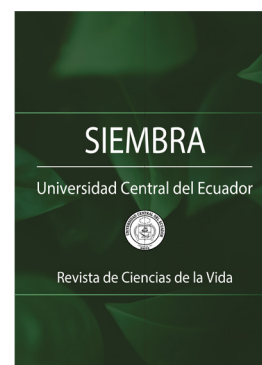


Environment-society relations in Ecuador's tourist beaches: evaluation of the guidelines for the Recognition of Sustainable Tourist Beaches in Playa Paraíso and Puerto Engabao

Relaciones ambientes–sociedad en playas turísticas de Ecuador: evaluación de los lineamientos del Reconocimiento de Playa Turística Sostenible en Playa Paraíso y Puerto Engabao

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Abstract

Beaches are key resources for coastal tourism in Ecuador; however, they currently face significant challenges, such as pollution, the impacts of climate change, and inadequate land-use planning. These challenges compromise their sustainability and reduce their competitiveness. This study evaluated compliance with Ministerial Agreement No. 2022-030, which establishes the requirements and procedures for achieving “Sustainable Tourist Beach – Ecuador” status, as well as the specific requirements for earning “Silver” and “Gold” Sustainable Tourist Beach recognition in Playa Paraíso and Playa Engabao, located in the canton Playas, Ecuador. We used a descriptive–comparative approach to collect information through field visits, direct observations, and document analysis. The evaluated criteria were safety, tourist services, environmental management, and coastal management. The results indicate that Playa Paraíso has better safety and basic infrastructure conditions, whereas Puerto Engabao exhibits deficiencies in environmental management and land use planning. Neither beach achieved the “Gold” certification level. These findings underscore the need for strengthening environmental, tourism, and social management to promote sustainable coastal development.

Keywords: sustainable tourism, coastal management, Ecuadorian beaches, environmental sustainability, tourism certification.

Resumen

En Ecuador, las playas son un recurso importante para el turismo costero, pero en la actualidad enfrentan retos evidentes como la contaminación, los impactos del cambio climático y una planificación territorial insuficiente, lo que compromete su sostenibilidad y por lo tanto reduce su competitividad. Este estudio evaluó el cumplimiento del Acuerdo Ministerial No. 2022-030, que establece los requisitos y el proceso para la obtención del reconocimiento como “Playa Turística Sostenible - Ecuador” con la Ficha de Requisitos Específicos para obtener el Reconocimiento de Playas Turísticas Sostenibles “Plata y Oro”, en Playa Paraíso y Playa Engabao, en el cantón Playas, Ecuador. Se aplicó un enfoque descriptivo-comparativo, recopilando información a través de visitas de campo,

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observaciones directas y análisis documental. Los criterios que fueron evaluados son: seguridad, servicios turísticos, gestión ambiental y gestión costera. Los resultados muestran que Playa Paraíso tiene mejores condiciones en seguridad e infraestructura básica, mientras que Puerto Engabao muestra deficiencias en gestión ambiental y ordenamiento territorial. Ninguna de las dos playas evaluadas alcanzó el nivel de certificación “Oro”. Se concluye que estos hallazgos resaltan la necesidad de reforzar la gestión ambiental, turística y social para conseguir un desarrollo costero sostenible.

Palabras clave: turismo sostenible, gestión costera, playas ecuatorianas, sostenibilidad ambiental, certificación turística.

1. Introduction

Coastal and maritime tourism are among the most dynamic economical models worldwide especially in developing countries that have extensive coastal areas and a marked dependency on touristic activity as it generates a high level of people inflow in both domestic and inbound tourism. This becomes an engine of local development (Jones & Phillips, 2018). In this context, beaches do not only represent a natural resource of great ecological value, but they also represent a strategic axis for competitive touristic destinies, common wellbeing and environmental preservation (Allen et al., 2023). However, the expansion of this model poses important challenges like environmental degradation, urbanistic pressure, inadequate waste management and a deficient governance of coastal spaces (United Nations Environment Programme [UNEP], 2013).

Sustainability concept applied to coastal tourism has evolved during the last decades in response to environmental, social and economic impacts derived from the intensive use of natural resources on the coast. At the beginning, beach sustainability was associated mainly to water quality, cleaning of the shores and security for visitors. However, recent studies warn about these criteria being insufficient if larger dimensions are not incorporated, such as governance, weather resilience and local community participation (Jones & Phillips, 2018).

Under this context, beach certification schemes have been consolidated as regulated and standardized international mechanisms that seek to guarantee environmental quality, and at the same time, to strength the touristic competitiveness of the destinations. Marchese et al. (2021) mention that in Latin America, these programs have adapted to local conditions, although some obstacles persist such as a weak environmental institutionalality and the lack of coordination between different government levels. The experience of the Ecological Blue Flag in Costa Rica is a prominent example of articulation between civil society, government and the private sector for the recognition of sustainable beaches.

Zielinski and Botero (2015) emphasize that the sustainability of beaches should be understood as a constant interaction between the ecological ecosystems and social systems that develop within them. For these authors, the implementation of programs for sustainable management involves providing environmental education to visitors and residents, monitoring ecosystems and sites of use, and generating economic incentives for conservation.

Collaborative governance, understood as the articulation of multiple actors in decision-making, is also an essential pillar on the management of touristic destinations. Bramwell and Lane (2011) emphasizes that this approach contributes to the prevention and conflict management, ensuring responsibility in the conservation of resources. On the same line, Ansell and Gash (2008) highlights the transparency on participative processes, trust and a solid institutional framework that could support collective agreements.

Another key component is security, which is tightly linked to risk perception. Slovic (1987) showed that this perception influences visitors' decisions. Likewise, Kozak et al. (2007) noted that the destinations perceived as insecure tend to lose competitiveness against the ones that offer protection and trust.

From an environmental perspective, the theory of sociological resilience (Berkes and Folke, 1998) conceives ecosystems as dynamic systems capable of adapting to perturbations as long as that do not exceed certain critical thresholds. Halliday and Gast (2011) warn that beaches can accumulate bacteria in the sand, which can represent an emergent risk for public health and water quality. Complementarily, studies, like the ones by Whitman et al. (2014) and World Health Organization (2021) document the risks associated with microbial contamination in sand and coastal waters.

The touristic dimension relies on the theory of experience (Pine & Gilmore, 2013) that claims that the value of a destination is not limited to its service offering, but it builds on authentic and memorable experiences. In the case of beaches, the conservation of natural landscapes, water and sand quality, and the complementary cultural offering become decisive factors for visitors' satisfaction (Roca & Villares, 2008; Sharpley, 2020).

The integrated management of coastal zones is presented as the ideal operative framework for the articulation of all of these dimensions. Cicin-Sain & Knecht (1998) highlights the need to design policies that integrate environmental, economic and social components. In the same direction, Allen et al. (2023) mentions that environmental co-governance should guarantee citizen participation and an equitable access to benefits generated by tourism. While the United Nations Program for the Environment (UNEP, 2013) proposes to have indicators that allow an objective measurement of the impact from the implemented public policies.

Overall, the recognition of sustainable touristic beaches cannot be limited to evaluating environmental parameters in isolation. It is essential to have an integrated approach that articulates ecological, social, economic and security dimensions. The literature coincides that sustainability in coastal destinations demand adaptable governance processes, the integration of local communities in decision-making, and the implementation of regulatory frameworks that promote the co-responsability between public, private and social actors (Marchese et al., 2021; UNEP, 2013; Zielinski & Botero, 2015).

In Latin America, and particularly in Ecuador, management of sustainable beaches is presented as a challenge due to the co-influence of socio-economic and environmental factors. The Equatorial coasts concentrate highly fragile ecosystem diversity, and they constitute themselves as high-pressure territories by the impact of touristic, fishery and urban expansion activities (Lastra-Bravo & Cabanilla 2020). According to Iturralde and Samaniego (2021), coastal territories in Ecuador face growing problems on its resource management. These are aggravated by non-planned tourism and intensive extractive activities that generate environmental pressure, conflicts from space usage and negative effects to the sustainability of the micro-coastal ecosystems. The situation complicates even more after the climate change effects that threaten the continuity of natural attractions and the integrity of the ecology of destinations (UNEP, 2013).

These dynamics demonstrate the urgency to have regulatory and certification frameworks that could guarantee the sustainability of destinations, the security for visitors and the inclusion of local communities in decision-making processes (Marchese et al., 2021; Zielinski & Botero, 2015). The certification schemes, originated in Europe and North America, have been extended to the region as instruments of environmental and touristic governance oriented to secure water quality, the protection of biodiversity and users' security. However, the implementation still faces challenges like a weak interinstitutional articulation, weak environmental education and the tension between economic interests and ecological conservation (Marchese et al., 2021; UNEP, 2013). Complementary methodologies have emerged to strengthen effectiveness, such as the mapping of actors who want to integrate the visions of distinct social groups into the planification and management of sustainable beaches (Zielinski & Botero, 2015).

At an international level, it is recognized that sustainability of coastal touristic destinations cannot be evaluated based solely on environmental indicators. It is necessary to have an integrated focus that could incorporate social, economic and cultural dimensions (Senthilkumar, 2021). This involves considering touristic security, equity in the access to benefits, the resilience against natural risks and the inclusion of host communities in the governance (Jones & Phillips, 2018). In consequence, it becomes essential to design regulatory frameworks and methodological tools that allow us to evaluate in a rigorous way the fulfillment of the sustainable criteria and the awarding of recognitions based on verifiable standards.

More recent tools, such as the *Comprehensive Index for Beaches* [CIB] or the sectoral analysis approach (*Sector Analysis*), have incorporated inclusive socio-ecological dimensions, for example, perceptions of safety, scenic value, and user behavior, and contribute to more comprehensive diagnostics for coastal management (Basurto-Cedeño et al., 2025; Er Ramy et al., 2023). These frameworks reflect a trend toward integrative models in which environmental conservation and visitor experience converge within a systemic vision of sustainable tourism.

In Ecuador, the Ministry of Tourism established Acuerdo Ministerial No. 2022-030, which defines the requirements and process for obtaining the designation "Sustainable Tourist Beach – Ecuador," through the Specific Requirements Form for the Recognition of Sustainable Tourist Beaches at the "Silver" and "Gold" levels. This technical instrument sets out 36 guidelines distributed across four pillars: environmental quality, safety, tourism services, and coastal governance. Despite the relevance of the evaluation instruments used in some certifications, which measure the level of compliance with tourism and environmental criteria on Ecuadorian beaches, their limited dissemination has created a gap in the technical feedback necessary for their adjustment and continuous improvement. As a result, several assessment tools have been developed along the Ecuadorian coast (Mora Méndez et al., 2020).

Accordingly, the present study is proposed as a contribution to strengthening the discussion surrounding

the recognition of sustainable tourist beaches, based on a methodological approach supported by a review of academic literature and the application of regulatory and technical instruments on the beaches of the Engabao Commune, Playa Paraíso and Puerto Engabao located in the Playas canton of Guayas Province. These beaches represent cases emblematic of this reality: destinations with high tourist influx that face environmental quality issues, fragmented administrative management, and increasing urban pressure. Their analysis not only allows for verification of the application of the “Silver and Gold” instrument, but also for the identification of barriers, institutional gaps, and specific opportunities for improvement, which could serve as a reference for other Ecuadorian beaches in similar conditions.

At the global level, the commitment to sustainable coastal tourism aligns with the Sustainable Development Goals [SDGs] and with restoration and resilience strategies. The Ocean Panel has set the goal that, by 2030, marine tourism destinations should be sustainable, resilient, free of pollution, capable of restoring ecosystems, and generators of community well-being (Ocean Panel, 2022). Achieving this vision requires a strong local management framework that translates these goals into feasible and sustainable operational processes.

In this context, the present research focuses on empirically evaluating compliance with the “Silver and Gold” Requirements Form on two Ecuadorian beaches, with the aim of proposing recommendations to strengthen their environmental, social, and tourism management. The objective is to generate evidence that allows not only for the categorization of beaches according to their level of sustainability, but also for the promotion of public policies and governance guidelines that ensure the preservation of natural resources and the well-being of local communities.

2. Materials and Methods

The study was developed under a qualitative and descriptive approach, oriented to evaluate the degree of compliance of the requisites established under the Acuerdo Ministerial No. 2022-030 and the Specific Requirements Sheet for the Recognition of Sustainable Tourist Beaches in its “Silver” and “Gold” levels, which are issued by the Ministry of Tourism of Ecuador. This sheet constituted a central instrument to examine the criteria of environmental management, security, tourism and coastal management in the beaches of Paraíso and Puerto Engabao, located in General Villamil Playas canton.

The methodology integrated various complementary techniques: documental revision, field observations, gap identification and formulation of improvement proposals. Firstly, a comprehensive analysis of the technical specifications included in the Acuerdo Ministerial No. 2022-030 was done, contrasting it with the national and local regulations related to the coast management, touristic use, territorial organization and environmental quality. This process allowed the identification of applicable criteria to each local context, legal loopholes, and possible regulatory superpositions that could challenge the implementation.

As part of the participative approach, a mapping of key actors was carried out through *Design Thinking* tool, which help the recognition of relationships, competences and interinstitutional interests. Moreover, semi-structured interviews were conducted with officials of the cantonal Decentralized Autonomous Government [GAD], in particular from the departments of Tourism and Environment, to identify the main local regulatory elements and evaluate the institutional abilities for the implementation of sustainable management and certification processes in coastal zones.

Subsequently, field visits were conducted to the selected beaches to collect *in situ* information on existing infrastructure, signage, tourism and support services, accessibility, cleanliness status, and the physical conditions of the surrounding environment. The technical form established under the Ministerial Agreement served as a guide for data collection through photographic records, field notes, and direct verification of indicators. Based on the information obtained, a technical compliance matrix was developed, in which each requirement was classified as compliant, partially compliant, or non-compliant. This procedure made it possible to identify regulatory gaps, weaknesses in management mechanisms, and limitations in local governance related to the management of tourist beaches.

The application of the methodology was aligned to the dispositions from the Acuerdo Ministerial No. 2022-030, which allow the categorization of beaches according to the soil type (urban, rural or protected). For each category, between 24 and 35 requisites were verified according to the level of recognition postulated (“Silver” or “Gold”). This differentiation ensured that the analysis corresponds to the territorial reality of each beach and that coherence with the national regulations was kept.

Finally, based on the findings, improvement proposals were formulated using technical, institutional, and community-based criteria, considering the feasibility of their implementation and the shared responsibility between local and national stakeholders. These recommendations were aimed at strengthening coastal management through environmental education programs, training for tourism operators and vendors, communication strategies targeted at visitors, improvements in monitoring and enforcement mechanisms, and the promotion of local products as part of a sustainable tourism offering.

Table 1 summarizes the procedure for obtaining the designation “Sustainable Tourist Beach – Ecuador” established by the Ministry of Tourism. This framework allows the application process to be aligned with good practices in planning, technical monitoring, and continuous improvement. The information provided in the “Methodological Note” column offers technical suggestions aimed at strengthening the institutional capacity of local governments [GADs] and ensuring the sustainability of the designation.

Table 1. Methodology for Recognition as a “Sustainable Tourist Beach – Ecuador”.

Step	Description of the process	Methodological Note
1	Letter of intention presented by the cantonal GAD to the highest authority in the Ministry of Tourism, showing the category (Silver/Gold), type of beach (urban, rural, protected) and delimitation of the space.	It is recommended to accompany the letter with a georeferenced map, identification of property frontage boundaries, and a preliminary assessment of the proposed area.
2	Documental revision by the Subsecretary of Touristic Development (15 working days). If it is complete, a technical visit is planned. If it is not, observations are returned.	This phase must ensure documentary traceability. The use of checklists based on official guidelines is recommended.
3	Technical visit <i>in situ</i> to verify the compliance of the requirements according to the postulated classification.	The technical team shall compile inspection forms, photographic evidence, and interviews where applicable.
4	Emission of the technical report from the Zonal Offices or Technical Offices (15 working days after the visit).	The report must be detailed, attaching the results of compliance with at least 30/35 guidelines, according to beach classification and type.
5	Emission of the compliance if the requirements are fulfilled. If they are not, the documentation is returned with observations.	In cases of partial non-compliance, the GAD may reapply once the observations have been addressed. This does not preclude future applications.
6	Re-classification: GAD can request the change of classification (from Silver to Gold).	To do so, compliance with the additional requirements must be demonstrated. Prior self-assessments are recommended.
7	Annual follow-up: post-inspection after the first year to verify the maintenance of the requirements.	The GAD must maintain up-to-date documentation, promote continuous improvement, and be prepared for technical audits.
8	Revocation or voluntary withdrawal of the designation if the requirements are not met or if requested by the GAD.	It is suggested that the GAD maintain a unit or committee responsible for ensuring sustainable compliance after recognition.

3. Results

The comparative analysis of the Paraíso and Puerto Engabao beaches located in the General Villamil Playas canton, allowed to have an integrated vision of the degree of compliance of the established alignments in the Specific Requirements Sheet for the Recognition of Sustainable Tourist Beaches “Silver” and “Gold”. The results showed a marked similarity in the conditions of the beaches (Figure 1), which reflect problematic structures, and at the same time, the existence of some advances in security and community engagement.

In the environmental component, it was observed that both Paraíso and Puerto Engabao beaches presented a generalized level of non-compliance. Neither of them has regulations controlling wastewater discharges or microbiological control systems that could monitor the presence of intestinal enterococci and feces in water. Similarly, some deficiencies still exist in both beaches that are linked to the presence of solid residues, oils, and foams in the sea surface, plus the lack of hazardous waste management in the sand. There are also no guidelines regulating pet access, and no programs to implement wildlife conservation, nor environmental education to the community and visitors. These aspects are complemented to the lack of control measures against noise and light pollution, which generates negative impacts to the coastal biodiversity and quality of the touristic ex-

perience. Overall, the findings demonstrate that the environmental component constitutes the main weakness in both beaches.

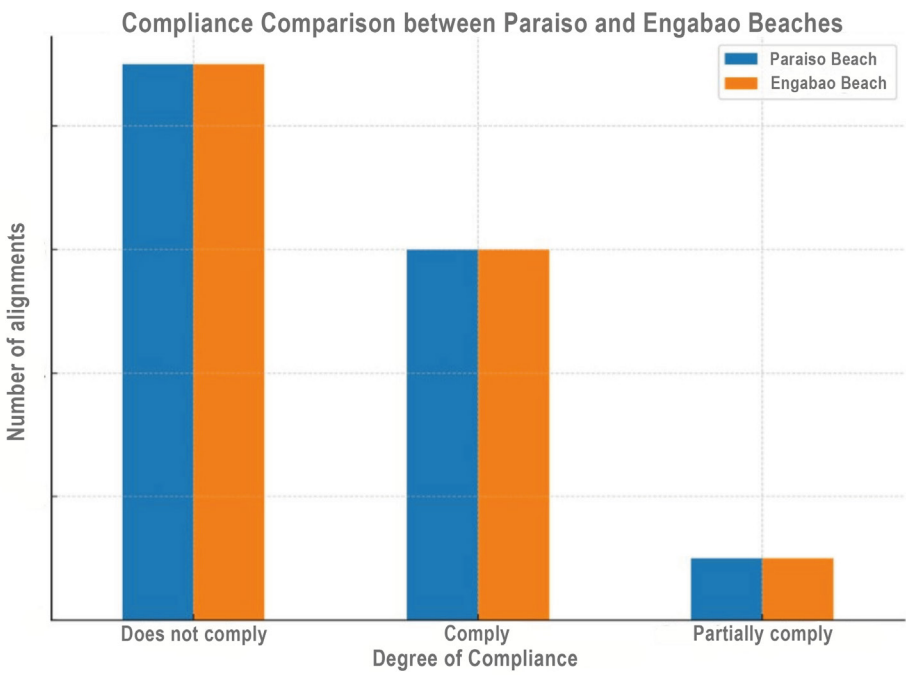


Figure 1. Compliance comparison

Regarding security, the results were more favorable. Both Paraíso and Engabao have trained lifeguards, regular patrols and vehicle control measures that prevent accidents in touristic areas. Similarly, street vending is regulated in designated areas, which contributes to the public space order. These advancements build trust in visitors and strength security perception. However, there is a continued lack of video surveillance systems and specific regulations for noise and light control, which limits the achievement of a comprehensive security model. Despite it, this component demonstrates a superior level of compliance in comparison to the environmental and touristic fields.

In the tourism component, similar deficiencies were identified on both beaches. The provision of tourism services lacks formalization, as informal service delivery predominates, without quality certifications or institutional regulations. Basic infrastructure is also lacking in all establishments, such as restrooms, showers, inclusive access, or urban furniture, which restricts the visitor experience. The absence of adequate signage, tourism promotion strategies, and inventories of cultural and environmental heritage further exacerbates these limitations, despite the fact that the Engabao Commune brings together more than 4,000 artisanal fishers, and its sound-based fishing method is recognized as an ancestral technique. These results show that the touristic component constitutes another critical point for achieving sustainable certification, as it limits competitiveness and the diversification of activities on both beaches.

Regarding beach management, both Playa Paraíso and Puerto Engabao show significant progress. Current urban planning regulations are complied with, and a relative order is maintained in the occupation of public space, in addition to coordinated planning of community events. The existence of community management committees made up of community members demonstrates an effort toward participatory governance and contributes to community involvement in coastal planning. However, there is still no clear zoning of spaces or a specific management plan for protected areas, which limits the effectiveness of long-term management. These aspects reflect the need to strengthen coordination between authorities and the community to consolidate an integrated management model.

The comparison between the two beaches shows that the levels of compliance are equivalent (Figure 1), with advances in security and community management, but with critical deficiencies in environmental and touristic fields. Table 2 summarizes these results.

Table 2. Assessment of compliance with guidelines for the recognition of Sustainable Tourist Beaches - Silver/Gold Levels.

Component	Lineament	Paraíso Beach	Engabao Beach	Suggested evidence
Environment	Quality of water	Do not comply	Do not comply	No microbial analysis, visual signs of visible discharges or turbid water.
Environment	Quality of sand	Do not comply	Do not comply	Photographs of solid residues, plastics, and oil.
Environment	Wildlife Protection	Do not comply	Do not comply	Lack of labels for wildlife or protected areas.
Environment	Noise and light pollution	Do not comply	Do not comply	Night photos showing invasive lights, reported noises.
Environment	Environmental education	Do not comply	Do not comply	Lack of educational panels, no visible campaigns.
Security	Security perception	Partially comply	Partially comply	Interviews with visitors and vendors, positive perception, but lack of technological vigilance.
Security	Patrols and Lifeguards	Comply	Comply	Photos of lifeguards, vigilance towers, police patrols.
Security	Street vending	Comply	Comply	Defined areas of informal commerce; visible order.
Security	Vehicle Control	Comply	Comply	Road signaling and access control; photographs of barriers or signage.
Tourism	Touristic Services	Do not comply	Do not comply	Photos of informal services, without signaling or standards.
Tourism	Basic Infrastructure	Do not comply	Do not comply	Lack of toilets, showers, urban furniture, visual evidence.
Tourism	Signals and promotion	Do not comply	Do not comply	Photographs showing the absence of signs or promotional panels.
Tourism	Cultural Heritage	Do not comply	Do not comply	There are no visible tourist information panels, activities, or inventories.
Beach management	Public Space Occupation	Comply	Comply	GAD interviews, visible urbanistic order.
Beach management	Event planification	Comply	Comply	Record of community activities; posters or announcements.
Beach management	Management committee	Comply	Comply	Photos of meetings, minutes, or local governance structures.

Engabao commune has two beaches, Paraíso and Puerto Engabao, where an exhaustive analysis was done. It resulted in four axes: environmental, security, tourism and beach management.

In summary, the environmental component showed evidence of non-compliance in water and sand quality, wildlife protection, noise and light pollution, as well as environmental education; therefore, the need for a comprehensive environmental monitoring and management program is evident. In terms of safety, although the perception of security and vehicle control are partially or fully met, surveillance is weak and depends on staff allocation, which occurs only during certain seasons or holidays. In tourism, none of the indicators related to tourism services, basic infrastructure, signage, or cultural heritage are met, which highlights the lack of a formal and sustainable tourism offering. However, in the beach management component, there has been significant progress, as public space occupation is managed, events are planned in coordination with the GAD, and community management committees are in place, demonstrating that the organizational structure is solid enough to initiate specific improvements and formalization processes.

It was observed that the environmental and touristic weaknesses are structural, but the community management was solid to build an improvement plan that could work to lead to monitoring environmental actions, infrastructure and education, allowing in some way to apply for and obtain recognition of sustainable beaches.

4. Discussion

The comparative analysis of Playa Paraíso and Puerto Engabao reveals shared structural problems that limit their eligibility for the “Silver” and “Gold” Sustainable Tourist Beaches certification. First, the absence of environmental monitoring mechanisms and specific regulations for controlling wastewater discharges and physical and microbiological pollutants stands out, representing a risk to both public health and biodiversity. This finding is consistent with Halliday and Gast (2011), who warn that the lack of clear regulatory and control policies negatively affects the ecosystem services of coastal destinations. Similarly, Zielinski and Botero (2015) emphasize that international certification schemes, such as Blue Flag, have demonstrated the need to implement systematic protocols for water quality and waste management in order to ensure tourism sustainability.

The informality of the touristic offer and the lack of basic infrastructure on the two beaches reinforce detected limitations in the touristic component. These conditions do not only restrict their competitiveness but also directly impact on the satisfaction of the visitors, and it is an essential factor to consolidate sustainable destinations. In this sense, Bramwell and Lane (2011) argues that the lack of formal services and a weak planification in emergent destinations reduce the ability to position themselves in international markets, unlike those who apply strategies of formalization and joint promotion. Therefore, it is imperative to move towards training service providers, the implementation of quality standards, and the creation of territory promotion plans that integrate cultural and natural resources.

In terms of governance, the results show partial progress in security and community organization, which constitute a starting point for strengthening participatory management. The presence of regular patrols, trained lifeguards, and local committees indicates an initial interest in building collaborative structures. However, the literature warns that these efforts must be complemented by solid regulatory frameworks and long-term strategic planning. Ostrom (1990) highlights that community self-management, when accompanied by control mechanisms and accountability, increases the effectiveness and legitimacy of local processes. Likewise, Rhodes (1996) and McLeod et al. (2011) point out that tourism governance requires multilevel cooperation networks that integrate the state, the community, and the private sector, enabling more coherent and sustainable management.

In summary, the discussion confirms that the limitations identified in Playa Paraíso and Puerto Engabao are not isolated phenomena but rather reflect a recurring pattern in emerging coastal destinations. The lack of environmental regulation, tourism informality, and incipient governance structures constitute common barriers that require comprehensive and coordinated interventions. International experience shows that the implementation of certification programs, investment in infrastructure, and the active participation of communities are key factors for achieving sustainability levels aligned with international standards (Bramwell & Lane, 2011; Global Sustainable Tourism Council [GSTC], 2020).

5. Conclusions

The evaluation done in the Paraíso and Puerto Engabao beaches showed that although progress has been made in security and community participation through management committees of the Cabildo and the GAD, the structural limitations persist and prevent the compliance of the required standards for the certification of Sustainable Touristic Beaches “Silver” and “Gold”. The main weaknesses are centered on the environmental field, where the lack of specific regulations, continuous monitoring programs and conservation strategies of biodiversity generate risks for public health and for ecological sustainability. Similarly, the lack of basic infrastructure and the informality of touristic services limit the competitiveness of the destination and reduce the quality of the experience.

These findings conclude that the consolidation of a touristic sustainable model on both beaches requires the implementation of clear environmental policies, investments in inclusive and sustainable basic facilities, as well as the formalization and training of touristic actors. Articulation among authorities, community and private sector is presented as a key element to transform current conditions and move towards coastal management that guarantees balance between economic development, environmental conservation and social wellbeing. Under this purpose, Paraíso and Puerto Engabao beaches could not only comply with the certification requirements but also position themselves as references for a responsible tourism in the Ecuadorian coast region.

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Contributor roles

- María Fernanda Sánchez Pincay: conceptualization, investigation, methodology, project administration, resources, validation, visualization, writing – review & editing.

Ethical implications

The author declares that the qualitative techniques applied (interviews and focus groups) were conducted under verbal informed consent, respecting anonymity, voluntariness, and confidentiality, in accordance with international ethical principles for social research involving human subjects. No sensitive data was collected, and no minors participated.

Conflicts of interest

The authors declare that they have no affiliation with any organization with a direct or indirect financial interest that could have appeared to influence the work reported

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