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ORGULLO CÍVICO Y TRAYECTORIAS DIVERGENTES DEL DESARROLLO DEL ECOTURISMO EN LA PENÍNSULA DE YUCATÁN: UN ANÁLISIS DEL TRILEMA DEL ECOTURISMO

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Civic Pride and Divergent Ecotourism Development Pathways in the Yucatán Peninsula: An Analysis of the Ecotourism Trilemma

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how civic pride shapes divergent pathways in community-based ecotourism in the Yucatán Peninsula. Although ecotourism seeks to combine environmental conservation, economic development, and community well-being, local communities face an "ecotourism trilemma" involving tensions among Nature Conservation (NC), Financial Viability (FV), and Socio-Cultural Integrity (SCI). The study argues that the balance among these dimensions is influenced not only by tourism growth and market conditions but also by civic pride, understood as shared community values, attachments, and aspirations. Changes in living standards and generational composition may transform these values and redirect local development priorities. Comparative field research was conducted in Nuevo Durango, El Cuyo, and Holbox using questionnaires (n = 54), semi-structured interviews (n = 20), participant observation, and document analysis. The findings identify three configurations: a relatively stable conservation-oriented model in Nuevo Durango, a transitional and structurally unstable configuration in El Cuyo, and increasing FV dominance in Holbox, where tourism expansion and generational changes in civic pride have shifted collective priorities toward economic benefits. The results show that the ecotourism trilemma is structurally constant but configurationally dynamic. Divergent development pathways emerge from the interaction of civic pride, generational change, and governance capacity rather than from economic expansion alone.

Keywords: community-based ecotourism; civic pride; ecotourism trilemma; developmental pathways; Yucatán Peninsula

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Orgullo cívico y trayectorias divergentes del desarrollo del ecoturismo en la Península de Yucatán: un análisis del trilema del ecoturismo

RESUMEN

Este estudio examina cómo el orgullo cívico configura trayectorias divergentes en el ecoturismo comunitario de la Península de Yucatán. Aunque el ecoturismo busca integrar la conservación ambiental, el desarrollo económico y el bienestar comunitario, las comunidades locales se enfrentan a un trilema del ecoturismo que implica tensiones entre la Conservación de la Naturaleza (CN), la Viabilidad Financiera (VF) y la Integridad Sociocultural (IS). El estudio sostiene que el equilibrio entre estas dimensiones está determinado no solo por el crecimiento del turismo y las condiciones del mercado, sino también por el orgullo cívico, entendido como el conjunto de valores, vínculos y aspiraciones compartidos por una comunidad. Los cambios en los niveles de vida y en la composición generacional pueden transformar estos valores y reorientar las prioridades locales de desarrollo. Se realizó una investigación de campo comparativa en Nuevo Durango, El Cuyo y Holbox mediante cuestionarios (n = 54), entrevistas semiestructuradas (n = 20), observación participante y análisis documental. Los resultados identifican tres configuraciones: un modelo relativamente estable y orientado hacia la conservación en Nuevo Durango; una configuración transitoria y estructuralmente inestable en El Cuyo; y un creciente predominio de la VF en Holbox, donde la expansión turística y los cambios generacionales en el orgullo cívico han desplazado las prioridades colectivas hacia los beneficios económicos. Los resultados muestran que el trilema del ecoturismo es estructuralmente constante, pero dinámico en su configuración. Las trayectorias divergentes de desarrollo surgen de la interacción entre el orgullo cívico, el cambio generacional y la capacidad de gobernanza, más que de la expansión económica por sí sola.

Palabras clave: ecoturismo comunitario; orgullo cívico; trilema del ecoturismo; trayectorias de desarrollo; Península de Yucatán.

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INTRODUCTION

In recent years, ecotourism has expanded widely across Latin America and other developing regions. Although often promoted as a strategy capable of reconciling environmental conservation with local economic development (Weaver, 2001), it unfolds under what can be conceptualized as an “ecotourism trilemma”—an institutionally embedded and unavoidable trade-off structure (Heffernan, 2022). Specifically, inherent tensions exist among three core elements: Nature Conservation (NC), Financial Viability (FV), and Socio-Cultural Integrity (SCI). Each of these elements possesses normative legitimacy and is indispensable to sustainability. However, their simultaneous maximization is structurally difficult (Schwartz, 2012).

Many cases described as Community-Based Ecotourism (CBET) involve initiatives led by indigenous or local communities, characterized by small-scale operations, collective management, and strong emphasis on environmental and cultural preservation. However, recent developments indicate increasing diversification in both formation processes and outcomes.

This variation is particularly evident in the Yucatán Peninsula, where large-scale tourism development centered on Cancún has expanded into surrounding regions (OECD, 2017). Government-led policies since the late 1960s, including the establishment of FONATUR, have driven infrastructure development and tourism growth (Torres & Momsen, 2005). More recently, projects such as the Tren Maya have further increased regional accessibility, accelerating tourism expansion into previously remote communities. While such developments create economic opportunities, they also introduce pressures related to environmental sustainability and community structure. In response, CBET has emerged in some areas as an alternative model emphasizing local participation and resource management.

This study examines three communities—Nuevo Durango, El Cuyo, and Holbox—to analyze how ecotourism develops and diverges across contexts. It adopts the concept of an "ecotourism trilemma," consisting of Nature Conservation (NC), Financial Viability (FV), and Socio-Cultural Integrity (SCI). Although all three are desirable, their simultaneous maximization is structurally difficult.

This study argues that the configuration of this trilemma is shaped not only by external conditions but also by civic pride, which evolves over time and influences collective preferences. Accordingly, the research question is:

Under what conditions does community-based ecotourism remain conservation-oriented, and when does it bifurcate toward growth-driven tourism?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Ecotourism and Sustainability

Ecotourism has been widely discussed as a strategy for sustainable development, particularly in regions seeking alternatives to resource-dependent economies (Blamey, 2001). While tourism can provide economic diversification, conventional mass tourism often generates environmental degradation and social disruption (Baloch et al., 2023; Amin & Budilestari, 2025). Conversely, strict conservation policies may limit local livelihoods (Brockington et al., 2006; Pandey & Dar, 2025).

These tensions highlight the difficulty of balancing environmental, economic, and social objectives. Although ecotourism is often presented as a solution, its outcomes depend heavily on governance and local participation (Thetsane, 2019; Forje & Tchamba, 2022).

Community-Based Ecotourism

Community-Based Ecotourism (CBET) has emerged as an important approach within the broader ecotourism discourse, particularly in rural and indigenous regions of Latin America where limited financial resources and infrastructure constrain large-scale tourism investment. In this context, CBET has been widely discussed as a development approach that utilizes locally available natural and cultural resources while enabling community participation in tourism activities (Foucat, 2002; Brenner & Vargas-del-Río, 2013; Mayett-Moreno et al., 2017).

CBET is generally characterized by three key features: active participation of local residents in tourism management, collective sharing of economic benefits, and community control over tourism resources and decision-making processes. By emphasizing local governance and community ownership, CBET is often regarded as a mechanism for strengthening local livelihoods while supporting environmental conservation and cultural preservation.

A growing body of research has examined the role of CBET in regional development across Latin America. In some contexts, institutional frameworks and policy support have facilitated the establishment of tourism cooperatives, enabling local residents to participate more actively in tourism management and benefit distribution (Hirami & Hidalgo Morales, 2024). However, the formation and

consolidation of CBET initiatives vary considerably depending on local social and institutional conditions. In certain cases, historical and political factors have complicated community organization and collective action, as observed in Bolivia (Mansilla, 1980), although successful cooperative-based initiatives have also emerged.

At the same time, not all tourism activities described as ecotourism correspond to CBET principles. In some regions, tourism is organized at the individual or family level without broader community participation or benefit-sharing mechanisms. While such initiatives may utilize natural resources and attract eco-oriented visitors, they often lack the collective governance structures associated with CBET (Hirami & Hidalgo Morales, 2025).

These variations suggest that CBET should not be understood as a uniform institutional model, but rather as a diverse set of locally embedded practices shaped by social organization, governance structures, and historical conditions. Understanding how these differences influence the developmental trajectories of ecotourism remains an important issue in tourism research.

Tourism Development Path

Tourism development has long been analyzed as a dynamic process that evolves over time through identifiable stages. One of the most influential frameworks in tourism studies is the Tourism Area Life Cycle (TALC) model (Butler, 1980), which conceptualizes tourism destinations as progressing through a sequence of stages including exploration, involvement, development, consolidation, stagnation, and potential decline or rejuvenation. The TALC framework emphasizes that tourism development is not static but follows a trajectory shaped by economic forces, infrastructure development, and market demand.

Subsequent studies have expanded this perspective by emphasizing the role of institutional arrangements and governance structures in shaping tourism trajectories. Rather than following a single universal pathway, tourism development may take multiple forms depending on local social, political, and economic conditions. In this context, concepts such as path dependency and path creation have been introduced to explain how early institutional decisions and development strategies influence later outcomes (Bramwell & Lane, 2011; Taylor et al., 2019). Initial choices regarding infrastructure

investment, governance systems, and tourism management may therefore create long-term development trajectories that are difficult to alter.

In recent years, scholars have also highlighted the importance of community agency and local governance in shaping tourism development paths. Particularly in regions where tourism is closely connected to natural resources and local livelihoods, community responses to tourism expansion can significantly influence the direction and sustainability of tourism growth (Scheyvens, 1999; Tosun, 2000; Kontogeorgopoulos et al., 2014).

This perspective suggests that tourism development should not be understood solely as a linear progression along a predetermined life cycle. Instead, tourism trajectories may diverge depending on how external conditions—such as infrastructure development, external investment, tourism growth, and professional assistance—interact with local institutional contexts and community responses. In ecotourism settings, these interactions are particularly significant because tourism development is closely linked to the management of fragile ecosystems and community-based resource governance.

Therefore, understanding tourism development requires examining not only stages of growth but also the structural and institutional conditions that shape development outcomes. This perspective provides a foundation for explaining how ecotourism evolves and why some community-based initiatives remain conservation-oriented while others shift toward growth-driven tourism models.

Such divergence in tourism trajectories may generate what can be conceptualized as developmental bifurcation in ecotourism development. Building on these perspectives, this study conceptualizes ecotourism development as occurring under a structural ecotourism trilemma, in which tensions among Nature Conservation (NC), Financial Viability (FV), and Socio-Cultural Integrity (SCI) shape possible development paths.

The following section presents the conceptual framework that explains how external conditions, civic pride, and governance capacity interact with the ecotourism trilemma to generate such developmental bifurcation.

THE ECOTOURISM TRILEMMA

Ecotourism has frequently been promoted as a development approach capable of simultaneously achieving environmental conservation, economic development, and community well-being. Early

discussions emphasized the potential of ecotourism to generate economic incentives for biodiversity protection while improving the livelihoods of local communities (Goodwin, 1996; Weaver, 2001). In this perspective, tourism revenues are expected to support conservation efforts, while conservation itself enhances the attractiveness of tourism destinations, thereby creating mutually reinforcing benefits for both nature and local societies. However, practical experiences of ecotourism development suggest that these objectives do not always evolve harmoniously. Empirical studies have shown that tourism expansion can produce complex trade-offs among environmental protection, economic benefits, and social stability in host communities. Rapid tourism growth may increase income and employment opportunities while simultaneously placing pressure on fragile ecosystems and altering local social structures. Conversely, strict conservation policies may limit economic opportunities for local residents, and externally driven tourism development may reduce community control and weaken socio-cultural integrity.

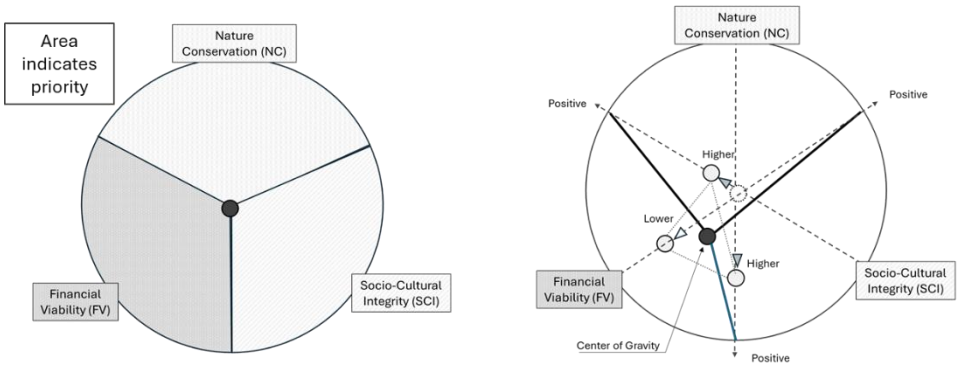
These tensions indicate that ecotourism development often involves structural trade-offs among multiple objectives rather than a simple win-win relationship. In this study, such tensions are conceptualized as an ecotourism trilemma, consisting of three interrelated but potentially conflicting dimensions: Nature Conservation (NC), Financial Viability (FV), and Socio-Cultural Integrity (SCI). Nature Conservation refers to the protection of ecosystems, biodiversity, and natural landscapes that constitute the core attraction of many ecotourism destinations. Environmental sustainability is widely regarded as a fundamental principle of ecotourism because tourism activities depend heavily on the preservation of natural resources and ecological stability. Financial Viability refers to the capacity of tourism activities to generate sufficient economic benefits to sustain tourism operations and support local livelihoods. Without tangible economic returns, communities may lack incentives to maintain conservation initiatives or participate actively in tourism management. Socio-Cultural Integrity refers to the preservation of local cultural traditions, community identity, and social cohesion. Tourism development may influence cultural practices, social relationships, and patterns of everyday life within host communities. Maintaining socio-cultural integrity is therefore essential for ensuring that tourism development remains compatible with community values and local governance systems. Although these three elements are widely recognized as desirable objectives of sustainable tourism development, their

simultaneous maximization is structurally difficult. Expansion of tourism activities designed to increase financial viability often requires increased visitor numbers, expanded infrastructure, and greater capital investment, which may place pressure on natural environments and disrupt traditional community structures. Conversely, policies that prioritize strict environmental protection may constrain tourism growth and limit economic opportunities for local residents. Similarly, tourism systems that prioritize rapid economic expansion may weaken community participation and reduce the capacity of local institutions to maintain socio-cultural integrity.

Rather than representing temporary imbalances, these tensions reflect a persistent institutional condition embedded within ecotourism development. Improvements in one dimension frequently occur at the expense of another. For this reason, ecotourism development can be understood as operating within a structural trilemma in which conservation, economic viability, and socio-cultural integrity must be continuously negotiated.

(a)

Figure 1. The Ecotourism Trilemma: Conceptual Structure and Dynamic Configuration



(a) Conceptual structure (b) Dynamic configuration

The conceptual structure of this trilemma is illustrated in Figure 1a. The three dimensions—Nature Conservation, Financial Viability, and Socio-Cultural Integrity—form a triangular relationship in which no single dimension can be maximized without affecting the others. The center of the circle represents a balanced configuration in which the three objectives are equally prioritized.

In practice, however, the relative balance among these three elements is not fixed. As tourism develops, changing economic opportunities, external investments, infrastructure development, and evolving community values may shift the relative priorities among the three dimensions. These shifts produce different trilemma configurations, as illustrated in Figure 1b. In Figure 1b, each axis represents one element of the trilemma. Points located along the axes indicate the relative emphasis placed on each dimension within a particular tourism development context. The triangular connection among these points represents the configuration of priorities among NC, FV, and SCI. The filled circle indicates the center of gravity of these priorities, representing the overall orientation of tourism development within the trilemma space. Such configurations may evolve over time as communities respond to changing external conditions and internal preferences. In some cases, strong emphasis on environmental protection and community participation may sustain conservation-oriented community-based tourism systems. In other cases, increasing market demand and external investment may gradually shift tourism development toward more capital-intensive and growth-oriented tourism models. Understanding these dynamic configurations of the ecotourism trilemma provides an important analytical basis for examining the diversity of tourism development trajectories. In particular, variations in how communities negotiate the trade-offs embedded within the trilemma may generate different long-term outcomes in tourism development.

Building upon this conceptualization, the following section develops a framework that explains how external conditions, civic pride, collective preferences, and governance capacity interact to produce developmental bifurcation in ecotourism trajectories.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

While the ecotourism trilemma describes the structural tensions among Nature Conservation (NC), Financial Viability (FV), and Socio-Cultural Integrity (SCI), an important question remains: how does a particular configuration of the trilemma emerge within a community? Tourism development does not

automatically determine the relative priority assigned to these three elements. Rather, the configuration of the trilemma is shaped through social processes within local communities. This study therefore proposes a conceptual framework that explains how tourism development trajectories emerge through interactions among external conditions, civic pride, collective preferences, and governance processes.

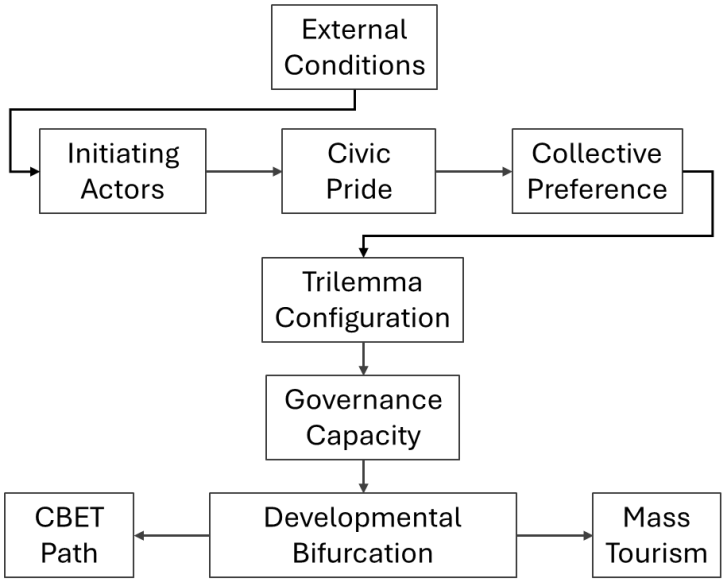
External conditions often play an important role in initiating tourism activities in rural or peripheral regions. These conditions may include infrastructure development, increasing tourist flows, professional advice from external organizations, or proposals introduced by universities, NGOs, or development agencies. In many cases of community-based ecotourism in Latin America, such external actors function as catalysts by providing technical knowledge, organizational advice, or market access. In communities previously examined by the author, this catalytic role has been observed in various forms, including a visiting architect in the Sierra Norte of Oaxaca, university students in Taselotzin, Puebla, Mexico (Hirami, 2024), a research institution in Villa Amboró, Santa Cruz de la Sierra, Bolivia (Hirami, 2025), and a foreign visitor in Chicacnab, Guatemala (Hirami, 2026).

However, external conditions alone do not determine the direction of tourism development. The response of local residents plays a crucial role in shaping development outcomes. In this study, particular attention is given to civic pride, which refers to residents' sense of attachment, responsibility, and identity associated with their community and local natural environment. Civic pride initially emerges at the individual level, often through interactions with visitors who appreciate local landscapes, cultural traditions, and community practices. Through repeated interactions with visitors and external actors, local residents may become more aware of the value of their natural and cultural resources. Such recognition may strengthen civic pride among individuals and gradually influence their attitudes toward tourism and conservation. In some cases, residents begin to view their local environment not only as a resource for economic activity but also as an important component of community identity (Hirami et al., 2025). When such attitudes are shared among community members, individual civic pride may evolve into collective preference. Collective preference represents a shared understanding within the community regarding how tourism development should be managed and what values should be prioritized. At this stage, communities begin to articulate their priorities regarding conservation, economic opportunities, and cultural preservation. These collective preferences influence the

configuration of the ecotourism trilemma. Communities that strongly value environmental protection and cultural traditions may prioritize Nature Conservation and Socio-Cultural Integrity within the trilemma structure. In contrast, communities that emphasize economic opportunities may place greater weight on Financial Viability. The trilemma configuration therefore reflects collective value formation within the community.

Once collective preferences become widely shared, they may lead to the establishment of governance capacity within the community. Governance capacity refers to the ability of communities to organize tourism activities, establish rules for resource management, regulate external investment, and distribute tourism benefits. This may include the formation of cooperatives, community-based tourism associations, or local regulatory arrangements that guide tourism development. When governance capacity is successfully established, communities are often able to maintain tourism development pathways that reflect their collective priorities. In such cases, conservation-oriented community-based tourism systems may remain relatively stable over time. However, when governance capacity remains weak or fragmented, tourism development may become increasingly influenced by external investment, market pressures, and infrastructure expansion. In such contexts, the initial configuration of the trilemma may gradually shift, potentially leading tourism development toward more capital-intensive and growth-driven forms of tourism. This study conceptualizes these alternative outcomes as developmental bifurcation in ecotourism trajectories. As illustrated in Figure 2, tourism development trajectories may diverge depending on how external conditions interact with civic pride, collective preference formation, and governance capacity within local communities. The proposed conceptual framework therefore provides an analytical lens for understanding how different configurations of the ecotourism trilemma emerge and shape divergent tourism development trajectories.

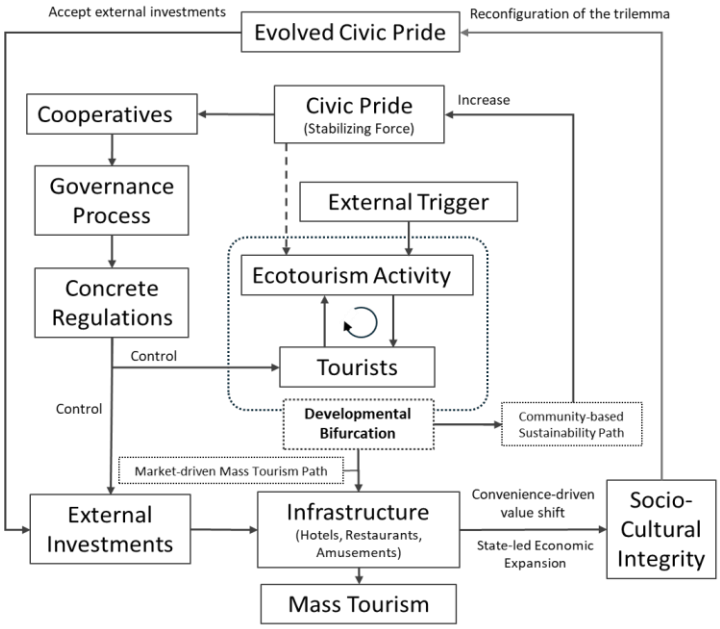
Figure 2. Conceptual Framework of Ecotourism Developmental Bifurcation



MECHANISM OF DEVELOPMENTAL BIFURCATION

While the previous section outlined the conceptual relationships among external conditions, initiating actors, civic pride, collective preference, trilemma configuration, and governance capacity, this section focuses on the community-level processes through which developmental bifurcation emerges in practice (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Mechanism of Developmental Bifurcation in Ecotourism Development



Ecotourism initiatives often begin when community members respond to new opportunities created by tourism growth, infrastructure development, or advice from external actors. Early interactions between residents and tourists may stimulate civic pride by increasing awareness of the value of local natural and cultural resources. As more residents recognize these values, civic pride can gradually evolve into shared preferences regarding how tourism should develop. These preferences influence local decision-making. Community members may organize meetings, establish informal rules, or create tourism cooperatives in order to manage tourism activities. Through such collective actions, communities attempt to balance conservation, economic benefits, and socio-cultural values. When these activities develop into stable local governance arrangements, communities are able to regulate tourism development through locally defined rules. Cooperative organizations may control visitor numbers, manage tourism services, protect natural resources, and regulate external investment. Under such conditions, tourism development tends to follow a community-based sustainability path that preserves the priorities embedded in the local trilemma configuration.

However, developmental trajectories may shift when tourism expansion is driven primarily by external investment, infrastructure development, or state-led economic expansion. In such cases, private investors or government-led development initiatives may introduce new tourism facilities, transportation infrastructure, or regional development projects that significantly increase accessibility and visitor flows.

As economic opportunities and living standards improve under these conditions, community members may gradually reassess the importance of socio-cultural integrity in relation to economic benefits. This shift in everyday experiences can alter how residents perceive their community and its development priorities. The relative importance of financial viability may increase, while the relative importance of conservation may weaken. At the same time, socio-cultural integrity does not necessarily decline but is gradually redefined as improved living standards reshape local aspirations and lifestyles. Under these conditions, tourism development may gradually shift toward a growth-driven mass tourism path.

These processes illustrate how dynamic changes in collective preferences can reconfigure the internal balance of the ecotourism trilemma and ultimately generate divergent tourism development pathways. The following section examines these mechanisms through comparative case studies in the Yucatán Peninsula, focusing on how different communities negotiate the ecotourism trilemma and how these processes shape divergent tourism development trajectories.

METHODOLOGY

Research design

This study employs a comparative field research design to examine how variations in civic pride and governance capacity influence the internal configuration of the ecotourism trilemma across communities. Fieldwork was conducted in the Yucatán Peninsula in October 2025 and February 2026, with approximately two days of field investigation carried out at each research site during each visit. A mixed-method approach was adopted, combining structured questionnaires administered to community members, participant observation, document analysis, and semi-structured interviews with cooperative leaders, local guides, drivers, and shopkeepers. The questionnaire was designed to capture residents' perceptions of tourism impacts, civic pride, and attitudes toward conservation and economic development. This comparative design enables systematic examination of how different community contexts produce varying developmental trajectories of ecotourism.

Table 1. Comparative characteristics of the three study areas

Category	Nuevo Durango	El Cuyo	Holbox
Area	Approx. 0.2 km²	Approx. 1.2 km²	Approx. 2.3 km²
Population	Approx. 200-300	Approx. 1,800-2,000	Approx. 1,800-2,000
Access from Cancún	Approx. 1.5 hours by road	Approx. 2.5 hours by road	Approx. 2 hours by road and ferry
Traditional industry	Agriculture	Fishing	Fishing
Main tourism resources	Caves, nature walks, craft experiences	Birdwatching, mangrove ecosystem observation	Whale shark observation yours, marine activities
Community profile	Small-scale rural community	Coastal fishing village	Island community
Tourism development pattern	Community-based ecotourism	Transitional tourism	Tourism expansion

Note: Area and access time were measured using Google Maps. Population data are approximate and based on multiple local sources, including community information, tourism-related websites such as Rutopia, and field interviews.

Study area

The research was conducted in three tourism communities in the Yucatán Peninsula, Mexico: Nuevo Durango, El Cuyo, and Holbox. These sites were selected because they represent contrasting community settings and different stages of tourism development, making them suitable for comparative analysis of ecotourism trajectories. Table 1 summarizes the basic characteristics of the three study areas.

The three cases therefore represent different stages of tourism development, ranging from community-based ecotourism to tourism expansion.

Nuevo Durango is a small inland rural community originally based on agriculture. Since the early 2000s, local residents have developed a form of small-scale community-based ecotourism through cooperatives such as A'aktun Jaaleb and related groups. Main activities include visits to caves and cenotes, guided nature walks, Melipona beekeeping experiences, traditional food, and craft workshops. Tourism remains relatively small in scale and is closely embedded in local livelihoods and community cooperation.

El Cuyo is a coastal settlement located on a sandbar between the Gulf of Mexico and a lagoon surrounded by mangroves. Historically, its economy has shifted from timber transport to fishing, and more recently to tourism. Ecotourism activities include flamingo observation, birdwatching, and other nature-based experiences in the lagoon ecosystem. At the same time, kitesurfing, foreign-oriented accommodation, and other externally driven developments have expanded, making El Cuyo a useful

case of a transitional tourism setting where conservation-oriented ecotourism coexists with more growth-driven tourism activities.

Holbox is an island community historically dependent on fishing but transformed rapidly by tourism growth. Ecotourism initially developed around whale shark tours, which originally emphasized guide knowledge, conservation, and environmental education. However, as visitor demand increased, tourism diversified into a broader range of marine and leisure activities, accompanied by expanded accommodation, transport services, nightlife, and tourism infrastructure. Holbox therefore represents a case in which ecotourism has become increasingly integrated into a larger-scale tourism economy.

Taken together, these three sites provide a comparative spectrum: Nuevo Durango as a relatively stable community-based ecotourism case, El Cuyo as a mixed and transitional case, and Holbox as a case of tourism expansion shaped by stronger market forces. This variation makes them appropriate for examining how different local conditions influence the balance among conservation, financial viability, and socio-cultural integrity.

RESULTS

This section presents the empirical findings from the three communities in the Yucatán Peninsula. First, community perspectives on ecotourism are examined based on interviews and questionnaires. Subsequently, the findings are synthesized to identify differences in civic pride, governance capacity, and the configuration of the ecotourism trilemma across the three communities.

Community Perspectives on Ecotourism

To understand how local actors perceive ecotourism and its impacts, in-depth interviews were conducted with cooperative leaders, guides, drivers, shopkeepers, and other community members across the three research sites. The interviews focused on local values, perceptions of tourism development, and attitudes toward conservation, economic benefits, and community governance.

(1) Nuevo Durango

Interviews with Enrique Wilcab, a leading member of the local ecotourism initiative, revealed that tourism in Nuevo Durango is guided by a philosophy described by residents as "humanitarian tourism." Under this approach, tourism is not designed primarily to maximize profit but rather to promote cultural exchange, mutual learning, and respect for Mayan traditions and nature. Visitors are welcomed not merely as tourists but as temporary members of the community, and they are encouraged to learn about Mayan cultural values and the community's relationship with the natural environment. Tourism is therefore positioned as a complementary activity rather than the core economic sector of the community. Agriculture remains the primary livelihood, while tourism provides supplementary income. Community members emphasized that sustainability is prioritized over rapid economic expansion, and tourism activities are intentionally maintained at a modest scale. However, residents also expressed concern that large-scale external investments, particularly those associated with the development of the Tren Maya, could eventually reach the region and alter the character of the community. Unlike mass tourism destinations in southern Mexico, Nuevo Durango remains characterized by quiet nights rather than nightlife-oriented tourism. Residents view this tranquility as an important aspect of their community identity.

Interviews and questionnaires with other community members similarly revealed strong civic pride, a culture of mutual support, and deep respect for nature. Most residents expressed positive attitudes toward tourism because it provides supplementary income while reinforcing local cultural identity and community cohesion. These perceptions suggest that tourism in Nuevo Durango currently supports the maintenance of socio-cultural integrity within the community.

An external perspective was provided by a taxi driver who regularly travels between Cancún and Nuevo Durango. According to the driver, the social foundations of tourism development differ greatly between planned tourism cities such as Cancún and rural communities like Nuevo Durango: "In Cancún, many people who previously worked in fishing or agriculture shifted to tourism-related jobs, and the city developed into a tourism-centered urban economy with a concentration of population and capital. Nuevo Durango, however, was formed by people who escaped harsh labor conditions on hacienda estates. The community still maintains Mayan customs and traditions, and residents continue to live based on the

belief that humans and nature are interconnected." This external comparison highlights the distinct socio-cultural foundations underlying tourism development in the community.

(2) El Cuyo

Interviews with Gamariel, co-representative of the ecotourism cooperative, revealed a nuanced and balanced perception of tourism development in El Cuyo. First, tourism is generally regarded as beneficial to the community, but it is not considered the core economic activity. Fishing remains the primary livelihood, and tourism is viewed as a supplementary activity rather than a replacement for traditional industries.

Importantly, Gamariel emphasized that he is not opposed to tourism development itself, a view that was broadly shared among interviewees. Rather, he expressed a clear preference for tourism to evolve in an orderly manner while preserving the community's core values and identity. Maintaining these values for future generations, respecting the environmental carrying capacity, and ensuring that natural resources are primarily utilized by local residents—thereby fostering respect and environmental awareness—were highlighted as key principles guiding local perspectives on development.

Within this context, several concerns were also noted. Gamariel pointed to the growing presence of foreign residents and investors in the tourism sector. In some cases, foreign entrepreneurs operate tourism services targeting international visitors, while local residents participate mainly as employees. This situation raises concerns that tourism revenues may not circulate sufficiently within the local economy. In addition, the number of international visitors has increased over the past decade, leading some residents to express concerns that external investment and tourism expansion could gradually alter the social structure of the community.

Furthermore, the rapid growth of kitesurfing tourism has generated both economic opportunities and environmental or safety concerns. Because kitesurfing activity near the pier can create risks for other beach users, local regulations require the activity to take place at least 200 meters offshore. This reflects the need to balance tourism development with environmental management and safety considerations.

When asked about local priorities, Gamariel described the hierarchy as:

(i) nature, (ii) quiet and safe living conditions, and (iii) economic benefits.

While this explicit ranking was not uniformly articulated by all interviewees, other respondents expressed closely aligned views, emphasizing the primacy of environmental and socio-cultural values. For instance, a boat guide stressed that protecting the environment, culture, and territory is more important than economic gains. A certified all-terrain vehicle (ATV) tour guide similarly emphasized that conserving nature is essential not only as an economic resource but also for ensuring the well-being of future generations. In addition, a tour guide couple noted that their awareness of the importance of protecting natural resources and habitats increased after engaging in tourism activities.

These perspectives suggest a shared orientation toward prioritizing environmental conservation and quality of life over purely economic objectives. Community members emphasized that decisions about future development should be made by local residents themselves, even though local governments may seek further tourism expansion.

Another guide also described past attempts by foreign investors to construct condominiums in El Cuyo. According to the interviewee, community organizations successfully opposed these projects. Environmental regulations currently limit building development and encourage environmentally sensitive tourism.

Overall, these interviews suggest that El Cuyo represents a case in which locally initiated ecotourism coexists with increasing external pressures for tourism expansion, creating structural tensions between conservation and economic growth.

(3) Holbox

In Holbox, interviews were conducted with tourism stakeholders representing three perspectives: a whale shark tour operator, a bioluminescence tour guide, and a souvenir shop owner.

An in-depth interview with Capitán Carmelo, head of the whale shark tour cooperative, revealed significant changes in the nature of tourism development. In the early stages of tourism, the number of guides was small and all guides were well trained. Tours emphasized ecological education and environmental awareness, and guides actively explained whale shark ecology to visitors. However, as tourism expanded rapidly, the number of tour operators increased and some new entrants lacked sufficient ecological knowledge. Carmelo expressed concern that whale shark tours are gradually shifting from educational ecotourism experiences to more purely observational tourist activities. He also

noted that earlier proposals to regulate market entry in order to control carrying capacity were not successfully implemented. As a result, new operators entered the market without cooperative agreements, contributing to the recent overcrowding of tourism activities. The introduction of small off-road vehicles approximately five years ago has further accelerated tourism expansion by improving mobility across the island. However, increased vehicle traffic, noise, and nighttime entertainment events have raised concerns about potential impacts on wildlife and local ecosystems.

Despite these concerns, tourism has clearly improved the living standards of local residents compared with the earlier fishing-based economy, and many residents evaluate the economic benefits of tourism positively. Capitán Carmelo himself, while expressing concerns about the rapid expansion of tourism based on his long involvement in the sector, also acknowledged that the improvement in local living standards has made the current situation difficult to oppose. This observation suggests that even among older generations, perceptions of tourism development may evolve over time.

A bioluminescence tour guide similarly emphasized that the introduction of off-road vehicles significantly increased tourist mobility and contributed to the expansion of tourism activities across the island. From an economic perspective, the guide expressed hope that visitor numbers—particularly during favorable summer seasons—would continue to increase.

A third perspective was provided by the owner of a souvenir shop who had migrated from Chiapas, Mexico. The shop owner explained that when tourism was still limited, the sale of handicrafts from Chiapas was profitable because such products were relatively rare. However, as tourism expanded, similar shops began to appear and competition intensified. The shop owner also noted that new hotel construction and tourism-related development have begun to expand into areas previously characterized by natural coastal environments. These changes were attributed to recent policy shifts by local authorities promoting tourism development. At the same time, concerns were expressed that such development could gradually degrade the island's natural environment.

Overall, the interviews suggest that Holbox is experiencing rapid tourism expansion accompanied by rising prices, increasing international orientation, and significant social transformation. While many residents recognize improvements in infrastructure and income levels, concerns have also emerged regarding environmental pressures and the long-term sustainability of the local ecosystem.

Comparative Case Findings

Nuevo Durango

With a population of approximately 200–300, Nuevo Durango represents an integrated community-based ecotourism (CBET) model. Mayankajtaj, a Maya community-based cooperative and one of the groups associated with A'aktun Jaaleb, regulates visitor numbers, implements rotational labor participation, and distributes profits equitably. Ecotourism functions as a complementary livelihood alongside agriculture and beekeeping. These observations suggest that tourism supports the maintenance of socio-cultural integrity within the community.

As a result, conservation-oriented civic pride has been institutionalized through cooperative governance, resulting in a configuration that prioritizes NC and SCI while deliberately moderating FV. This case illustrates a stable trilemma configuration anchored in conservation-oriented civic pride.

El Cuyo

With approximately 1,800–2,000 residents, El Cuyo is positioned in a transitional phase within the trilemma structure. Following the decline of fisheries and log transportation, tourism has expanded. The Yamalkan cooperative, established in 2009, plays a partial governance role. Although certain regulations exist—such as limits on flamingo-viewing boats—external investment pressures from hotels and restaurants have intensified.

At the same time, interview evidence reveals that conservation-oriented values have not disappeared but continue to coexist with emerging economic priorities. Many residents expressed concern that rapid tourism development may negatively affect environmental protection and community life, even as they recognize the economic opportunities generated by tourism.

Taken together, these findings indicate that El Cuyo is approaching a bifurcation point at which competing value orientations coexist and the internal balance of the ecotourism trilemma is being actively reconfigured. This case represents a structurally unstable configuration in which the trajectory of tourism development remains contingent on how these tensions are resolved, potentially leading toward either conservation-oriented CBET or more growth-driven tourism development.

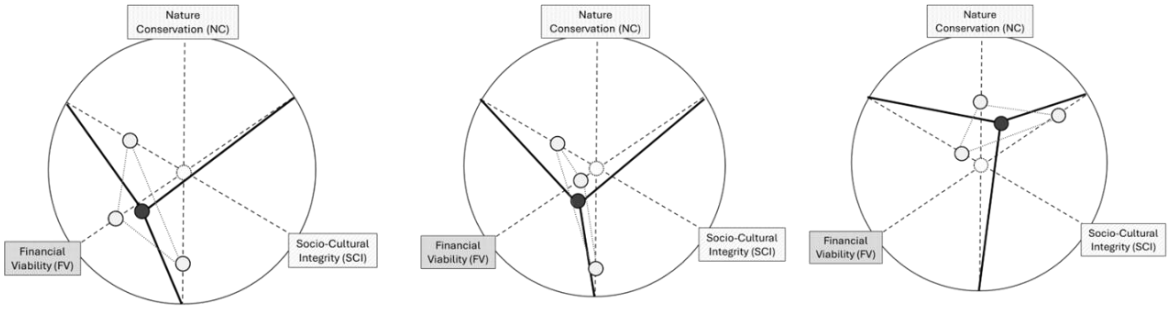
Holbox

Holbox represents a case where the trilemma configuration has gradually shifted toward financial viability (FV) dominance. Rapid expansion of whale shark tourism and changes in protected-area governance weakened local control. Interviews revealed differences in how residents evaluate tourism development. While younger generations tend to view external investment and expanding tourism opportunities positively, even long-term actors such as Capitán Carmelo—who had previously expressed concern about rapid tourism expansion—acknowledged that tourism has improved living standards compared with the earlier fishing-based economy.

These observations suggest that changes in everyday life conditions, including improved infrastructure, income opportunities, and convenience, can gradually reshape civic pride and local value orientations. As development progressed, civic pride partially shifted toward an economic-development orientation. Consequently, the center of gravity within the trilemma moved toward FV, while socio-cultural integrity (SCI) began to be reinterpreted as a new regional identity linked to economic growth. This case demonstrates how both generational change and material improvements can drive a structural reconfiguration of the trilemma.

Historical demographic change provides additional context for this transformation. Tourism growth has been accompanied by in-migration, increasing the population of Holbox from approximately 500 in the 1960s to around 1,800–2,000 today. This demographic shift appears to have diversified community values and contributed to changes in civic pride and collective preferences.

Figure 4. Comparative Trilemma Configurations across Three Communities



(a) Nuevo Durango (b) El Cuyo (c) Holbox

DISCUSSION

Taken together, the three cases illustrate distinct configurations of the ecotourism trilemma. Nuevo Durango demonstrates a conservation-oriented CBET model in which civic pride reinforces nature conservation (NC) and socio-cultural integrity (SCI). El Cuyo represents a transitional configuration where conservation-oriented values coexist with increasing market pressures. In contrast, Holbox illustrates a trajectory in which tourism expansion and external investment have shifted the balance toward financial viability (FV).

Based on the conceptual framework illustrated in Figure 1b, Figure 4 visualizes the relative positions of the three communities. The figure presents the comparative configurations of the ecotourism trilemma across the three case studies. Nuevo Durango exhibits a configuration oriented towards conservation and socio-cultural integrity, reflecting a community-based ecotourism model. El Cuyo represents a transitional configuration in which conservation values coexist with increasing external tourism pressures. In contrast, Holbox shows a configuration increasingly oriented toward financial viability as tourism expansion and external investment reshape local development priorities. These variations highlight how civic pride and governance capacity shape divergent developmental pathways in ecotourism.

This study demonstrates that developmental bifurcation in ecotourism is not determined solely by economic expansion. Rather, ecotourism development is shaped by a sequential process in which individual civic pride evolves into collective preferences, which in turn form the configuration of the ecotourism trilemma. This initial stage determines the overall orientation of development—whether it is conservation-oriented or development-oriented. In cases where a conservation-oriented direction

emerges, a second decisive factor becomes critical: the capacity for cooperative governance to translate this orientation into concrete regulations and institutional arrangements, thereby stabilizing one development pathway over the other.

The theoretical contribution of this study lies in conceptualizing the ecotourism trilemma (NC–FV–SCI) as structurally constant yet configurationally dynamic. While the three elements remain universally relevant, their internal balance shifts as civic pride evolves within communities. The cases demonstrate that such shifts may generate bifurcation in development trajectories, producing either conservation-oriented CBET models or tourism expansion driven by financial viability. This suggests that civic pride can be treated not only as a cultural attribute but also as an analytical variable shaping development trajectories.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study was to examine why ecotourism initiatives follow different developmental trajectories. While ecotourism is often introduced to protect natural environments and maintain socio-cultural integrity, some initiatives remain small-scale complementary activities alongside traditional livelihoods, whereas others expand rapidly toward large-scale tourism. To investigate this divergence, this study focused on the Yucatán Peninsula in Mexico, where tourism development centered on Cancún has expanded rapidly. While Cancún and the Riviera Maya represent large-scale tourism destinations, smaller ecotourism initiatives have emerged in surrounding communities. Three cases—Nuevo Durango, El Cuyo, and Holbox—were examined through comparative field research.

This study introduced civic pride as a key explanatory concept. Civic pride refers to residents' attachment to their community and local resources. These individual perceptions gradually develop into collective preferences, which in turn influence how communities prioritize tourism development. To analyze these dynamics, ecotourism development was conceptualized within an ecotourism trilemma consisting of three elements: Nature Conservation (NC), Financial Viability (FV), and Socio-Cultural Integrity (SCI). While all three are normatively desirable, their simultaneous maximization is structurally difficult. The balance among them shifts as civic pride evolves within communities.

The case studies show that interaction with visitors can strengthen conservation-oriented civic pride, encouraging communities to establish cooperative governance mechanisms such as visitor limits and

operational rules. However, external investment, government policies, generational change, or in-migration associated with tourism may alter local value orientations. In particular, in-migration associated with tourism development can diversify community values and reshape civic pride and collective preferences, potentially redirecting the trajectory of the ecotourism trilemma. In such situations, socio-cultural integrity itself may be reinterpreted, as economic development becomes incorporated into local identity, as observed in the Holbox case.

These findings indicate that ecotourism trajectories are shaped not only by market forces but also by the evolution of civic pride and the community's capacity to translate collective preferences into governance arrangements. More broadly, the ecotourism trilemma offers a framework for explaining how shifts in community values shape divergent development pathways across different tourism contexts.

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