leveraging the huge potential of ecotourism as a catalyst for sustainable peacebuilding.

Colombia, one of the world's largest countries [1] located in northwestern South America, is home to an enormous variety of ecosystems ranging from the Amazon rainforest and the Andes Mountains to coastal plains and Caribbean and Pacific coastlines. Labelled as one of the world's 'megadiverse' countries with close to 10% of the planet's biodiversity [2], its population is no less varied with an ethnic diversity of around 85 different groups [3].

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Through an examination of interview data from a rich variety of stakeholders in the Colombian tourist industry, this work aims to explore the impact of the Colombian Peace Treaty of 2016 on ecotourism and analyse the role ecotourism could play in the future of the peacebuilding process in Colombia.

2 HISTORICAL CONTEXT

2.1 The establishment of a peace treaty

Colombia's war history is marked by three significant conflicts: La Guerra de los Mil Días (1899–1902), La Violencia (1948–1958) and the Armed and Drug Conflict which, fuelled by land reform, economic inequality, and political representation, escalated due to drug cartels and paramilitary groups. This conflict, which saw the birth of The Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and the National Liberation Army (ELN), resulted in severe human rights abuses and displaced over 5 million people [4]–[6]. In 2012, President Santos initiated peace negotiations, culminating in a peace treaty signed on 26 September 2016. The Final Agreement to End the Armed Conflict and Build a Stable and Lasting Peace focused on rural reform, political participation, conflict resolution, drug control, and implementation [4], [7]. This treaty offered hope to Colombians after a century of strife, addressing the underlying social and economic issues that had fuelled the war [8].

2.2 Consequences of the war and the peace treaty

2.2.1 Environmental impact

While the stereotype of Colombia focused on drug cartels [9] and a resulting considerable use of land to grow coca [10], the reality was that the whole of the Colombian environment was affected during the conflict. Indeed, Rettberg et al. [11] demonstrated that conflict over legal crops such as bananas, coffee, coal, flowers, gold, ferronickel, emeralds, and oil were all linked to crime during this period, causing environmental damage. A surprising positive outcome of the conflict era was that violence also protected ecosystems by making certain areas 'off limits' to development [12], [13]. The peace treaty established a National Land Fund to support rural land reform and promote sustainable land use, recognising the importance of traditional knowledge and community participation in conservation efforts [14], [15].

2.2.2 Tourism impact

Colombia exemplifies how war negatively impacts tourism, with mass media portraying the country as unsafe and tourism agencies blacklisting it [16], [17]. Despite this, tourism can mitigate the impact of conflicts, as demonstrated by post-conflict increases in the number of visitors to the country which increased from 1.3 million per annum in 2006 [18] to almost 6 million in 2023 [19].

2.3 Ecotourism as means to build a lasting peace

2.3.1 Sustainability and ecotourism

Sustainability's three pillars, established in the Brundtland Report in 1987 [20] are well known: the environment, the society and the economy. The UN Tourism definition of sustainable tourism logically follows this lead as 'tourism that takes full account of its current and future economic, social and environmental impacts, addressing the needs of visitors, the industry, the environment and host communities' [21].



Ecotourism has been described as a ‘complex tourism phenomenon’ [22] since its conception in the 1960s and its description of a type of pure tourism where one could travel to ‘uncontaminated natural areas’ to ‘enjoy the scenery’ [23]. The definition has evolved with Diamantis and Ladkin proposing, in 1999 [24], a simple but seemingly little-used four-layer, very weak to very strong cline, depending on the emphasis of the offering including nature, education and economic and socio-cultural sustainability. Two years later, a content-analysis of 85 definitions of ecotourism [25] showed that the key terms employed were ‘conservation, education, ethics, sustainability, impacts and local benefit’. The themes of conservation, education and support, involvement and development of local populations was reiterated in a review of definitions in 2016 [26]. Finally, the definition which UN Tourism created in 2001 [27] will be used in this work. Its key elements are: nature, education, provision of services by locals to small groups, preservation of the natural and socio-cultural environment and ensuring locals benefit from tourism.

2.3.2 Promoting ecotourism for peace building

There is evidence that the Colombian government prioritised tourism as a peacemaker by creating the campaign Tourism for Peace Building from 2014–2018, aiming to rebuild the country’s culture, improve the value chain and improve quality of life through responsible and sustainable practices [28]. While this campaign helped war-ravaged urban areas achieve sustainable development [29], the extent to which this could be described as ecotourism is unclear. The scant research carried out on Colombian ecotourism shows that locals believe ecotourism will promote environmental conservation in their area and that they should be involved in those enterprises [30]. Indeed, ecotourism projects which involve local communities, foster empowerment and participation and attract international visitors have been found to aid reconciliation [16]. However, infrastructure, security concerns, and the influence of popular culture and media complicate these efforts [17], [31], [32]. Bearing in mind Crisis Group’s recent statement that ‘levels of violence remain high’ in the country [33], the aim of this research was therefore to ask how could ecotourism contribute to building lasting peace in Colombia?

3 METHODOLOGY

The research employed the technique of semi-structured interviews in English or Spanish with 12 purposively chosen ecotourism stakeholders: investors in ecotourism, both Indigenous and outsiders, a traveller and politicians whose accounts were recorded and translated by the interviewer, and subsequently analysed thematically [34] and for salience [35] using MAXQDA in order to understand the individuals’ ‘stories’ [36]. Informed consent was obtained from all interviewees, ensuring they knew the study’s purpose and rights once ethical clearance had been provided by the academic institution’s research committee. Individuals were anonymised and identifiers used, as shown in Table 1.

The interviewer’s identity as a Colombian positioned her as an insider which facilitated access to the participants who were potentially more open and trusting [37] with her than if she had been an outsider. Separate interview schedules including themes of perception of the country’s ecotourism provision, the challenges faced and potential strategies for the future were created for each group of interviewees and were used as guides rather than a rigid framework as the interviewer deliberately maintained a conversational ‘loose’ style during the discussions.



Table 1: Stakeholders of ecotourism in Colombia.

Role	Identifier	Gender
Indigenous investors	Ind. Inv. 1	Male
	Ind. Inv. 2	Male
Outsider investor	Out. Inv. 1	Male
Traveler	Trav. 1	Male
Ecotourism providers	Eco. Prov. 1	Male
	Eco. Prov. 2	Male
	Eco. Prov. 3	Female
	Eco. Prov. 4	Male
Politicians	Pol. 1	Female
	Pol. 2	Male
	Pol. 3	Male
	Pol. 4	Female

4 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Colombia as a Phoenix rising from the embers

Positivity regarding the future after the incredibly difficult years of the war was a strong theme. Tourism is seen by Pol. 1 as a ‘vehicle for peace’ and a ‘huge opportunity’ with Colombia ready to be reborn (Pol. 2). Pol. 3 specifically mentioned that the Colombian people could benefit from tourism as the ‘most powerful vehicle Colombia has’. Ecotourism providers, and the traveller, all referred more specifically to the potential of ecotourism in their analysis with Eco. Prov. 4 alluding to ‘green tourism’ being ‘what people are looking for’ and Trav. 1 describing Colombia as having ‘absurd potential’ for ecotourism.

4.2 Ecotourism post peace-treaty

Since the signing of the peace treaty in 2016, large swathes of the country which were previously unreachable and perceived as ‘dangerous’ (Ind. Inv. 2) are now becoming accessible. These lands are described in poetic language as ‘magical’ (Pol. 3), ‘unexplored treasures’ (Ind. Inv. 2), ‘spectacular’ (Trav. 1) and ‘virgin’ (Eco. Prov. 4). Trav. 1 even shares his gratitude to the guerillas who participated in maintaining the fauna of these spaces as some of them ‘had very strong rules. You couldn’t traffic animals, macaws, because whoever did it was killed. That, you have to thank them [for]’. Notably, the Indigenous leader, Ind. Inv. 1, takes a less positive view, describing his people as being ‘violently displaced’ from regions which were subsequently turned into ‘nature disaster’ zones. The opening up of these previously inaccessible lands has resulted in ecotourism in the form of ‘glamping’ (Ind. Inv. 2) flourishing in these areas with visitors coming to see ‘birds and cave paintings’ (Trav. 1) but tourist provision there is ‘little known and of low quality’ (Ind. Inv. 2).

In order to answer the research question, Colombian tourism stakeholders’ perspectives are mapped onto the UN Tourism’s definition of ecotourism in the following subsections.

4.2.1 Natural environment and its preservation

Undeniably, and mentioned by all the participants, the remarkable biodiversity in the untouched gems which were off-limits and where destructive activities such as cattle



ranching were not possible (Eco. Prov. 2) during the conflict years are phenomenal natural assets for the country. Preventing subsequent deforestation and biodiversity loss are worries expressed by Pol. 3 and Eco. Prov. 3 who is concerned that ‘the whole world is already arriving’ which is leading to ‘a very strong environmental crisis’ including deforestation. Although the general and tourist economy suffered as a result of the COVID pandemic, Pol. 3 articulates the need for individuals ‘to look for quieter places, where they could connect with nature, to look for places of nature and adventure’ and find this solace in Colombia’s ecotourist provision. Alluding to the fossil fuel industry and its economic and environmental impact on society, Eco. Prov. 4 comments that ecotourism is, ‘the new oil, we pollute less and we do not need huge investments the oil industry might need’.

4.2.2 Education

The second theme UN Tourism includes in its ecotourism definition is the provision of ‘educational features’, presumably to the visitors, but, in line with Nash [38], locals can benefit from training and education as an element of sustainable ecotourism. As a result, both aspects are developed below.

Colombians are unaware of the biodiversity on their doorstep (Pol. 3) or of the wonders they take for granted, as Trav. 1 explained in his account of a farmer being astounded that tourists would pay to see the toucans ‘he sees every day’. They also lack training in hospitality but do not want to be ‘only left as waiters and employees of cleaning services’ (Eco. Prov. 4), instead, they are trained to become executives. This notion was echoed by Pol. 1 who talked of a long-term vision where education would ‘empower young people’ as ‘we need to ... pay back to society’, implying that there is a debt due to those who had suffered through the conflict.

Aligning with UN Tourism’s view of education, the local Indigenous leader, Ind. Inv. 1, spoke movingly of showing the wonders of the Colombian resources to ‘the world, to the tourists, [so] we can send a clearer message of how to live in peace with nature’.

4.2.3 Local involvement in ecotourism

This section combines the third element of UN Tourism’s definition which attends to the locals providing services to small groups with the last element which deals with locals benefitting from such tourism.

The theme of working in close harmony with locals (Pol. 1) was strongly represented in the stakeholders’ accounts with Eco. Prov. 4 articulating, ‘If the Koguis do not want to receive tourists in the Sierra Nevada in their territory, it must be respected’. Tourist numbers and their accommodation must, he insisted, be agreed with locals before implementing any ecotourism programmes. Ind. Inv. 1 mentioned that, as the native peoples ‘have all the wisdom’, they must be worked with in a ‘responsible way’.

One of the repercussions of the peace treaty was the ‘wonderful’ (Trav. 1) conversion of guerillas into tourism actors. Ind. Inv. 1 spoke proudly of educating guerillas about sustainable living in remote jungle areas and these individuals now acting as ‘even better tour guides than an outsider’ as they have learnt how to ‘live in harmony with nature, traditions, how to be safe, even how to find and identify wild animals that at that time were a great threat to them but today tourists pay millions to go and see even a trace of them’. The harmony the Indigenous leader mentioned not only concerned nature but between individuals. Pol. 2 recounted touchingly the time when he was being taken to a tourist destination driven and accompanied by two former guerillas from different gangs who each had family members killed by the other’s gang – and here they were, working together, tourism uniting them.



Pol. 1 explored the possibility of extending gender equality by empowering local women to provide sensitive tourism packages to their area, ensuring they receive fair payment for their contributions and are then promoted in the tourist organisations.

The aim of many of the stakeholders was to see tourism replace drugs as the economic driving force of the local populations with one of the providers, Pol. 3, dreaming of his company having more competition as a reflection of this growth. Eco. Prov. 1 explained, 'If people don't have anything to eat, they start to commit crimes and cut trees for coca... then they realised that tourism was a catalyst. If they have something to eat, they will not do these things'. Trav. 1 pointed out that this realisation can emanate from a simple observation, as a farmer relayed to him, 'I am realising that there are people who want to sleep in my house, without electricity, see toucans, drink water from the river, instead of cutting down half the jungle to grow coca'.

4.2.4 The socio-cultural environment

The fourth part of UN Tourism's definition covers the preservation of the natural and socio-cultural environment. As nature was attended to in Section 4.2.1, this last subsection focuses on the importance given to the socio-cultural aspects mentioned by the participants.

The theme of spirituality resonated through the accounts of the interviewees with expressions such as, 'a country that ... is in communion with the earth' (Eco. Prov. 4), 'we have to be at peace with nature...to gain inner peace' (Ind. Inv. 1) and nature being able to 'nourish your body, mind and spirit' (Eco. Prov. 3) peppering the narratives. Music contributes to both the spiritual side of tourism with Colombian spiritual traditions being spread through a festival of sacred music (Eco. Prov. 4) and Colombian culture becoming known worldwide through musicians such as Shakira, Maluma and Karol G (Trav. 1, Pol. 2). Eco. Prov. 1 recounted how tourists leave Colombia 'transformed, because you can't imagine that there is so much beauty or so much human quality in a territory, the way you can connect to these places, they can't imagine it'.

Two overarching communities, native and the Afro-Colombian populations, were referenced repeatedly as assets needing to be valued and safeguarded in the same way the participants referred to the biodiversity of flora and fauna. Ind. Inv. 1 described how native peoples in 32 different regions 'could easily explain part of their culture' and Eco. Prov. 3 said that 'they are one of the most important things that our country has'. The benevolence of the stakeholders towards these communities and the high regard they held them in was powerfully portrayed in the stakeholders' accounts.

Finally, other socio-cultural components of ecotourism which the participants mentioned were the ancestral element (Eco. Prov. 3), folklore (Eco. Prov. 4), gastronomy (Eco. Prov. 4) and the diversity of ethnicities and languages (Trav. 1).

Returning to the four-level definition of ecotourism, Diamantis and Ladkin [24] mentioned earlier, it is clear that the participants' perception of Colombia's ecotourism provision aligns with the 'strong' definition, one which places an equal emphasis on nature, education and socio-cultural and economic elements.

4.3 Setting the Phoenix free: Recommendations for the future

The stakeholders' levels of optimism about Colombia's future were hugely divergent. Eco. Prov. 4 estimated that a rise from 3 million to 12 million tourists over the next 8 years as per the president's vision 'is not something unreasonable', while Eco. Prov. 2 bemoaned the room for improvement in the industry: 'We do not have good products; we do not have a good offer developed. We do not have a good presence; we do not have good distribution'.



Eco. Prov. 4 offers somewhat of a middle ground, stating that sustainable tourism is ‘like a win-win, the tourist is happy, there is no pollution, neither cultural, nor environmental, nor visual’. The participants’ responses when asked about how they saw the future of Colombian ecotourism are grouped thematically in the following eight subsections. They act as recommendations to enable Colombia to fully embrace ecotourism so that it may contribute to a sustainable peace.

4.3.1 Luxury provision

The traveller interviewee was cognisant of the fact that Colombia is currently underselling its ecotourism offerings commenting, ‘There is a market that wants to pay to be very comfortable in the middle of nowhere’. Developing this idea, he mentioned the ultra-luxury market where individuals pay between US\$10,000–15,000 to experience a safari in Casanare while Ind. Inv. 2 draws attention to the fact that currently the average nightly Colombian hotel room revenue is no more than \$100. There is therefore a market and a possibility to move away from the ‘very ugly...low quality glamping’ (Ind. Inv. 2) towards a much more upmarket offering in the ecotourism field.

4.3.2 Experiential provision

Especially post-COVID, tourists ‘are looking for experiences, they want to connect with people, but they want to understand the stories behind the people’ (Pol. 2). This statement underpins the findings of Packer and Ballantyne [39] which referred to providing experiences enabling the visitor to actively reflect and lead not only to more environmentally sensitive behaviour but also to customer satisfaction.

4.3.3 Security

The optimism expressed earlier regarding Colombia’s ecotourism potential, post-peace treaty ceded to a much greater degree of morosity regarding the current state of national security. All of the stakeholders referred to the current return to violence in certain areas as being hugely problematic. The challenges are complex, as articulated by Eco. Prov. 3 who described complicated communication in the post-FARC era as there is ‘no clear leader’. Trav. 1, an influencer who shares his travel adventures regularly on social media, ‘cannot post in real time for security reasons’. Such feelings of insecurity are problematic ‘because as long as they [violent movements] are there, successful ecotourism will not be possible’ (Ind. Inv. 1). Ind. Inv. 2 provided a rather disheartening but potentially realistic commentary demonstrating the challenges faced by wishing to replace coca with tourism: ‘I don’t think the drug traffickers want these projects to be developed in certain places. There are many places that drug traffickers use to transport drugs and this is very convenient for them because these areas are alone, so I do not think this can improve’.

4.3.4 Digitalisation

A stronger contrast between the untouched, pristine natural world underpinning Colombia’s ecotourism sector and the use of digital tools to market it to potential customers worldwide would be hard to find but digitalisation was seen as the way forward for many of the participants in this study. Politicians (Pol. 3) and ecotourism providers (Eco. Prov. 2) through their accounts, and Trav. 1, the social media traveller/influencer through his actions, all aligned with Vukasović and Očko [40] in their understanding that digital marketing is the way to expand demand for ecotourism offerings.



4.3.5 Infrastructure

A second contradiction becomes apparent when considering the co-existence of ecotourism and infrastructure. Eco. Prov. 2, with his experience on the ground, explained,

For tourism to exist, everything has to be working. There is no tourism where something is missing, where connectivity is missing, where training is missing, where public services are missing, where health is missing. All these are elements that are missing, you cannot bring foreign tourists if you do not have the capacity to ensure their wellbeing in every sense.

This sentiment was echoed by Eco. Prov. 3 who commented that most travellers like to ‘travel to...destinations that work’. Providing a counter-argument, Eco. Prov. 4 stated that with hotel occupancy of 52%, ‘we have infrastructure...we have half of the infrastructure still to be filled’, although he acknowledged that there is scope for gently building on what already exists.

4.3.6 Marketing

As mentioned in Section 4.3.4, using digital tools to market the ecotourism offerings was deemed primordial. Additionally, participants stressed the notion of security ‘projecting the image of a pacified country’ (Eco. Prov. 4), marketing to both the foreign (Eco. Prov. 4) and to the domestic markets (Eco. Prov. 1 and 2) and using storytelling to get people to ‘fall in love with other types of products’ (Pol. 3). They recommended creating packages (Eco. Prov. 2) with experiences and marketing Colombia’s diversity to Europeans and Americans (Eco. Prov. 3). Several niche markets were suggested, including backpackers as they are the executives of the future and could bring a convention here in 20 years (Eco. Prov. 4), 20–40 year olds who have seen the change from ‘the most dangerous place in the world’ and whose ‘perception has shifted’ to ‘one of the trendiest destinations in the world’ (Pol. 3) and bird-watchers (Pol. 2, Pol. 3, Eco. Prov. 2, Eco. Prov. 3 and Trav. 1) as they are very sophisticated and have a large spending power although Eco. Prov. 2 wonders about the size of this market realistically. Sports tourists interested in activities such as rafting (Pol. 3), fishing in ‘rivers that are absolutely virgin’ (Ind. Inv. 2) and solo female trekkers was a surprising suggestion from Pol. 2. Those attracted by specific flora and fauna could be targeted (Eco. Prov. 4) as could the well-being tourism market specifically linked to ancestral medicine (Pol. 3) or with a high level of comfort (Eco. Prov. 3). The last niche to be suggested was the Afro-American population ‘because they are people who are today looking for their roots and one of the most important diasporas in the world of Afro people is Colombia’ (Pol. 2). The stakeholders in the Colombian ecotourist field have clearly considered a wide range of natural and socio-cultural elements in their quest for new markets to target.

4.3.7 Education

Training of locals was mentioned above and was considered a vital part of the future of Colombian ecotourism (Eco. Prov. 2) to ensure not only a quality of service and related guest satisfaction but economic growth for the local communities.

4.3.8 Strategy

Politicians expressed a desire to see a bottom-up approach where communities ‘create tourist packages’ (Pol. 1) while ecotourism provider Eco. Prov. 3 would prefer more government involvement. Eco. Prov. 1 held a more balanced view with ‘local, regional and national entities’ working together. Planning was considered vital by Eco. Prov. 2 while Pol. 1 would like to see a professionalisation of the tourist industry, potentially overlapping with the area



of education mentioned above. Finally, both the outsider investor and Eco. Prov. 3 perceived the decriminalisation of drugs as being the only way to move forward into a lasting peace.

5 CONCLUSION

This work had, as its aim, to answer the research question: How could ecotourism contribute to building lasting peace in Colombia? Following an in-depth analysis of the accounts of 12 Colombian ecotourism stakeholders, it can clearly be seen that the country has the potential to turn to ecotourism to contribute to building a sustainable peace through its bountiful and unique untouched lands and its natural and cultural diversity. However, the path to lasting peace does not appear to be straightforward and several recommendations including marketing, specifically digitally, to particular niches, educating locals and improving national security and infrastructure and creating a solid ecotourism strategy have been put forward as suggestions for action by politicians and invested stakeholders in ecotourism.

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