

**La sostenibilidad de los emprendimientos turísticos  
en la competitividad de la zona norte de Manabí**

**Sustainability of tourism entrepreneurship in the  
competitiveness of the northern region of Manabí, Ecuador**

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## RESUMEN

Este estudio tuvo como objetivo diseñar estrategias de sostenibilidad que mejoren la competitividad de los emprendimientos turísticos en la zona norte de Manabí. La investigación, de carácter exploratorio y enfoque mixto, se desarrolló en tres etapas: análisis de los aspectos sostenibles en la competitividad de los emprendimientos turísticos, análisis estratégico mediante la matriz SWOT y diseño de estrategias sostenibles. Los resultados indican que la percepción de sostenibilidad en los emprendimientos turísticos de la zona bajo estudio, mayormente se sitúa por debajo de la media aceptable y en menor frecuencia, mínimamente superior a 5 (social >3,98 <5,12; económica >4,41 <4,79; ambiental >3,97 <5,68); así mismo se lograron identificar barreras para el correcto desempeño de los emprendimientos como la falta de financiamiento y escaso apoyo técnico a los emprendedores. En conclusión, la creación de emprendimientos sostenibles y competitivos demanda la implementación de estrategias que fortalezcan el sector, tanto en la generación de nuevos proyectos como en el acompañamiento a los emprendedores.

**Palabras claves:** competitividad, emprendimiento turístico, estrategias de sostenibilidad, sostenibilidad.

## ABSTRACT

This study aimed to design sustainability strategies that improve the competitiveness of tourism ventures in the northern area of Manabí. The research, which was exploratory in nature and used a mixed-methods approach, was developed in three stages: analysis of the sustainable aspects in the competitiveness of tourism ventures, strategic analysis using the SWOT matrix, and design of sustainable strategies. The results indicate that the perception of sustainability in the tourism ventures within the study area largely falls below the acceptable average, with only a slight frequency exceeding 5 (social >3.98 <5.12; economic >4.41 <4.79; environmental >3.97 <5.68). Additionally, barriers to the proper performance of these ventures were identified, such as a lack of financing and limited technical support for entrepreneurs. In conclusion, the creation of sustainable and competitive ventures requires the implementation of strategies that strengthen the sector, both in generating new projects and in supporting entrepreneurs.

**Keywords:** competitiveness, tourism entrepreneurship, sustainable strategies, sustainability.

## Introduction

Sustainable tourism has become a paradigm for the development of territories on a global scale (Mendoza et al., 2023). It demands the creation of differentiated products and services in the sector (Ruiz et al., 2020). According to García (2019), Ecuador has strong difficulties in managing tourism sustainability. One of the main problems in this context is the limited growth of formal tourism entrepreneurs and their incipient focus on sustainability, this phenomenon significantly affects the competitiveness of the destination in line with the constant growing of the market. In this regard, Torres (2019) defines competitiveness as the ability to produce and bring to market a profitable product with quality in a business context. A good quality product generates emphasis on efficient productivity in enterprises that are willing to improve their product according to the needs of their customers.

According to the World Economic Forum in 2017, competitiveness is the set of institutions and factors that establish the productivity level of an economy, which is established as a level that a country can achieve (Martínez, 2019). This highlights the fact that the company which manages competitiveness as a support method can be more effective in generating appropriate capabilities in the institutional factors that increase productivity in its entrepreneurs; which, from a practical perspective, according to Romero (2020) it becomes a dynamic concept that progressively modifies the different internal and external resources of companies.

In this context, resilience and adaptability emerge as critical variables that determine the ability of companies to respond to environmental, economic and social disruptions, ensuring their survival and continuous improvement. Resilience enables companies to absorb shocks and recover effectively, while adaptability fosters their ability to innovate and realign their strategies in response to evolving market dynamics (Samán et al., 2022). In addition, the environmental dimension plays a fundamental role in sustaining long-term competitiveness, as it involves not only the conservation of natural

resources but also the ability of companies to minimize their ecological footprint, aligning business practices with environmental care to promote sustainability in tourism.

On the other hand, to Parra (2020), a destination or tourism company has the ability to compete with a product or service when it is sustainable. However, the limitations in the development of a healthy entrepreneurial ecosystem are also perceived from the technical limitations of human resources. In this sense, Crespo et al. (2022) points out that the main drawbacks of entrepreneurs occur especially in the calculation of costs and pricing, marketing spaces, lack of financial and administrative knowledge, and management problems. Therefore, it is essential that they have a business orientation as a key success factor, which must reflect innovation, proactive mentality and competitive capacity, while contributing to improving the quality of life of communities and the conservation of the tourist destination, while providing satisfactory experiences for the visitor.

According to UNEMI (2019), sustainable tourism management is a schematic and simple tool that identifies strategic variables and the interrelationships of a situation to translate them into an action mechanism. Castillo et al. (2024) propose that the future of destinations must adopt a sustainable approach and develop measurement indicators for different contexts and industries. Under this approach, multidimensional management for sustainable development involves a triple generation of value, systematically encompassing economic growth, social development, and environmental protection within an equitable framework (Lázaro, 2019). However, such management requires models that integrate instruments and actions, facilitating an appropriate understanding of the complexity faced by tourism and guiding collective efforts to enhance the destination's competitiveness through sustainability.

The northern region of Manabí stands out for its tourism potential. According to Minaya-Navarrete and Párraga-Zambrano (2023), entrepreneurial ventures are a driving force in

the province's economy. However, the onset of the health crisis caused by COVID-19 brought significant changes to traditional management models of these ventures, which were forced to adapt to new market behaviors, resulting in many businesses being unable to do so and ultimately closing their doors. Regarding the business impact, the Ministry of Tourism of Ecuador (MINTUR, 2021) indicates that at least 20% of food and beverage companies have ceased operations since late 2019, leading to an average increase of 5.5% in unemployment among unskilled labor, with variations ranging from 0% to 15%, depending on the significance of tourism to the economy. In addition, Vizueta (2020) notes that the economic instability facing the country, environmental degradation, globalization, and demographic changes will compel entrepreneurs to rethink new strategies and business models that allow them to remain in the market and navigate challenges and opportunities with caution. For this reason, the purpose of this research was to design sustainability strategies aimed at enhancing tourism competitiveness in small businesses situated in the northern region of Manabí.

A critical challenge to fostering sustainable tourism in the northern region of Manabí is the lack of cohesion within the local business community. The fragmented nature of the business ecosystem hinders the formation of collaborative networks that are essential for sharing resources, knowledge, and best practices in sustainability. According to Figueroa and Bravo (2020), businesses in this region often operate in isolation, with limited interaction among themselves, which restricts the collective action needed to create competitive advantages. This lack of cooperation prevents the development of synergies that could strengthen the sector's overall performance and its ability to address the sustainability challenges it faces. As a result, the region struggles to align its tourism sector with broader sustainability objectives, affecting its long-term competitiveness in an increasingly interconnected global marketplace.

## Methodology

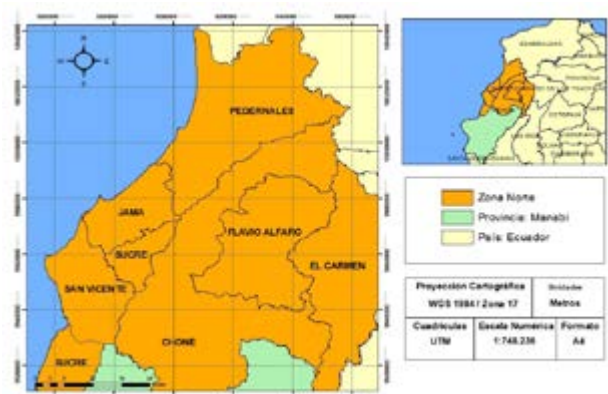
The present research is exploratory in nature, cross-sectional, and employs a mixed-methods approach. It includes a systematic review of the scientific literature on the topic, as well as the collection, analysis, and interpretation of qualitative and quantitative data. Evaluation models related to competitiveness in tourism are considered as methodological guidelines for achieving the proposed objective.

## Location

In the study area, this research focuses on the northern zone of Manabí, which is one of the 24 provinces that make up the administrative divisions of Ecuador. It is comprised of 22 cantons, bordered to the north by Esmeraldas, to the south by Santa Elena, to the east by Santo Domingo de los Tsáchilas, Los Ríos, and Guayas, and to the west by the Pacific Ocean (CONGOPE, 2019). The province covers an area of 18,870 km<sup>2</sup>, and its northern zone (the study area) consists of seven cantons: (1) El Carmen; (2) Chone; (3) Flavio Alfaro; (4) Jama; (5) Sucre; (6) Pedernales; (7) San Vicente (GPM, 2021) (figure 1).

**Figure 1**

*Geographic location of the Northern Zone of Manabí.*



Source: processed on ArcMap 10.8.

According to Campos et al. (2020), this area boasts a significant amount of vegetation, highlighting the agricultural production sector, which is complemented by the presence of

beaches and protected areas that can be leveraged by tourism entrepreneurs.

The proposed methodology approaches three stages: (1) the analysis of sustainable aspects in the competitiveness of tourism ventures in the area of study; (2) A strategic analysis SWOT; (3) the design of sustainable strategies. First, the objective is clearly defined: to develop strategies that promote the sustainability and competitiveness of these ventures. Data collection is carried out through a combination of sources, including literature review and survey. This is complemented by collaborative workshops where participants identified and discuss the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats, providing a more holistic view of the context. Once the information is gathered, the SWOT analysis was conducted to set a baseline for strategy formulation. These strategies are organized into a model that illustrates how each element of the analysis relates to and enhances one another. Subsequently, a 5W2H matrix is created to break down each strategy, addressing key aspects such as what, why, where, when, who, how, and how much, allowing for detailed and practical planning of implementation. Finally, a monitoring and evaluation system is established, including indicators to measure the effectiveness of the strategies over time, ensuring ongoing adjustments and improvements. This comprehensive methodology not only aims to strengthen the capacity of tourism ventures in the region but also to promote their alignment with sustainability principles, ensuring their long-term viability.

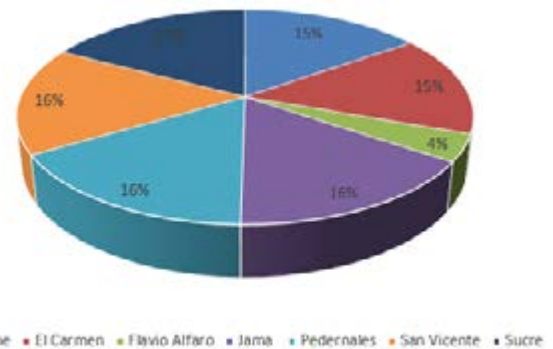
### Sample and data collection

A random probabilistic sampling was conducted with an infinite population due to the lack of prior data for data collection. The aim of the survey was to analyze the sustainability of tourism ventures from the perspective of tourists visiting the Northern Zone of Manabí. To this end, a questionnaire was developed based on the sustainability indicators from the World Tourism Organization (WTO). The surveys were administered during June and July 2023 at the visitation sites of the cantons in this region of the

province. A total of 196 surveys were collected, corresponding to a confidence level (Z) of 95%, a success-failure probability of 50%-50% (p-q), and a margin of error (e) of 7%, which is considered acceptable in social studies. Data obtained were analyzed on Excel.

### Results

The northern region of Manabi has 329 tourism establishments; 80.92 % of them is represented by microenterprises, 10.68% small businesses, 0.37% medium sized, and only 0.03% involves big companies (MINTUR, 2022). However, small informal businesses constitute a significant part of the supply and they are not subjected to legal duties, therefore, the absence of formal recognition inevitably causes a particular phenomenon which must be studied separately.



Note: data obtained from the cadaster MINTUR (2023)

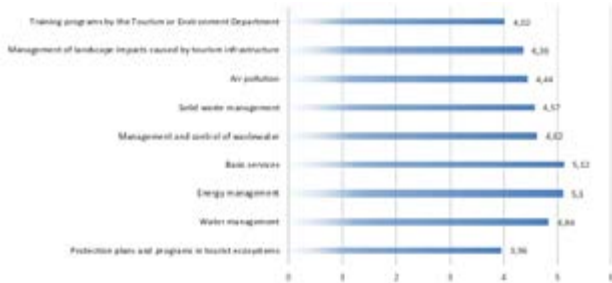
### Tourism sustainability in the competitiveness of the Northern Region of Manabi

It is widely accepted the fact that sustainability affects destination competitiveness (Buranasiri, et al. 2024). Therefore, diagnosing the current sustainable state of the entrepreneurial actions in the destination is demanded to learn about its competitiveness. In this study, a total sample of 197 surveys related to the tourists' perception about the sustainability of tourism in the Northern Region of Manabi were collected. The results were analyzed separately according to the environmental, economic and social dimensions respectively. Environmental situation



of tourism entrepreneurship in the study area is shown in figure 2.

**Figure 2**  
*Social sustainability on tourism competitiveness*

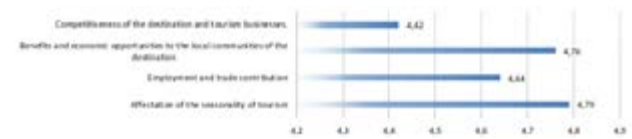


Note: data collected through survey in the Northern Region of Manabí

Environmental management in tourism entrepreneurship showed serious limitations. All the means of the evaluated indicators in a 1-10 scale were scored under 6 points (figure 2) which reflects the weak position of the environmental management from the entrepreneurial sector, and, in turn, the low competitiveness of the destination. Indeed, the lack of plans and programs to protect tourism ecosystems resulted the lowest scored in destination sustainability bringing out the deficiencies in tourism sustainable development planning to avoid predatory actions over natural resources and ensure life quality in the destination. Moreover, other low-scored indicator is that of few initiatives on environmental training programs complements the reality of bad practices perceived by tourists as observed in the score of the other indicators of this dimension.

Economic dimension is another fundamental part of sustainability and significantly contributes to destination competitiveness (CEPAL, 2022). The current situation of tourism entrepreneurship sustainability in the competitiveness is shown in figure 3.

**Figure 3**  
*Economic sustainability on tourism competitiveness*

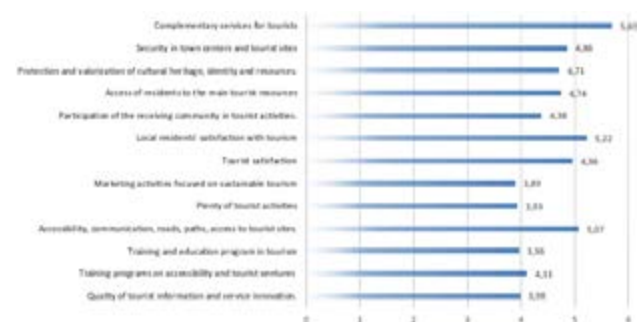


Note: data collected through survey in the Northern Region of Manabí

Similar to the results regarding the environmental dimension, the tourists' perception about the economic situation derived from the tourism entrepreneurship sector. The competitiveness of the destination shows a negative scenario regarding the economic sustainable dimension. As it can be seen in figure 3, the indicators were scored 4 in the 1-10 scale (under the acceptable criterion), which displays that the tourists perceive inadequate implementation of economic actions that are hazarding the right distribution of economic benefits among the local community.

The situation of the social dimension in the destination competitiveness is shown in figure 4.

**Figure 4**  
*Social sustainability on tourism competitiveness*



Note: data collected through survey in the Northern Region of Manabí

In the social dimension, sustainability plays a crucial role in tourism competitiveness, as it ensures that the development of the sector benefits local communities and preserves their long-term well-being (Amador, 2021). However, when evaluating the social indicators in this

context, it was observed that they all scored below 6, indicating a number of significant shortcomings. This low score reflects challenges such as the lack of quality of tourism information and innovation in services and marketing activities focused on sustainable tourism, which show significantly low values; this suggests that although there are some positive elements, social sustainability in tourism competitiveness faces serious challenges, especially in the promotion of sustainable tourism and in the satisfaction of both residents and tourists.

**SWOT Strategic Analysis**

The northern region of Manabí has a significant number of tourism microenterprises (80.92%), while medium and large enterprises represent a minority (0.37% and 0.03%, respectively) (MINTUR, 2022). This predominance of microenterprises, together with a notable presence of informal enterprises, presents particular challenges and opportunities for the sustainable development and competitiveness of the destination. One of the main barriers faced by entrepreneurs in the study area is the limited access to financing, along with high interest rates, especially at the micro level. Additionally, challenges in business management are compounded by inadequate infrastructure, which includes difficult access to roads, instability in electrical service, and low internet connectivity. The absence of a solid strategic plan and a legal framework that simplifies bureaucratic processes limits support for small businesses. Furthermore, restricted access to local markets and a lack of technical mentorship hinder growth toward economies of scale and the effective management of financial resources. Despite the tourism-oriented vocation and enthusiasm of entrepreneurs, the limited collaboration among them hinders teamwork and reduces the capacity to develop and share new knowledge in the business sector.

The Northern Region of Manabí demonstrated a remarkable level of resilience following two significant socio-natural disasters that occurred within five years (the earthquake on April 16, 2016, and the COVID-19 pandemic),

which exacerbated issues in the tourism sector and significantly weakened the business environment. However, sustainability remains a critical factor that requires significant improvements from the visitors’ perspective, weakening the destination’s image and diminishing its competitive capacity in the tourism sector. The following SWOT matrix detailing the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats facing the tourism sector in northern Manabí (table 1).

**Table 1**  
*SWOT Matrix*

Strengths	Opportunities
Business diversity Natural and cultural richness Local knowledge Adaptability and resilience Entrepreneurial spirit Vocation for tourism	Emerging markets Technological advancements International aid and support Sustainable planning initiatives Global e-commerce Social entrepreneurship
Weakness	Threat
Limited access to capital Low skills level on entrepreneurship Inadequate infrastructure Lack of sustainable planning Economic inequality Market size constraints Limited business support services Weak community ties Business informality	Competition from informal sector Corruption Loss of tourist confidence Political instability Economic volatility Brain drain Socio-natural disasters

The northern region of Manabí has a remarkable business diversity in the tourism sector, highlighted by the presence of numerous local enterprises that drive the development of the destination. This business diversity is complemented by a growing recognition of sustainability and a strong entrepreneurial spirit. In addition, the lack of sustainable planning and underlying economic inequalities negatively impact tourism development, creating a gap between the opportunities and the operational reality of businesses.

Despite these weaknesses, there are significant opportunities to address these challenges, certainly the formalization of informal businesses and access to training and financing programs can improve the structure of the sector and encourage more sustainable management. Sustainable planning initiatives can also enhance tourism supply, aligning it with current market demands; however, the sector

faces threats such as increased competition from other destinations and possible regulatory changes, which could affect tourist confidence. It is essential to implement strategies that strengthen local capacities and ensure a competitive and sustainable tourism offer.

### **Sustainable tourism entrepreneurship for the competitiveness of the Northern Region of Manabi**

Starting from the premise that the sustainability of tourism entrepreneurs significantly affects the competitiveness of destinations, it is essential to structure strategies based on these foundations. While the issues identified at the business level in the area reveal deep limitations in achieving a highly competitive status, it is necessary to adopt a systemic approach that encourages the creation of new business that are both sustainable and competitive. The model for developing tourism entrepreneurs under this approach is illustrated in Figure 5.

**Figure 5**



Note: the model shows how sustainability relies on its three dimensions which must be strictly considered in planning aligned with the pillars of competitiveness to build a sustainable a competitive entrepreneurship.

Considering the deficiencies identified during the diagnostic phase and the model for developing sustainable tourism ventures that enhance the competitiveness of the northern region of Manabí, the following strategies are proposed:

#### **Business Formalization and Strengthening Strategy: Implement a business**

**formalization and strengthening program that offers incentives and facilities for informal businesses in the tourism sector to register legally. This program would include advice on business management, access to financing, and training in legal regulations.**

**Fostering social cohesion through collaborative tourism projects: Develop tourism projects that involve the entire community, such as tourism fairs, cultural festivals, and community tourism routes. Promote the formation of local tourism associations that work together to strengthen community ties and share the benefits generated by tourism.**

**Promotion of community-based tourism and inclusive entrepreneurship: Promote community-based tourism, where local communities benefit directly from tourism activities. Establish incentives for enterprises led by women, youth and other vulnerable groups, ensuring that they actively participate in the economic development of tourism.**

**Sustainability Training and Continuing Education Strategy: Create an ongoing sustainability training and education program for tourism entrepreneurs, focused on the effective implementation of sustainable practices and the incorporation of technological innovation. This program may include modules on resource management and sustainable marketing.**

**Investment in sustainable and accessible tourism infrastructure: Carry out an infrastructure improvement plan that includes the development of basic services, digital connectivity, and accessible tourism facilities (for people with disabilities). Prioritize the development of infrastructure that minimizes environmental impact and green construction.**

**Creation of training programs in tourism management and entrepreneurship: Develop training programs in business**



**skills and tourism management, focusing on sustainability, digital marketing, financial management, and innovative tourism product development. Include support from local universities, non-governmental organizations, and tourism expert**

**Promotion of public policies for access to financing for tourism ventures: Implement government policies that facilitate access to capital for tourism entrepreneurs through loans or investment funds. These policies should prioritize sustainable projects, encouraging investment in sustainable infrastructure.**

**Implementation of Key Actions of the Tourism Sectorial Plan 2021-2025: It will be aimed at aligning the sector’s activities with the plan’s objectives, which seek to strengthen the competitiveness of companies through the adoption of practices that promote environmental protection.**

**Certification of Local Tourism Enterprises: Encourage tourism sustainability certification in tourism enterprises to access tax benefits, tourism promotion in new markets and specialized technical assistance.**

It should be noted that each of these strategies will be linked to the model of competitive and sustainable tourism entrepreneurship, ensuring a holistic integration of all components.

The 5W2H matrix, a structured tool that facilitates both the planning and execution of strategic actions, was used to develop the strategies. This matrix was applied on the basis of the SWOT analysis, which identified the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats of the evaluated context. Based on this diagnosis, nine key strategies were formulated, each with a set of detailed actions; these actions clearly specify how the strategies will be implemented, who will be responsible for their execution, the implementation schedule, and justify the purpose of each action.

**Table 2**  
*Matrix 5W2H*

<p>Strategy 1:                  What: Formalize and strengthen informal tourism businesses.                  Why: Encourage the legal registration of informal companies and improve their management.                  Where: In the tourism ventures of the northern zone of Manabí.                  Who: Local governments in collaboration with local tourism entrepreneurs                  How long: 6 years</p>
<p>Strategy 2:                  What: Develop collaborative tourism projects that promote social cohesion.                  Why: Strengthen community ties and distribute the benefits of tourism.                  Where: In the tourism ventures of the northern zone of Manabí                  Who: The entire community, local tourism associations.                  How long: 6 years</p>
<p>Strategy 3:                  What: Promote community-based tourism and inclusive entrepreneurship.                  Why: Ensure the participation of women, youth and vulnerable groups in tourism development.                  Where: In the tourism ventures of the northern zone of Manabí.                  Who: Entrepreneurs and entire community                  How long: 6 years</p>
<p>Strategy 4:                  What: Create a continuous training program in sustainability and education for tourism entrepreneurs.                  Why: Improve the implementation of sustainable practices and technological innovations.                  Where: In the tourism ventures of the northern zone of Manabí.                  Who: Tourism entrepreneurs in collaboration with academia.                  How long: 6 years</p>
<p>Strategy 5:                  What: Improve tourism infrastructure with a focus on sustainability and accessibility.                  Why: Reduce environmental impact and make tourism accessible to all.                  Where: In the tourism ventures of the northern zone of Manabí.                  Who: Local entrepreneurs, local government and investors                  How long: 6 years</p>
<p>Strategy 6:                  What: Develop training programs in tourism management and business skills.                  Why: Strengthen the capacities of entrepreneurs for innovation and sustainability.                  Where: In the tourism ventures of the northern zone of Manabí.                  Who: Tourism entrepreneurs in collaboration with academia.                  How long: 6 years</p>
<p>Strategy 7:                  What: Implement public policies that facilitate access to financing for tourism ventures.                  Why: Promote sustainable tourism projects and foster economic growth.                  Where: In the tourism ventures of the northern zone of Manabí.                  Who: Tourism entrepreneurs, local government and financial institutions.                  How long: 6 years</p>
<p>Strategy 8:                  What: Implement key actions according to the Tourism Sector Plan 2021-2025 in tourism enterprises in Manabí.                  Why: Strengthen competitiveness through environmental protection.                  Where: In the tourism ventures of the northern zone of Manabí.                  Who: Local governments in collaboration with the tourism sector.                  How long: 6 years</p>
<p>Strategy 9:                  What: Encourage sustainability certification in local tourism businesses.                  Why: Access to tax benefits, tourism promotion and technical assistance.                  Where: In the tourism ventures of the northern zone of Manabí.                  Who: Tourism entrepreneurs and certifying agencies.                  How long: 6 years</p>

**Discussion**

The results of the study in the northern region of Manabí show significant deficiencies in sustainable management, which negatively affect the competitiveness of the destination,

a conclusion that coincides with previous research According to the study by Serrano et al. (2018), sustainability is a crucial factor for the competitiveness of tourist destinations, where poor environmental and social management decreases the attractiveness and retention capacity of tourists. Furthermore Perez (2017) emphasizes that the lack of sustainable planning and the perception of poor environmental practices by tourists contribute to a decrease in competitiveness. Likewise, inadequate infrastructure and lack of financial support represent important barriers to the competitiveness of microenterprises, limiting their ability to adapt to the demands of sustainable tourism.

On the other hand, although there are studies that highlight resilience and adaptability as key factors for competitiveness, as indicated in the work of Costa and Sonaglio (2020), the results in Manabí show that this resilience is not sufficient to counteract the deficiencies in environmental and economic sustainability. Entrepreneurs, despite their spirit and vocation, face structural limitations that prevent them from taking full advantage of opportunities, which coincides with the findings of Polanco et al. (2020) in regions with a predominance of informal microenterprises. This contrast highlights the need to implement strategies that combine resilience with strategic and sustainable planning to increase long-term competitiveness, considering the threats of socio-natural disasters and the lack of cohesion in the business community.

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