

Ecotourism in Panama – the Way to Increase the Tourism

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Abstract

Panama is one of the poorest countries in the world, but has the advantage of having a rich flora and fauna, with many national parks. The government has decided to thrive in tourism, especially in ecotourism, the newest form of tourism because has a good strategy to grow this sector - there is this natural wealth and there is local workforce.

Taking into account the evolution of the tourism industry, in this article we will focus on the strategies that have been implemented both locally and at the country level, using the fundamental research method and the observation method of the phenomenon of industrialization in Panama, being done in a beautiful area that is the hospitality industry.

At the end of the article we will highlight the strengths of the strategy that can be used as a model of good practice in other countries.

Key words: ecotourism, tourism, management, strategies

J.E.L. classification: M21, O44, Q26, Q57

1. Introduction

In recent years, the economy of the Republic of Panama, a small country located at the intersection of the two parts of mainland America, having borders on the west with Costa Rica, on the south-east with Colombia, with the Pacific Ocean on the south and on the north with the Caribbean Sea, a surprising evolution from the economic point of view reaching a constant growth of the GDP, a nonlinear growth, but a growth that amazes us for a country very little industrialized and with very little tourism in the past.

In the last 7 years, according to the WTTC, which published a study "Travel & tourism power and performance report", which shows that this sector has grown a lot worldwide and Panama obtained in 2017 Total Travel & Tourism contribution to GDP, 8,504.3 US \$ Millions (real 2017 prices and exchange rates), (WTTC - 2018). And in the world of Latin America, from the point of view of economic growth, reflected in GDP, in 2017 a place 6. (WEF Forum, 2018).

The population of this country is about 4 million inhabitants, with a rich cultural diversity there being Métis, Americans, Indians (from India), Chinese, Africans, Mulatrians, whites, who brought with them their own culture and traditions.

In the top 10 of the most sought after places as an ecotourism destination there is the island of Bocas del Toro, in the Republic of Panama with wonderful beaches, a chocolate plantation, tree houses and farm food (Every Step, 2019), makes us think that I chose a very profitable and good destination for this article.

The way in which this growth was achieved has become important because it can prove another way to improve tourism and especially ecotourism, because there, they developed this tourism with the protection of nature, due to the multitude of protected areas.

2. Theoretical background

The word ecotourism comes from the union of two great concepts ecology and tourism. Ecology is the science that deals with the study of ecosystems, with the study of the interaction between biocenosis and biotope, with the study of living organisms in the existential environment. Ecology is the basic concept for sustainable development, because studying the biosphere and the influence of pollutants on the environment draws our attention to man-made skids and the need to conserve nature. Tourism is a growing industry, which involves travel, visits from home to other destinations involving the development of humanity in terms of history, culture, philosophy by absorbing new knowledge about both nature and economic evolution. Ecotourism is the form that combines ecology, environmental protection with tourism, with the greed of people to know new destinations, new cultures, new people.

Ecotourism was initially named as an "alternative tourism" and some authors think that this type of tourism is dedicated to rich tourists who travel to exotic areas or young people who go with their backpacks spending little money. (Wearing et al, 1999, pg.10)

Currently, thanks to the International Society of Ecotourism, founded in 1990, which had developed principles, guidelines, standards, training and educational resources, it is known exactly how ecotourism works. This form of tourism is very helpful for countries with rich natural resources, but poor in terms of tourism, because it creates added local value by attracting tourists both by the beauty of places and the discovery of traditions and employs local labor, increasing the economic level locally, and Republic of Panama is a good example for ecotourism.

3. Research methodology

Everything in ecotourism is very new in Republic of Panama because the whole article is based on information placed on some books and on the Internet, and true truths have been collected from government websites such as the Ministry of Environment, the Ministry of Tourism, the World Tourism Organization, etc. all that is new and the method used was the fundamental research method, a research based on the phenomenon and the observation method by which we identify the possibilities by which the growth of ecotourism in Panama can lead to the growth of ecotourism in other countries.

It is true that usually the fundamental research must be carried out until the beginning of tourism in that country, but considering that the development of the country has been done in the last years, we will refer to the evolution of the past quite a bit.

4. The study of evolution of tourism and ecotourism in Republic of Panama

Tourism started with the first trips after food, clothing and pleasure and knowledge and developed step by step for a better world, where communication, education, learning and commerce have the power to make evolution. Ecotourism is the newest form of tourism, environmentally friendly tourism, but even if it exists as a concept in 2002, it was still thought that it would be very difficult to create this tourism time. In order to achieve this, several conditions must be met (Drumm *et al*, 2005, p 74):

- to have information on the ecotourism market,
- to have an information about the physical conditions (accommodation, amsa, attractions, etc.) existing,
- to offer an ecotourism program,
- to have related services,
- to train the local community,
- to make an investment according to the expectations of the investor
- be organized in a natural area.

Table no. 1 presents the results of a survey of 66 U.S. tour operators which at that time offered in-kind entertainment in 271 destinations in Africa, Europe, Antarctica, Asia, North America, Alaska and Canada and South America. The best known destination was and is currently Costa Rica, the first country who develop ecotourism in the world.

Table no. 1. The most Popular Destinations in Latin America

Country	Number of US outbound operators who identified this as one of their primary destinations	Percentage
Costa Rica	37	56
Galapagos Islands	32	48
Peru	29	44
Mexico	27	41
Belize	26	39
Chile	18	27
Argentina	16	24
Ecuador	16	24
Brazil	14	21
Bolivia	11	17
Caribbean	11	17
Guatemala	10	15
Venezuela	10	15
Panama	9	14
Others	5	8
Total of respondents	66	100

Source (Drumm et al, 2005,56)

Tourism has always been an important part of the GDP, from the Republic of Panama, due to the Panama Canal, the beaches and the Colon free area, tourists coming to these places for rest, curiosity and shopping. Lately, especially after the last global crisis, a little perspective has changed, as the authorities have become more transparent and have also forced banks to participate in the Organization for Economic Co-operation (OECD) Standard.

Image no. 1. Parks in Panama



Source (<http://www.ecotourismpanama.com/national-parks.htm>)

The evolution of tourism is due, on one hand to the existence of a well-developed transport network and to the fact that this network is expanding to be as easy as possible to reach different parts of the country, and on the other hand, to the existence of natural parks that include terrestrial and aquatic beauties of nature, some of which are in UNESCO heritage.

The 14 parks, which cover an area of 5 million hectares, represent 25% of the country's surface, and in the future to this percentage will be added another 4% of conserved lands, protected lands.

Each of these parks are unique with tropical forests, with lilies and orchids, which descend to the edge of lakes, rivers and the Panama Canal, where we find different populations, such as harpy eagle, sow, parrot, quetzal, turtle, a multitude of turtles, species of monkeys, etc.

Currently, the government has made various changes to help the development of tourism and especially of ecotourism by lowering taxes, by ratifying the principles of ecotourism and its application in protected areas. Thus they put into practice these principles:

- educating locals and tourists
- decrease of the impact of the tourism activity
- tourism activity that brings benefits for the locals
- offering tax exemptions or other financial opportunities for visitors and hosts
- awareness of benefits at all levels, local and national
- the responsibility of the locals for the natural environment, cultural and traditions
- supporting international agreements on reducing or even disappearing poverty and respecting human rights.

These principles were the basis of the development of a plan, of a national strategy in tourism, which proved in 2012, that it did not reach maturity even though all the actors were involved - players in the hospitality industry, even using a participatory method and inclusive, which brought ecotourism to local communities, but as you know everything takes time.

After this beginning, in 2015, the authorities of Panama launched the Green Tourism Plan, which is applied only in nine protected areas, considered priority areas and based on a new strategy that involves seven strategic points.

This strategy, built for the development of ecotourism in Panama (UNTWO, 2018) is based on the following points:

- building a country brand that brings to the fore nature, culture and traditions,
- offering ecotourism products,
- improving the competitiveness of the products offered in various natural areas,
- stimulation of the demand for ecotourism on the internal and external market through the concentration of specialized groups,
- maximizing the benefits for the locals,
- governance through the involvement of public authorities, private partners and the community,
- sustainable economic, social and ecological development.

Applying this strategy they built the infrastructure that allows easier access to the protected areas, a subway line, roads, lanes, hotels and restaurants, thus increasing the entire infrastructure of the hospitality industry, not just the ecotourism area, because is a good collaboration between the authorities, NGOs and the bussines enviroment

The education of the inhabitants and the development of the ecotourism by offering cultural attractions that are specific to the place, offering a guide, which involves visits to tropical areas with animals and birds that tourists have ideas for, but has not seen until now, offering handmade objects and the participation of tourists in the execution of some of the objects leads to the increase of the tourists' satisfaction, to the implicit increase of the number of satisfied tourists, which will lead to the increase of the number of tourists worldwide. By educating the locals to become guides, drivers, cooks, plant collectors, artisans, hoteliers, we also get an increase in the local economy and a decrease in poverty.

Developing the site <https://visitpanama.com/> and promoting the Republic of Panama as a tourism and ecotourism destination, together with all the above, the number of tourists has increased compared to 2016, in 2017 by 140%, and the revenues from tourism until July 2017 will be equal to those of the whole year 2014.

5. Conclusions

In 2017 was the International Year of Tourism 2017 and the main challenges that have been highlighted in tourism are: social inclusion, poverty reduction through employment and qualification, retraining of the labor force; sustainable development in the economy; environmental protection through the efficient use of resources and climate change; diversity, culture and heritage and peace and security through mutual understanding.

In this article we have shown that the Republic of Panama foresaw and developed tourism based on sustainable development and showed that any natural area can become an area where the tourist and tourism are at home, along with the locals in that area.

A country like the Republic of Panama, which has a huge income due to the Panama Canal, which unites the Pacific and Atlantic oceans is a country with major possibilities in tourism as well, having both natural and human potential. It was enough for the local population to be trained, to build an infrastructure to attract more and more tourists and to develop the safest way of tourism - ecotourism.

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