

## El Salvador: Tourism and Protected Area Projects.

Rocío Estéfani Portillo Mira<sup>1</sup>, Gracia María Cabrera Carrillo<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>(Faculty of Business Sciences, Universidad Católica de El Salvador, El Salvador,  
ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3505-5709>)

<sup>2</sup>(Faculty of Business Sciences, Universidad Católica de El Salvador, El Salvador,  
ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8016-4405>)

**ABSTRACT:-** Tourism is one of the main activities that take place around the world, considered one of the key pieces for developing countries like ours, these activities are carried out in natural areas as the main resource.

El Salvador is a country that, although not as extensive as others, has a great biodiversity and about 40 protected natural areas, according to data from the Ministry of Environment and Natural Resources (MARN), divided into marine and state. According to the Salvadoran Institute of Tourism (ISTU), there are 4 natural parks under its administration where different types of projects are carried out, two of which are in the western part of the country.

The research was based on the identification of the different projects that are being developed in the main natural sites of El Salvador, as well as the description of the results to be achieved with their execution, their technical management and the type of governmental and non-governmental entities that provide support.

However, there are protected areas where there are no projects; on the contrary, the area faces problems of deforestation, housing construction and even abandonment.

**Key words:** economic support, environment, government, projects, protected natural sites, tourism.

### I. INTRODUCTION

Agricultural ecosystems or agroecosystems are by far the most important land use in El Salvador. Although accurate and updated data on land use in El Salvador are not available, the 2010 Land Use Map prepared by the University of El Salvador and PROCAFE is a good reference for indicative purposes. According to the data in this map, about three-quarters of the national territory would be occupied by agroecosystems (Estrategia Nacional de Biodiversidad, 2013), as shown in Figure 1.

**Figure 1. Structure of the National Biodiversity Strategy 2013 (ENMA)<sup>1</sup>**

		1st Axis	2nd Axis	3rd Axis
TOPICS CRITICS	Awareness	<b>Strategic Integration of Biodiversity into Business</b>	<b>Critical ecosystem restoration and comprehensive conservation</b>	<b>Biodiversity for the People</b>
	Research	Priority Lines	Priority Lines	Priority Lines
	Education and further education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Agriculture: Coffee, cocoa, fruit trees, basic grains and livestock.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Mangroves and beach ecosystems.</li> <li>Rivers and wetlands.</li> <li>Gallery forests and other forested ecosystems.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Rescue of traditional practices for the conservation of genetic resources.</li> <li>Rights of use of biological resources.</li> </ul>
	Technology Features	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Fishing and agriculture.</li> </ul>		

<sup>1</sup> It refers to Estrategia Nacional de Biodiversidad

	Financing	• Tourism.		• Local economic opportunities.
INSTITUTIONAL REQUIREMENT	Inter-institutional coordination			
	Strengthening institutional capacity			
	Local Governance and Management Model			
	Monitoring, Reporting, and Verification			
	Laws, Rules and Ordinances			

Source: Prepared by the authors based on the ENMA 2013 scheme.

Note: In Figure 1 we can observe the structure of the National Biodiversity Strategy, which is organized around three fundamental axes with their corresponding priority lines of action, five critical themes, and an equal number of institutional requirements. Source: Own elaboration based on the ENMA 2013 framework.

According to Fernández & Blanco (2017), a country’s natural environment is one of the main factors that motivates travel, as a variety of well-preserved landscapes or ecosystems serve as a core attraction for tourist destinations, especially for nature-based tourism.

Now then, Hummel et al. (2019), as cited in González et al. (2021), state that the most widely used definition for "protected natural area" is the one established by the Convention on Biological Diversity, which defines it as: “a geographically defined area which is designated or regulated and managed to achieve specific conservation objectives” (United Nations, 1992, p.3).

Considering that tourism is one of the main activities carried out worldwide, El Salvador is no exception in also recognizing it as a key component of its economy—especially given that such activities are mainly conducted in natural areas, some of which are currently hosting or are expected to host specific projects. In this context, and to clearly understand what constitutes a Project of National Tourism Interest, we refer to what is stated in Article 2, Paragraph E of El Salvador’s Tourism Law: “It is any project or master plan for the construction, remodeling, or improvement of tourism infrastructure and services, which is classified as such by the Ministry of Tourism, based on its recreational, cultural, historical, natural, or ecological significance, making it eligible for the incentives granted under the Tourism Law”.

The research conducted focused on identifying the various projects being implemented in major protected natural areas, limited to the western and paracentral zones of El Salvador, as well as describing the expected outcomes of their implementation, the technical management of these projects, and the types of governmental and non-governmental entities providing support.

However, in a smaller number of cases, there are protected natural areas where no projects are currently being implemented. On the contrary, these areas face issues such as deforestation, construction of housing, and even abandonment.

## II. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Methodology is a fundamental part of conducting research, as it ensures the validity and reliability of the results obtained in the study. As the main source of information on protected natural areas in El Salvador, the list of properties declared as protected natural areas for the period 1996–2021 was used, with data obtained from the Transparency Portal – El Salvador.

The research was quantitative in nature, as it seeks objectivity under the perspective that reality is singular and can be observed without altering it (Ramírez, Fabián, & Zwerg-Villegas, 2012). The metaphor for this epistemological approach to scientific research is that science is like a mirror—it reflects things as they are (Kerlinger, 2002, p. 10).

To collect data, a questionnaire was designed to conduct interviews with the managers or administrators of these projects, since, according to Ramírez, Fabián, & Zwerg-Villegas (2012), the techniques used in research include observation, surveys, and interviews.

In the words of Ramírez, Fabián, & Zwerg-Villegas (2012), the survey is:

“One of the most prevalent data collection techniques in quantitative research. It consists of a questionnaire used as an instrument to record opinions that will help verify the hypothesis. This technique provides more precise information and facilitates the use and quantification of variables”.

They also point out that the interview can offer the possibility of expanding on or contrasting previously established concepts.

Field visits were conducted to confirm the existence or absence of tourism projects in the protected natural areas, which allowed for the collection of necessary information. This aligns with Tamayo (1999), who states that observation is "A deliberate search carried out carefully and with forethought, in contrast to the casual and largely passive perceptions of everyday life."

Regarding population and sample, López (2004) explains that it is important to identify, differentiate, and understand the meaning of both concepts. He recommends considering the definition by Pineda et al. (1994), who state that the population is the group of people or objects about which something is to be known in an investigation, and the sample is a subset or part of that population in which the research will be conducted.

Another important concept considered was sampling, which according to Mata et al. (1997), is:

The method was used to select the components of the sample from the total population. It consists of a set of rules, procedures, and criteria through which a group of elements is selected from a population to represent what happens in that population.

To select the population and sample in this research, 104 properties were considered out of the 185 listed in the updated List of Properties Declared as Protected Natural Areas as of March 22, 2022. All properties located in the eastern zone of the country were excluded. These properties may or may not have ecotourism projects at the time the census was conducted during the field visits.

### III. RESULTS

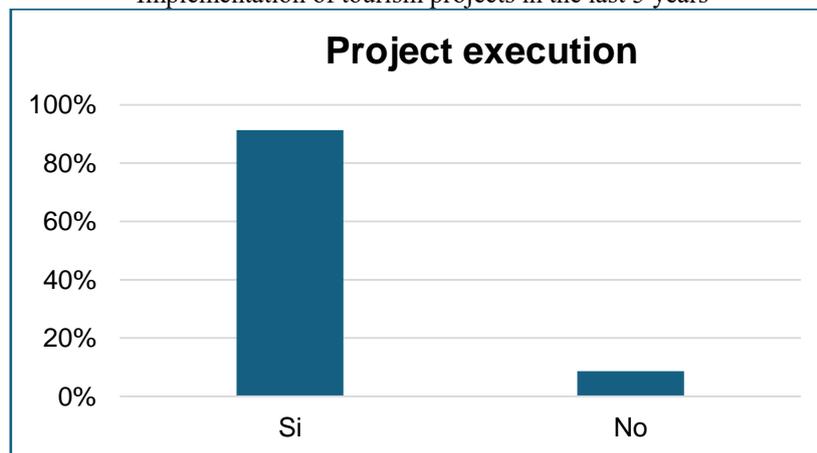
The results are an important part of the research, as they constitute a rigorous process where, as researchers, we must dedicate ourselves with discipline and commitment (Laverde, 2021). They are crucial because they represent the synthesis of the information collected and, in turn, provide evidence that supports the conclusions.

According to Hernández et al. (2014):

It is necessary to communicate the results through a report, which can take different formats: a book or a chapter, an article for an academic journal, a general outreach publication, a computer presentation, a technical document, a thesis or dissertation, a DVD, etc. In any case, we must describe the research carried out and the discoveries made.

According to the results obtained in this research, of the tourism projects implemented in the area of influence over the last five years, 91% reported having developed some type of project, while a minimal percentage of 9% did not. This finding highlights tourism activity in the region, which is consistent with the view that tourism development can be a significant economic driver (Orgaz Agüera & Moral Cuadra, 2016). (See Figure 2).

**Figure 2**  
Implementation of tourism projects in the last 5 years



*Note:* Figure 2 shows the graphical representation of the percentage of surveys that responded positively or negatively to the question about whether tourism projects had been carried out in the last five years.

Likewise, the tourism projects identified as "the most common" and that received the highest weighting were infrastructure improvement and maintenance projects, with 62%. Other less frequent types of projects included accessibility and innovation and/or updates at 12%, web connectivity at only 4%, and risk prevention at 10%. This emphasis on the importance of infrastructure development in tourist areas aligns with studies indicating that infrastructure quality is crucial for sustainable tourism development (López López & De Esteban Curiel, 2010).

When asked about the objectives of the projects, 28% indicated that improving the image was considered a key objective. On the other hand, implementing tourist routes at 27% and project maintenance and management at 88% were highlighted as priorities. In this section, respondents were allowed to select more than one option.

This focus on image and tourism promotion, as well as project maintenance and management, is considered fundamental for attracting visitors and improving destination competitiveness, as stated by Folgado, Oliveira, & Hernández (2011):

In a tourism industry surrounded by constant changes, a key challenge for businesses is to highlight their brand; most tourists choose their destinations based on the brand and image they perceive. Thus, many places seek to implement promotional techniques through brand image creation, to differentiate their identities and emphasize the unique character of their destination.

Subsequently, questions were asked about the technical aspects of the projects that are essential for their execution. Respondents could also select more than one option. Among the most notable were funding methods, with 84%, and types of supplies, with a lower percentage of 29%. Demand studies were mentioned by 22%, type of organization by 11%, and the lowest percentage was for the use of technology and equipment, with 6%.

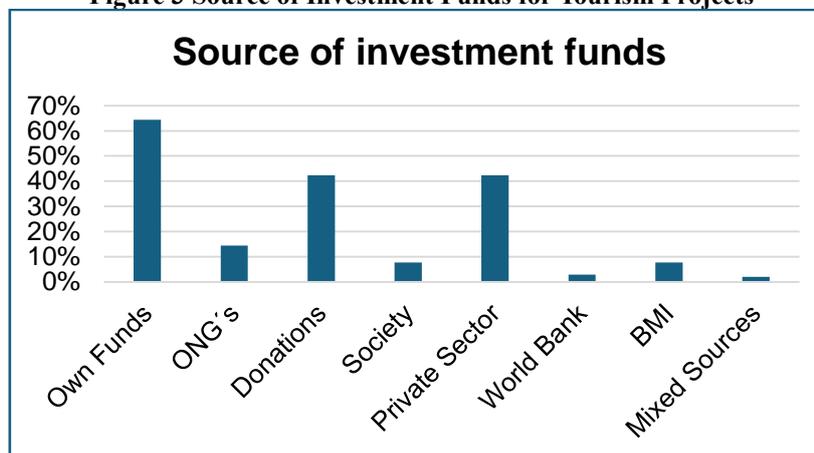
These results reflect the importance of adequate financial planning and the selection of supplies for the success of tourism projects, as Gitman (2007), cited in De Ávila et al. (2016), affirms financial planning is an essential segment in an institution's procedures, providing parameters to govern, systematize, and control actions to achieve objectives.

In the section on the source of investment funds, the concept provided by the World Tourism Organization, as cited in Cadenas et al. (2013) and quoted by Morillo et al. (2014), was considered. It defines investment in tourism activity as:

Any expenditure by the productive structure of the tourism sector for the provision of services to visitors within the tourism system of a given destination, carried out cooperatively among the public sector, private sector, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), minimizing negative socio-environmental impacts.

For this question, respondents had the option of selecting two or more responses, yielding the following results: 64% of respondents stated that the funds for project implementation were self-financed, followed by 42% representing donations and support from the private sector. NGO participation accounted for 14%, and a minimal percentage responded that funding originated from the community and the BMI (Banco Multisectorial de Inversiones) with 8%, the World Bank with 3%, and mixed funds with 2%, as shown in Figure 3.

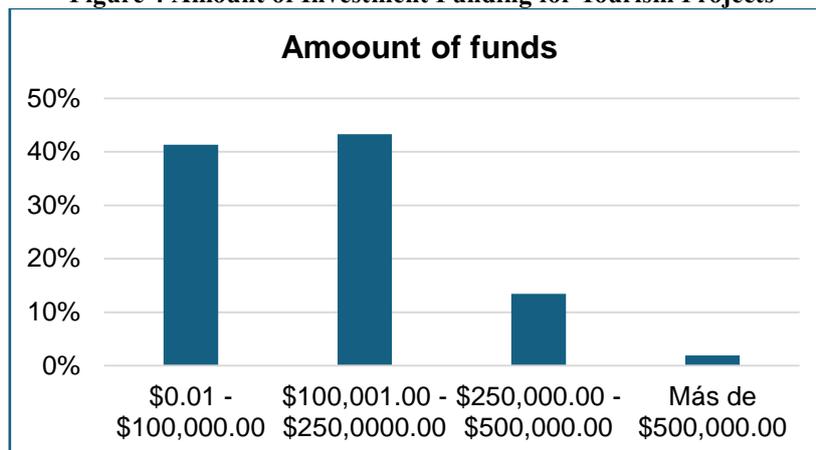
**Figure 3 Source of Investment Funds for Tourism Projects**



*Note:* Figure 3 graphically presents the percentage of responses selected by the survey participants regarding the source of funds used to finance tourism projects.

Finally, respondents were asked about the range in which the financing amounts for the projects fell. In this case, the analysis of the responses shows that 43% of the financing amounts ranged between \$100,001 and \$250,000, 41% stated that the value ranged between \$0.01 and \$100,000, 13% reported amounts between \$250,000 and \$500,000, and a minimal 2% indicated that the financing amount exceeded \$500,000.

Figure 4 Amount of Investment Funding for Tourism Projects



Note: Figure 4 describes the range within which the financing amounts for tourism projects fluctuate.

This distribution suggests that most projects fall within a moderate investment range, which is typical in the tourism sector, where initial investments can be significant but are necessary to generate long-term returns (Weaver et al., 2014).

#### IV. DISCUSSION

The results obtained after completing the entire research process reveal the significance of tourism activity as an economic engine for El Salvador, especially in the case of protected natural areas. The large number of tourism projects recorded—covering 91% of the selected areas—is a sign of commitment from the institutions responsible for managing these properties. This finding aligns with studies suggesting that infrastructure is highly relevant for achieving sustainable tourism.

Despite this, tourism development is only being implemented in some protected areas, which is concerning, as there are still regions that have yet to receive new project investments. Deforestation and neglect of these zones pose not only a threat to the biodiversity they harbor but also represent a missed opportunity for the employment generation in economically depressed communities. This suggests shortcomings in conservation policies and ecotourism promotion.

The fact that most projects focus on infrastructure maintenance underscores the importance of improving the quality of tourism services offered. This is crucial, as the way visitors perceive the image of a tourist destination plays a fundamental role in their decision-making. Furthermore, objectives such as improving the image and implementing tourism routes indicate a more strategic approach to promoting ecotourism in such projects.

Financing these projects is another critical aspect. Most respondents stated they used their own funds and private sector donations, which suggests that although there is interest in tourism development, there is also a dependence on external resources. This could, at some point, limit the long-term sustainability of tourism projects. Therefore, it is essential to explore diversified funding models that include government support and international cooperation.

In conclusion, the data regarding the financing ranges for each project show that most tourism initiatives fall within a conservative investment level. While this may reflect a cautious and necessary strategy, it could also limit the capacity for innovation and improvement in service quality. As the tourism sector in the studied areas continues to face constant changes, it is of utmost importance that these projects not only focus on maintaining and improving modern infrastructure but also invest in training and developing local tourism skills to enhance the economic and social impact in these areas.

Ultimately, the research highlights both the opportunities and challenges in developing tourism in El Salvador's protected natural sites. A multidimensional approach is required—one that integrates conservation, infrastructure, and community empowerment—to ensure a sustainable future for tourism in the country.

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**Resumen**

El turismo es una de las principales actividades que se realizan alrededor del mundo, considerada como una de las piezas clave para países en vías de desarrollo como el nuestro, estas actividades se llevan a cabo en espacios naturales como principal recurso.

El Salvador es un país que, a pesar de no ser tan extenso como otros, posee una gran biodiversidad y alrededor de 40 áreas naturales protegidas según datos del Ministerio de Medio Ambiente y Recursos Naturales (MARN) , los cuales están divididos en Marinos y Estatales. Según datos del Instituto Salvadoreño de Turismo (ISTU) , se cuentan con 4 parques naturales bajo su administración en los cuales se están llevando a cabo proyectos de diversa índole, cabe mencionar que 2 de ellos se encuentran en la zona occidental del país.

La investigación realizada se basó en la identificación de los diferentes proyectos que se desarrollan en los principales sitios naturales de El Salvador, así como describir los resultados que se pretenden lograr con su ejecución, la gestión técnica de los mismos y el tipo de entidades gubernamentales y no gubernamentales que brindan apoyo.

Sin embargo, existen áreas protegidas en las que no se está ejecutando ningún proyecto, todo lo contrario, la zona enfrenta problemas de deforestación, construcción de viviendas e incluso abandono.

**Palabras clave:** turismo, sitios naturales protegidos, proyectos, gobierno, medio ambiente, apoyo económico.

*Rocío Estéfani Portillo Mira<sup>1</sup>, Gracia María Cabrera Carrillo<sup>2</sup>*

*<sup>1</sup>(Faculty of Business Sciences, Universidad Católica de El Salvador, El Salvador,  
ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3505-5709>)*