

Motivations and Valued Attributes of Ecotourism in a Natural Protected Area: Santay Island (Ecuador)

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Abstract

Natural protected areas have become more appealing destinations for tourists. Although the concept of nature protection and the declaration of protected areas is old, scientific overview of this attractiveness is of a more recent date. This article empirically investigates three variables, with respect to the sociodemographic profile, motivations to visit and attributes valued by ecotourists that visited a Ramsar wetland of international importance: Santay Island, in Ecuador. This National Protected Area located in the middle of 2 cities, offers a green and recreational place for ecotourists' relaxation. The analysis is based on 1002 on-site surveys collected from tourists visiting this isle. The results indicate that the ecotourists that visit the place are mostly national young people motivated by intellectual, interpersonal, challenge and relaxation aspects, except for the one related to gastronomy. Results highlight that the most valuable attribute of the the touristic destination is public security. Given the scarcity of information and research on Community-Based ecotourism in the region, there is a dire need for additional baseline data.

Keywords: Protected area, Ecotourism, Sustainable tourism, Motivation, Ramsar Sites.

1. Introduction

The natural surrounding is a basic factor to take into account in the expansion of ecotourism. It is difficult to quantify nature tourism; there are no centralized data available on the number of tourists even in developed countries (Minciu, Padurean, Popescu, & Hornoiu, 2012). The World Tourism Organization (2014) informs that, around 6.4 million travelers a year in Europe are eager to integrate into natural ambient. There is a segment of tourists that demand new cultural and nature experiences (Maldonado, 2007). Latin America is a region that stands out in this matter. Countries such as Bolivia, Costa Rica, Argentina and Ecuador show significant development and offer for recreation and relaxation.

In the case of Ecuador, there is some academic research that deals with this economic sector; the most relevant are from Ruiz-Ballesteros (2011), Erskine and Meyer (2012), Everingham (2015) and Gascón (2015). Ecuador, located in South America, has a privileged position to undertake and develop sustainable tourism due to its mega biodiversity. According to the Environment Conservation Monitoring Center, 17 countries are in the category of mega biodiverse and shelter from 60% to 70% of the biodiversity of the planet (Bravo, 2013). The heterogeneousness of flora and fauna of Ecuador is globally recognized because of the conservation efforts by local government and rural communities who have committed to protect and sustainably manage the biodiversity. Some examples are the UNESCO state of World Heritage Sites given to Galapagos and Sangay National Parks, also the designation as Biosphere Reserve to the Yasuní Park; and the World Wild Fund's accolade for a significant contribution to the protection of the living world with the identification of Galapagos and the Llanganates-Sangay Ecological Corridor as the "Gifts to the Earth". Also, this country embraces 2 of the 25 worldwide biodiversity hotspots (Ministry of Tourism, 2007)

Ecuador counts with a National System of Protected Areas that includes 51 preserved zones under the aegis of the State. These fields represent 26% of the Ecuadorian territory, in which 18 wetlands are considered Ramsar Sites (1.01% of national space) (Ministry of Tourism, 2007; Ministry of Environment, 2015). Santay Island is an International Importance Ramsar Site (Ramsar List, 2015).

The touristic and recreational usage of ecosystems of Ecuador has long trajectory, mostly in terms of the development of ecotourism and community-based tourism, which are essentially linked to protected areas, landscape beauty and cultural resources. In Ecuador, tourism is the third highest contributing sector for the national economy, without considering the oiling sector. Tourism represents a level of income of \$ 1,086.00 million in 2014 coming from the arrival of 1'557,000 foreigners who are mostly motivated thanks to the performance of government marketing actions and international awards (Ministry of Tourism, 2014). This nation has won international awards such as "Ecuador: World's Leading Green Destination", "Quito: South America's Leading Destination" in 2013, 2014 and 2015; FinchBay Eco Hotel in Galapagos won the World's Leading Green Hotel 2014, Cuenca: World's Leading Adventure Tourism Destination 2014 and the Ecuadorian train cruise gained the nomination of South America's Leading Luxury Train 2014; also, The New York Times named Ecuador as a paradise to discover (Ministry of Tourism, 2015)

REDTURS is a Latin American network, supported by the International Labour Organization, which gathers communities, institutions and human resources that share the vision of sustainable development of community-based tourism (CBT). This network helps to strengthen small rural businesses and contributing the accomplishment of 3 objectives of the United Nations millennium development goals: eradicating extreme poverty and hunger, promoting gender equality, and ensuring environmental sustainability (Maldonado, 2007). Some documents prepared by the STEP (Sustainable Tourism- Eliminating Poverty) program give an approximation about the touristic potential, poverty indexes, and the presence of cooperation in Ecuador (WTO, 2002). Furthermore, this data sets up the basis for the design of the "Sustainable Tourism Development Strategic Plan 2020" for Ecuador. This course of action brings direction to the development of competitive management of sustainable tourism so that human development is achieved in harmony with nature. This plan registers the inventory of 1634 tourist attractions in Ecuador; 712 count as nature sites and 923 as ancestral cultural practices (63% are preserved and unaltered and 37% must be recovered). As for the Ecuadorian portfolio of tourist products, there are 3 main lines: Ecotourism, cultural tourism and community-based tourism. The aforementioned inventory counted 35 ecotourism destinations, 17 cultural places and 30 CBT destinations (Ministry of Tourism, 2007).

The Ecuadorian Ecotourism Association (2002) identifies ecotourism as the one performed in natural areas corresponding or not to the National System of Protected Areas. Natural wealth contrasts with consumption and production systems that lack sustainability and threaten the integrity of ecosystems. This dimension represents a great challenge to accelerate the introduction of better practices of clean production, ecological efficiency and analogous enforcement of more responsible behaviors with the environment in order to comply with world's scale ecotourism destinations. In these circumstances, the present article aims to present the analysis of the situation of a tourist destination in a natural protected area: Santay Island, located in Durán (Ecuador-South America), through the discussion of a field study conducted throughout the year 2015. This paper pretends to analyze the socio-demographic profile, motivations, and attributes of the tourists that visit the isle; and in this manner contribute to cover an area little discussed in the literature in the region. In addition, by formulating recommendations, the material may foster the debate about the touristic structuring in this geographical zone. The remainder of this paper is organized as follows: the first section is the introduction to the geographical area; the second section provides a theoretical framework. The third section presents the methodology used in the research; a fourth section reports the results of the empirical study and finally, the last section concludes.

1.1 Description of the geographical area

Santay island is located at the delta of Guayas River. There is a distance of 800 meters from the city of Guayaquil. This continental space has 4,705 hectares of flooding forest and tropical dry forest and gives habitat to various threatened and protected-by-national legislation species of animals and biological diversity. This terrain gives shelter to a great number of aquatic breeds that migrate to the rivers and the sea. These unique characteristics make this wetland accounts the designation of #1041 world's Ramsar of International Importance since year 2000.



Figure 1: Geographical location of Santay Island

Source: <https://www.google.es/maps/>

Santay island is the homeland of seven species of existing mangroves in Ecuador; they cover almost half of its territory. The fauna of the island has a diverse array of birds, reptiles and mammals. This wetland guards 60 vegetable species, 12 reptile varieties and 128 kinds of birds, which 12 are registered as vulnerable and threatened in the List of International Trade in Endangered species and the World Conservation Union (Rodríguez et al., 1995).

The designation of the island as a Ramsar site has compelled an Environmental Management Plan dependent on the conservation and sustainability of the location. Thus, policies and objectives were established in order to control the interventions over the wetland and the community of San Jacinto de Santay. In the framework of national and international policies of environmental protection, it was declared as a National Recreational Area and added to the National Patrimony of Protected Areas in 2010 (Ministry of Environment, 2011). The declaration of Santay as a protected zone and its international importance forbids from transforming it into urban solutions (Navas, 2013). The Ministry of Environment of Ecuador regulates and establishes the sustainable usage of the island, where 56 families composed by 245 inhabitants live. Santay is divided into zones of: restoration (697, 94 ha.), conservation (1,069 ha.), multiple uses (59 ha.) and 252 ha. for a strict conservation sub-zone. The citizens of the island are grouped together in the Association of Settlers San Jacinto de Santay, they have 96.69 hectares of the island destined to offer community ecotourism and they are responsible for the conservation of the Ramsar wetland. (Ministry of Environment, 2013).

The ecotourism Project of Santay Island generates positive externalities in the intervention areas as a green and recreational place located a few minutes from the city of Guayaquil. Each element of the infrastructure at Santay has a moderate environmental impact and is properly planned in order to preserve and care its habitat, therefore no natural phase of its ecosystems is interrupted. The Ministry of Environment of Ecuador (2013) has developed a Financial and Functionality Sustainability Plan for this Recreational Area that includes the usage of its areas for ecotourism to assure economic sustainability. Although access to the National Protected Area is free of charge, all community-based tourist services yield income to the population.

In June 2014, a bridge that connects Santay Island to the city of Guayaquil was opened, producing an exponential growth in the number of visitors as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Visitors at Santay Island, years 2012-2015

Year	Number of visitors	Visitor's growth rate
2012	900	n/a
2013	22,309	2379 %
2014	717,818	3118 %
2015	491,715	-31 %

Source: Ministry of Environment, 2015

2. Theoretical Background

There is no doubt that tourism is a complex and fascinating phenomenon in perpetual interaction with economic, psychological, social and cultural elements (Burns, 2004). The ecotourism segment has shown the fastest growth in the global tourism sector. In response to the fast growth of the touristic trends shown in the past decades, there is increasing demand for natural spaces for tourism use (WTO, 2008). Domestic tourism is also exhaustively practiced at these types of sites (Tudorache, 2009; Minciu et. al., 2012). Therefore, it is necessary to bring about a model to lower environmental impact and create a level of development that satisfies the tourists, the community, and the tour operators' needs with sustainable criteria (Flores, Hernández, Muñoz, López & Mendoza, 2012). There is a wide range of tourism types and their number and classes keep developing; one of them is ecotourism.

Ecotourism is defined as a travel experience that highlights nature and contributes to the conservation of ecosystems while respecting the integrity of communities. Thus, this type of tourism involves practicing an economic conduct in a pleasant environment, blazed with refreshing and unaltered scenic views. The practice of ecotourism requires protected zones or touristic resources, which are designed to study, admire nature, recreation and physical and mental recovery (Batea, 2013).

The International Ecotourism Society (2015), as well as Andrei, Chiritescu & Gogonea (2013) converge defining ecotourism as the responsible travel to natural, least modified by man, areas that use every endeavor to preserve the environment, showcase cultures, alleviates poverty (Cohen, 1988; Mbaiwa, 2008), reduces inequality (Croes & Rivera, 2015) and offer employment opportunities (Hunt, Durhan, Driscoll & Honey, 2015). Its principles are the minimization of impact, biodiversity protection, construction of environmental conscience, and respect for local culture. The main attractions for ecotourists are the flora, fauna, and cultural patrimony and it offers the enjoyment of natural landscapes and cohabitation with local population.

Ecotourism offers the possibility of interacting with nature. This becomes a source of knowledge to the visitors, not only by experiencing wildlife ecotourism but also through environmental education for adults (Walter, 2013), increasing their human capital by using the ecosystemic natural assets (Barrantes & Flores, 2013). In this respect, the minimum availability of relatively unaltered places has stimulated the use of rural spaces. In other cases, this alternative type of tourism is performed in Natural Protected Areas (Weaver, 2005). This may boost the level of attraction of the experience (Reinius & Fredman, 2007). Nature tourism has an important contribution to environmental protection, biodiversity conservation, and heritage protection for the people under the name of ecotourism, rural tourism, cultural tourism, and tourism in protected areas. It includes the active involvement and the responsible behavior of tourists in environmental protection and the implementation of appropriate policies, facilities for tourists, and proper management (Zenelaj & Prifti, 2013). Over time, concerns for nature conservation materialized in a broad range of actions covering a diversity of issues: development of specific regulations, establishment of the management bodies, settlement of protected areas, design of complex management systems, etc. (Smaranda, 2008; Batea, 2013).

Tourism in protected areas is essentially motivated by the wish to spend leisure time in a clean, quiet, less crowded nature and begin a journey of miscellaneous experiences, including: adventure, climbing, hiking, nature photography, bird and animal watching, knowledge, learning, etc. (Minciu et. al., 2012). In the narrower sense, Andrei et. al. (2013) explains that ecotourism is based on the admiration of nature, offering tourism products in the forms of cultural tourism, and scientific research as practiced in countries with extraordinary biodiversity which have natural reserves, national parks, and local communities that customs and traditions have been preserved unaltered. At the same time, ecotourism is raising more awareness of the need to protect the environment by adopting a responsible attitude. In this context, Swarbrooke (2009) pointed out that besides traditional criteria of price, service quality, and facilities; there is an increasing concern for the quality of the environment when choosing a destination.

The available literature shows that the conducted studies have circumscribed on sustainable ecotourism development, mainly focused on the identification, analysis, and promotion of sustainable forms of travel that better promotes conservation than any other economic sector (Hunt et. al., 2015). Tourism, it is well known, is an important user of natural resources and therefore has a significant participation in the decaying of the natural and human environment. An exacerbation of tours will intensify its negative repercussions (Vanhove, 2005; Goodwin, 2011). At the same time, tourism also has the necessary means to counteract such effects, firstly with the practice of area-specific management methods (Smaranda, 2008; Batea, 2013); also with the promotion of its sustainable forms, including: ecotourism, rural tourism, agri-tourism, adventure tourism, cultural tourism, and tourism in protected areas, and encouraging tourists to ensure the mitigation of their negative consequences (Hornoiu, 2009). Even though ecotourism and sustainable tourism are not synonymous, it is a fact that environmental sustainability is one of the most critical challenges for economic growth and for the wellness of people (UNEP, 2011). However, if ecotourism is to contribute to sustainable development,

it must be economically viable, environmentally appropriate, and socio culturally acceptable (Meier & Ham, 2009).

Following Ochoa, Johannie, & Márquez, (2013), Santillán (2015), Butler & Hinch, (2007), ecotourism is an opportunity for economic development, conservation and generation of benefits to the community, compatible with the objectives of a protected area (De Menezes, 2005). Authors such as Velázquez-Sánchez, Gómez-Velázquez, Bohórquez, Solana & Pérez (2015); Hitchner, Lapu Apu, Tarawe, Galih-Sinah, Aran & Yesaya (2009); and Stone (2015) affirm that there are 3 aspects that explain the vision of local development from the community and the projects of ecotourism: First, the presence of facilities offering ecotourism services; second, the community participation and empowerment in the service; last, the community sustainability through an equitable distribution of benefits.

The responsibility of preservation is a concern of the tourists in parallel with that of suppliers of the host communities, who have to monitor not only the economic results but also the conservation of the natural environment, traditions, and cultural values. Hence, the sustainability of ecotourism is possible when it supplies tourist facilities that maintain a high level of tourist's satisfaction and ensure a meaningful experience that responds to their needs, motivations and perceptions (Bramwell, 1994; Jafari, 1997; Benson, 2014).

Tourism literature generally glances through tourist behavior. Therefore, one's preferences and motives to visit certain destinations are subject of investigation. Minciu (2004) highlights the importance of identifying tourists' motivations based on leisure, business reasons, family and friends' visits, medical treatments, and religion. Another view based on Maslow's model (Rogheb LMS model) describes the components of tourism motivational factors: intellectual component such as learning and exploration; the social component that implies the need for interpersonal relationship and to be respected by others; the challenge component usually engaged in natural areas; and the relaxation element that seeks for solitude and peace (Mahika, 2011).

Minciu *et. al.* (2012) considered the determinants of the buying decision and the effects of consumption of ecological holidays. Therefore, the tourist profile is reflected in the motivation to travel. At the same time, the features of the location define a specific image thereof. The option for a certain destination and further consumption, results from the arrangement of the features, motivation and image with the expectations of the tourists.

Burton (2005) classified the visitors of protected areas as hard-core nature tourists, nature dedicated tourists, mainstream nature tourists, and casual nature tourists. Another classification given by Tapper and Cochrane (2005) identifies categories such as the explorers, backpackers, high volume tourists, general interest tourists, and special interest tourists. Each of those kinds of tourists meets a number of characteristics that are part of their behavior and are important to manage promotion programs of protected areas and to ensure sustainable development of ecological tourism.

Plog (2002) and Ryan (2003) emphasize motivations rather than behavior, so they describe a motivation for novelty of the travel destination and the motivation of venturesomeness. The paper of Reisinger and Turner (2002) points out that culture influences a person's relation towards nature, and then it offers a new perspective that tourists have a basic preference for either natural or cultural environment when pursuing a destination. By knowing the motives that make the tourists opt for the ecological destination, this study intends to contribute to the emerging literature in the region.

3. Methodological Aspects

3.1 Data collection instrument

Data were collected through a survey based on previous works (Yang & Wall, 2009; Dodds *et al.*, 2010; López-Guzmán *et al.*, 2011), applied to a representative sample of visitors at Santay Island. It responds to three groups of variables with respect to the tourists visiting the island: First, the socio demographic profile of the tourist; second, the motivation to go; and third, the evaluation of different attributes associated to the isle as a tourist destination. Respondents were asked to indicate the gender, age, education level, professional category, country of origin and monthly income, pertaining to understanding the socio demographic profile. In addition, respondents were asked to rate the importance of each of 13 different items connected with motivation and attributes of the place. To this end, closed and Likert scale questions were included in the survey.

Data was collected via convenience sampling, commonly used where the respondents are available in a determined space at a determined time (Finn *et al.*, 2000). The survey was distributed in Spanish and English at the tourist venue of Santay island from June to September, 2015. The tourists filled the self-administered and anonymous survey with entire independence. A test of 25 surveys was done in order to detect possible deviations and errors. A total of 1046 surveys were distributed but 1002 resulted valid. The respondents were selected randomly, in keeping with the

requirements of probability principles. The sample was not stratified by any variable (e.g. gender or country of origin) because of the lack of previous investigations that support the stratification. The refusal rate was very low and of no significance to any variable. The survey unit is the tourists after the visit to the island, the first question made to the selected persons was if their habitual residence was in the city of Guayaquil, excluding them if the answer was affirmative, with an investigated population from the total number of visitors to the island of 717,818 persons in 2014. Therefore, it may be estimated that the sample is 95% representative, with a $\pm 3.1\%$ margin of error for the investigated population. Under these circumstances, the results may be extrapolated to the entire population without reticence.

3.2 Information processing and interpretation

This research uses descriptive quantitative approach to analyze the data. The collected data is organized, tabulated and interpreted using the IBM SPSS Statistics 22 program. The result of the surveys is analyzed using a statistical test of reliability (Cronbach’s Alpha) to evaluate the metric properties of the instrument applied. In addition, the result is studied using the statistical data model to study the differences among group means in the analysis of variance (ANOVA) with the purpose of comparing groups of quantitative variables by using gender as differentiation variable for further examination and discussion purposes.

4. Results and Discussion

Table 2 summarizes the results obtained, differentiated by gender, the socio-demographic profile of the survey respondents considering age, education, nationality, profession and income.

Table 2. Socio-demographic profile of tourists.

Variable	Male (N = 481)	Female (N =521)	Contingency Coefficient
Age (years old)(N=1002)			
Less than 30	36.9%	48.8%	
30-39	23.9%	22.3%	
40-49	21.8%	15.7%	
50-59	11.4%	8.6%	0.130
60-69	4.8%	4.0%	(0.004)
older than 70	1.2%	0.6%	
Education (N=1002)			
Elementary	3.3%	3.6%	
Secondary	38.9%	44.9%	0.066
University	57.8%	51.5%	(0.364)
Nationality (N=1002)			
Ecuadorian	70.9%	70.6%	
American	8.1%	6.0%	
Spanish	3.1%	2.1%	0.230
German	1.7%	3.6%	(0.001)
Other	16.2%	17.7%	
Profession (N=1002)			
Director/Entrepreneur	9.4%	3.1%	
Independent Professional	26.3%	18.4%	
Public servant	14.8%	12.7%	
Employee	22.9%	21.5%	0.298
Household chores	0.4%	15.5%	(0.000)
Student	21.6%	24.5%	
Unemployed	0.2%	1.0%	
Retired	4.4%	3.3%	
Monthly income in US dollars (N=859)			
Less than 500	23.1%	36.5%	
500 - 749	15.3%	14.0%	0.184
750 - 999	14.4%	14.9%	(0.000)
1,000 - 1,249	14.6%	14.3%	

1,250 - 1,499	9.7%	9.0%
1,500 - 1,749	5.2%	2.3%
1,750 - 2,000	4.0%	2.3%
More than 2,000	13.7%	6.7%

Source: processed data.

The results from table 2 allow us to observe that the tourists visiting Santay Island are, by majority, younger than 40 years old (70% of respondents). Likewise, the monthly income is majorly below US\$ 1,000. It also stands out the fact that men and women were mostly domestic visitors (about 70% in both cases), followed by tourists coming from the United States.

In regard of the motivations of the tourists visiting Santay, table 3 summarizes the results differentiating the gender. It displays values using a Likert-type scale of 5 points, in which 1 means "Not at all" and 5, "Very much".

Table 3. Motivations for the visit (Santay Island).

Motivation	Male	Female	F and (level of significance)
Desire to visit new destinations	4.79	4.84	1.740 (0.191)
Spend time with family and/or friends	4.76	4.85	4.865 (0.028)
Contact with nature	4.70	4.71	0.016 (0.901)
Disconnect from routine	4.67	4.70	0.226 (0.634)
Accessible tourist destination	4.64	4.62	0.106 (0.745)
Discover the natural wealth	4.64	4.62	0.250 (0.617)
Search of tranquility	4.59	4.58	0.064 (0.800)
Fame and reputation of the tourist destination	4.42	4.48	1.066 (0.302)
Practice sports	4.12	4.20	0.890 (0.346)
Visit the interpretation center	4.09	4.16	0.725 (0.395)
Taste the gastronomy	3.59	3.66	0.648 (0.421)
Shop handcrafts	2.89	3.20	8.567 (0.004)

Source: Processed data.

It is noticed from table 3 that all motivations, except the one related to gastronomy, received a score higher than 4. We consider that these results reinforce the quality of this tourist destination. The three most valued motivations for men are the desire to visit new places, spend time with family and friends, and have contact with nature. As for women, the most appreciated motivations are the same first two but in reverse order, and the third remains equal. Of these findings, we note that there is no significance between gender and the motivations to visit Santay, except for the motivations to shop handcrafts and spend time with family and/or friends.

The Cronbach's alpha coefficient of the final scale reaches a value of 0.843, which indicates a commendable internal consistency among the scale items. The coefficient can take on any value less than or equal to 1, where zero indicates total absence of internal consistency and one means total redundancy among the items; Morales et al. (2003) consider as a desirable minimum value of 0.5 for basic research and over 0.85 for advanced researches. The critical level (p) associated with the F- statistic (323.247) in the analysis of the variance to test the null hypothesis that all items on the scale have the same mean (ANOVA) is less than 0.001. This reveals that it is not possible to maintain the hypothesis that the means of the elements are equal.

Regarding the attributes of the island, table 4 presents the valuation of those attributes, which are important to the visitor, assorted by gender, when choosing a destination. Again, a Likert scale was used to perform the assessment, being 1, "Unimportant" and 5, "Very important".

Table 4. Attributes of the Santay Island, differentiated by gender

Attributes	Male	Female	F and (level of significance)
Renew and fulfill myself of energy	4.53	4.62	3.536 (0.060)
Public security	4.34	4.38	3.028 (0.082)
Opportunity to shop	3.13	3.40	6.265 (0.013)

Source: Processed data.

Three attributes with levels of significance between men and women are presented in table 4. The first characteristic of this destination allows tourists to enjoy from a place of relaxation that they value very positively in relation to their personal welfare. It is also interesting to point out the high score given to public security; this is an essential aspect to achieve the consolidation of this tourist location. There are some aspects to improve; the shopping variety, mostly handicrafts, is one element in need of reinforcement. Hence, this amelioration in the touristic offer may lead to reinforcement in the local community income.

At last, another Likert scale of 5 points was asked to the examined sample in order to know if they would agree to recommend the visit to Santay island, male and female respondents scored a mean of 4.77 and 4.83 respectively ($F = 3,361$; level of significance = 0,067). We consider that this high scoring is highly related with the tourist satisfaction that is undoubtedly the best publicity for a tourist place.

The Cronbach's alpha coefficient of the final scale reaches a value of 0.873, which indicates a commendable internal consistency among the scale items. The critical level (p) associated with the F - statistic (114.262) in the analysis of the variance to test the null hypothesis that all items on the scale have the same mean (ANOVA) and it is less than 0.001. This reveals that is not possible to maintain the hypothesis that the means of the elements are equal.

5. Conclusions

The planning and implementation of tourism in natural protected areas that are fostered and managed by the community are becoming a way to reinforce the economic growth of those geographical zones. In accordance with the theoretical framework, a tourist destination is opted for consumption when it harmonizes the features, image and motivation with the expectations. In this sense, the tourists visiting Santay island find their motivations on leisure, family and friends and health (Minciu, 2004) and their motivational factors such as intellectual, social, challenge and relaxation (Mahika, 2011) are studied in this paper.

This paper presented a study of a Ramsar site of international importance, Santay island, located in Ecuador. It is a wetland and national protected area at scarce distance from the city of Guayaquil, where a tourist activity is building up as a complementary economic activity from the traditional of the local community. In this study, we have exhibited the disaggregated results by gender in order to give a more accurate image of the socio demographic profile of the visitor. The main results indicate that the island is majorly visited by local tourists. This implies the need of international promotional campaigns to let foreigners know about this natural space. It is observed that the main motivations to visit the island, for both groups, but in reverse order, are the desire to visit new places and spend time with family and friends, as well as contacting with nature. It is also necessary to improve the gastronomy of the island with the purpose of turning it into another motivation to visit the zone and reinforce the handicrafts business offered by the local community.

After analyzing the results shown in the tables, we consider that the visitor can be described a *casual nature tourist* of protected areas (Burton, 2005) and can also be classified as a *high volume tourist* (Tapper & Cochrane, 2005). This is on the grounds that the profile describes an individual preferring to travel in groups and enjoying superficial aspects of local culture, the natural landscapes, and wildlife if they are readily accessible.

Finally, the obtained results may become useful to plan and manage this community-based tourism endeavor begun mainly since June 2014 when the pedestrian bridge that connects the island with Guayaquil was opened. In any study of this nature, there are certain limitations in the data gathering, the main constraint is that it was collected during a determined period of time, this limit constitutes a motivation for further research during other periods of the year. Finally, we suggest extending the study centered on the tourist satisfaction in this natural environment.

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