



Desarrollo turístico en El Salvador: Diagnóstico desde la perspectiva de actores locales en el litoral del Pacífico

Tourism development in El Salvador: Diagnosis from the perspective of local actors on the Pacific coast

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RESUMEN

Introducción: Este estudio analiza las condiciones del desarrollo turístico en playas de baja afluencia del litoral del Pacífico salvadoreño, con énfasis en el departamento de La Libertad. A pesar de iniciativas nacionales como Surf City, muchas localidades costeras continúan excluidas de los principales circuitos turísticos, lo cual limita significativamente su desarrollo económico y social.

Metodología: A través de un enfoque cuantitativo-descriptivo, se aplicaron encuestas a turistas y empresarios locales con el fin de identificar los principales factores que obstaculizan su integración al sistema turístico nacional.

Resultados: Los hallazgos evidencian brechas en infraestructura, promoción y articulación institucional, así como la falta de apoyo técnico y financiero a emprendimientos locales.

Conclusiones: Se concluye la urgencia de implementar estrategias integradas y descentralizadas que fortalezcan las capacidades territoriales, diversifiquen la oferta y promuevan un modelo turístico más inclusivo y sostenible.

Palabras clave: Desarrollo económico y social, desarrollo sostenible, ecoturismo, gestión ambiental.

Clasificación JEL: L85, Q56.

ABSTRACT

Introduction: This study examines tourism development conditions in low-traffic beaches along El Salvador's Pacific coast, particularly in the department of La Libertad. Despite national initiatives such as Surf City, many coastal areas remain excluded from major tourism circuits, limiting their economic and social growth.

Methodology: Through a quantitative-descriptive approach, surveys were conducted with tourists and local entrepreneurs to identify key obstacles to their integration into the national tourism system.

Results: Findings reveal significant gaps in infrastructure, promotion, and institutional coordination, as well as limited technical and financial support for local businesses.

Conclusions: The study concludes by emphasizing the need for integrated, decentralized strategies that strengthen territorial capacities, diversify the tourism offer, and foster a more inclusive and sustainable development model.

Keywords: Economic and social development, ecotourism, environmental management, sustainable development.

Classification JEL: L85, Q56.

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INTRODUCTION

In the last decade, tourism emerged as a central economic policy strategy for El Salvador, with emblematic state initiatives channeling investments into infrastructure and coastal promotion (Patel, 2024). The Surf City project served as the flagship of this drive, radically transforming beaches such as El Tunco and El Zonte (Patel & Argueta Platero,



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2025). These locations experienced significant economic growth and were integrated into international surf tourism circuits. However, this development fostered a deeply concentrated growth model that operated to the detriment of other coastal territories, creating an unequal landscape where numerous areas—despite exhibiting comparable or superior natural and cultural potential—remained excluded from the national tourism offerings (Hippolyte & Haynes, 2024).

Faced with this territorial disparity, this research focused on eight beaches in the department of La Libertad with low tourist traffic: El Obispo, El Palmarcito, La Perla, San Diego, El Majahual, La Paz, Los Cóbano, and Las Flores (Vivar Velasquez & Berru Beltran, 2022). The study began with a concrete observation: the existence of valuable natural and cultural resources in these locations does not translate into significant tourism development. On the contrary, these communities face a complex web of structural barriers—of an infrastructural, economic, social, and governance nature—that constrain their competitiveness and keep them invisible.

The general objective of this work was to systematically diagnose the challenges hindering the tourism development of these beaches, prioritizing the perceptions and experiences of tourists and local stakeholders. Methodologically, the research was based on a mixed-methods design, strategically integrating quantitative and qualitative techniques. This methodological approach allowed not only for the statistical measurement of the phenomena studied but also for a deeper understanding of the narratives and meanings underlying the challenges of tourism development in the region.

This methodological framework is built upon a central theoretical and political premise: the urgent need to transition from a model based on the logic of isolated growth poles to a paradigm of integrated, territorially balanced, and socially inclusive tourism development for El Salvador's Pacific coast. This paradigm requires, as a prerequisite, the active and leading participation of local communities and the synergistic collaboration of public and private actors, whose actions are often characterized by fragmentation. This perspective aligns with that expressed by Dangi and Petrick (2021), who argue that tourism can only function as an effective engine of regional development when its implementation is guided by principles of distributive equity and is framed within a long-term strategic vision.

Theoretical framework

This work is built upon a multidimensional theoretical framework that integrates and critically relates the foundations of sustainable tourism, the processes of local community involvement, and territorial planning strategies with an inclusive approach. This integrative framework allows for a critical analysis of the reality of marginalized beaches along the coast of La Libertad and provides a solid basis for proposing an alternative development model.

Towards a critical conceptualization of sustainable tourism development

The notion of sustainability constitutes the fundamental pillar of this research, but from a critical perspective that transcends instrumental views. The study adopts a comprehensive conception of tourism, which conceives of this model as one that harmoniously balances the economic, social, and aesthetic demands of the present, while safeguarding cultural authenticity, fundamental ecological processes, biodiversity, and the livelihoods of host communities (Roblek et al., 2021). This conceptualization transcends the reductionism that circumscribes sustainability to mere environmental conservation, embracing instead a holistic vision where social equity and economic feasibility are equally decisive.

However, and in line with the warnings of Telleria and Garcia-Arias (2022), the existence of a substantial gap between the theoretical discourse of sustainable development and its effective implementation in emerging destinations is acknowledged. Frequently, the principles of sustainability are subordinated to the pressures to obtain immediate economic profitability, giving rise to extractive and spatially polarized models. This research aligns itself with the critical stance of Wang et al. (2024), for whom sustainability represents not a static endpoint, but a continuous process of adaptive management that demands collaborative governance and adaptation to specific contexts.

Additionally, the perspective of ecological economics incorporates a structural critique of the paradigm of unlimited tourism growth, emphasizing the inherent incompatibility between the expansionist logic of tourism capitalism and the biophysical limits of coastal territories (Chakraborty, 2021). This contradiction acquires particular relevance in the case of El Salvador, where the notable fragility of coastal ecosystems faces strong developmental pressures.

Local actors, social capital, and agency in tourism development

The second component of the theoretical framework recognizes the central role of local communities in building a truly sustainable tourism model. It is based on capital theory, which highlights the value of trust networks, norms of reciprocity, and the capacity for collective action as foundations for community development (Ari et al., 2024). In the tourism sector, this capital is activated when the population participates meaningfully in decision-making, takes ownership of development processes, and receives tangible and equitably distributed benefits.

This research is therefore situated within the bottom-up participation paradigm, in direct contrast to traditional top-down planning models. As Hall (2019) warns, the imposition of tourism strategies from centralized authorities, without consultation or genuine participation of local stakeholders, inevitably generates socio-territorial conflicts, relationships of dependence, and an inequitable distribution of economic benefits.

The concept of agency emerges as fundamental in this analysis: the capacity for initiative and transformation possessed by local entrepreneurs, community guides, workers, and residents is a determining factor for the long-term sustainability of any tourism development project (Giovine & Barri, 2023). This agency allows communities not only to react to external initiatives but also to design and lead proposals that reflect their own values and development aspirations. This agency, however, is frequently constrained by unequal power structures and a lack of access to economic, technical, and political resources.

Multilevel governance and institutional coordination as critical enablers

The effectiveness of development initiatives depends fundamentally on the quality of governance. This study is based on the concept of collaborative governance for tourism, defined by Valderrama and Polanco (2024) as a management arrangement where multiple actors (government, private sector, community, and academia) participate formally and deliberatively in collective decision-making.

The limited institutional coordination observed in the coastal destinations studied reveals a governance deficit, manifested in insufficient coordination among municipalities, central government entities, and local associations, which fragments initiatives and replicates operational inefficiencies. In this scenario, the polycentric governance approach is presented as an alternative framework that promotes multiple semi-autonomous but interconnected decision-making centers, capable of responding with greater flexibility and adaptability to the specific characteristics of each territory (Baldwin et al., 2024).

An effective governance structure allows for transcending the logic of isolated interventions. It fosters the formation of integrated local tourism clusters or systems, where collaboration among small and medium-sized enterprises enhances the competitiveness of the destination as a whole (Purnomo & Purwandari, 2025). The notion of “social innovation” acquires particular relevance in this context, demonstrating how novel institutional arrangements can generate more inclusive solutions better suited to realities marked by tourism-related marginalization (Busacca & Tzatzadaki, 2025).

The territorial approach as an alternative to the growth pole model

At its core, this conceptual framework is based on a territorial approach to development, a perspective widely promoted by international organizations such as ECLAC (2020). This approach argues that development strategies must be adapted to the specific characteristics, strengths, and endogenous assets of each territory, thus opposing the application of homogeneous and standardized models disconnected from local contexts.

Applied to the tourism sector, this principle supports the need to decentralize the tourism offerings and disperse visitor flows. The traditional growth pole model has shown its limitations by generating “hollowing out” effects or uneven development in surrounding territories (Lim et al., 2025). In response to this limitation, the theory of regional development based on innovation suggests that the competitive advantage of peripheral territories can be built by valuing their specific resources and promoting collective learning processes (Kritikos et al., 2025).

As an alternative, a vision of a network of interconnected destinations is proposed, one that values the landscape and cultural diversity of the entire coastline, facilitating a more equitable distribution of the benefits derived from tourism throughout the territory. This approach seeks to reduce regional disparities through spatially balanced and integrated tourism planning (Knicker et al., 2021). The notion of “territorial resilience” also provides a crucial perspective for understanding how these marginalized territories can develop adaptive capacities in the face of

external shocks and structural transformations (Zhikharevich et al., 2021).

Theoretical convergence: Towards an integrative framework for inclusive tourism development

In summary, the theoretical framework guiding this research is that of sustainable, territory-based, and participatory tourism development. The convergence of these four conceptual pillars—critical sustainability, community agency, collaborative governance, and a territorial approach—provides a robust analytical lens for diagnosing the challenges facing the beaches of La Libertad and, fundamentally, for designing intervention proposals that are not only technically feasible but also socially just and politically achievable.

This integrative framework allows us to overcome fragmented views of tourism development. It offers a holistic perspective that recognizes the complexity of territorial transformation processes in contexts of marginalization and tourism-related exclusion.

METHODOLOGY

This study was designed using a mixed methodological approach, with a predominance of quantitative methods and complementary qualitative components (Matović & Ovesni, 2023). This design allowed for the systematic characterization of the current conditions of the investigated beaches and, based on the findings, the formulation of strategic lines of intervention for their tourism development.

The target population included two key groups: national and international tourists, and local business owners linked to the gastronomy, accommodation, and tourism services sectors. The sample selection was intentionally limited to eight beaches in the department of La Libertad with low visitor traffic, with a special emphasis on El Obispo, El Palmarcito, and La Perla, due to their attributes with untapped tourism potential. The beach selection criteria considered: (1) low tourist influx documented by the Ministry of Tourism, (2) the presence of registered local businesses, and (3) minimal vehicular access that would allow for fieldwork.

A total of 90 quantitative instruments were applied for data collection: 50 surveys directed at tourists and 40 at local business owners, with response rates of 92 % and 88 %, respectively. The quantitative instruments were complemented by qualitative techniques that included 12 sessions of direct non-participant observation (3 for each main beach) and 8 semi-structured interviews with community leaders and representatives of local development associations. This mixed design enriched the depth and context of the numerical data, allowing for methodological triangulation that strengthens the validity of the findings.

The analysis encompassed six critical dimensions derived from the theoretical framework: (1) physical and digital accessibility, (2) basic infrastructure and services, (3) perceived experiential quality, (4) promotion and positioning strategies, (5) institutional articulation and governance, and (6) perception of the natural and cultural environment. The processing of quantitative data was carried out using percentage analysis, contingency tables, and chi-square tests to identify significant associations, with the results represented through graphs and two-way tables. The qualitative data were analyzed using thematic categorization and content analysis, identifying recurring discursive patterns and illustrative cases.

RESULTS

The analysis of the results allowed us to characterize the profile of the visitors and establish a critical comparison with the perspective of local business owners, revealing both potential opportunities and structural challenges for the tourism development of the beaches studied.

Tourist profile and behavior

The data collected from tourists showed a predominance of the female gender (54 %) and a high level of education, with 60 % having completed or currently pursuing university studies. Regarding their origin, a clear preponderance of international visitors was identified (64 %), mainly from the United States (38 %), Honduras (12 %), Spain (8 %), and other Latin American countries (6 %). This profile confirms a growing trend of international tourism towards emerging destinations in the region, but also reveals the still limited appeal to domestic tourism (36 %), suggesting positioning problems in the domestic market.

The average stay was 2,3 days, with an average daily expenditure of \$45-60 USD, significantly lower than that

recorded in established destinations such as El Tunco (\$75-100 USD). 72 % of visitors were traveling to these beaches for the first time, while 28 % were repeat visitors, mainly surfers attracted by the consistent quality of the waves.

In terms of how they discovered these destinations, personal recommendations (56 %) and social media (28 %) were the most relevant sources of information, while official tourism promotion channels showed a marginal presence (6 %). Their main motivations for visiting the beaches were associated with surfing, attracted by the quality of the waves (36 %), and the search for tranquil and authentic environments (30 %), far outweighing other attractions such as gastronomy (12 %) or cultural heritage (8 %).

A critical finding was that 72 % of respondents did not receive any official tourist information upon arrival, either at access points or accommodations, which demonstrates a marked weakness in the public management of the destination. In addition, 64 % reported difficulties accessing the area due to poorly maintained roads and a lack of adequate signage.

Level of satisfaction and perceptions of quality

The level of satisfaction revealed important nuances that reflect the nascent nature of these destinations. While 74 % of tourists positively evaluated the basic infrastructure (cleanliness, sanitary facilities, lighting) and more than half (52 %) considered road access acceptable, 28 % expressed dissatisfaction with the prices of some services, citing affordability issues and a lack of price transparency.

The evaluation of service quality showed mixed results: 68 % rated the friendliness and helpfulness of local service providers as “good,” but only 42 % considered the professionalism of the service adequate, highlighting the need for specific training. Despite these observations, a large majority (82 %) stated that they would recommend the beach they visited, reflecting an overall positive assessment and underscoring the latent potential of these destinations for tourists seeking authentic and uncrowded experiences.

Profile and challenges of local entrepreneurs

On the other hand, the profile of local business owners revealed significant participation of women (45 %) and an educational level where 45 % had a university degree, predominantly in areas unrelated to tourism. The average experience in the sector was 4,2 years, suggesting relatively little experience in the tourism industry.

The average initial capital invested was \$3,500-\$5,000 USD, mainly from family sources or personal savings. More than half (55 %) operated their businesses without access to formal financing, relying on immediate cash flow for minor reinvestments. In comparison, only 25 % had accessed some type of institutional credit, and 20 % had accessed microcredit programs. 45 % expressed an explicit interest in obtaining technical or financial support to improve their operations, but stated that they were unaware of the appropriate channels to access these resources.

Training needs were clear and specific: 90 % prioritized training in customer service and service quality, 95 % identified English proficiency as crucial for serving international tourists, and 80 % requested training in digital marketing and social media management. Overall, although 90 % acknowledged that improving their establishment’s image is fundamental to attracting more visitors, most admitted to lacking the necessary resources to implement these improvements, which exposes a critical gap between intention and the capacity to act. Only 15 % of the business owners belonged to a tourism association or trade group, and only 8 % reported active participation in working groups or local tourism planning initiatives, indicating very low collective and institutional collaboration.

DISCUSSION

The integrated analysis of the results confirms the existence of a deep structural gap between the established tourist hubs and the underdeveloped coastal areas within the Salvadoran coastline, validating the study’s initial premise. The findings demonstrate that the central problem does not lie in the lack of valuable natural attractions—in fact, the beaches studied exhibit attributes comparable to or even superior to some established destinations—but rather in insufficient territorial planning, the inequitable distribution of public and private investments, and the absence of integrated strategic promotion.

The combination of weak institutional coordination, precarious access roads, the lack of tourist signage, and the almost complete digital invisibility of these beaches generates a systemic exclusion effect that operates at

multiple levels. This situation severely limits the capacity of local businesses to integrate into tourism value chains and access the economic benefits of the sector, despite the existence of clearly identified potential demand and a favorable disposition from both visitors and service providers.

These conclusions resonate with the specialized literature on tourism development in peripheral contexts. The study aligns with Hall (2019) and Giampiccoli et al. (2022) in that any effective tourism planning must incorporate host communities not merely as passive recipients, but as central protagonists in the development process. The very low levels of association and institutional participation detected (15 % and 8 %, respectively) precisely reflect the exclusion of these local actors from decision-making processes, resulting in symbolic rather than real participation.

Along the same lines, Sharpley (2020) warns about the dangerous disconnect that often exists between the theoretical tenets of sustainable development and their effective practical implementation in territories facing structural challenges. This disconnect is clearly evident in the case studied: while national policies discursively promote sustainable and inclusive tourism, their concrete implementation through Surf City has tended to reproduce a concentrated model that marginalizes territories with equal potential.

The preponderance of personal recommendations (56 %) and social media (28 %) as the main sources for discovering these destinations, compared to the marginal role of official channels (6 %), also suggests the emergence of self-organized communities that compensate for the absence of top-down tourism promotion strategies with bottom-up practices (Romero–Medina et al., 2024). This self-organization, while symptomatic of local agency, is insufficient to scale up tourism development significantly.

The findings on financing also reveal an early-stage financing gap for micro and small tourism businesses: most operate with insufficient own capital (55 %) and are unaware of the channels for accessing formal financing (45 %), severely limiting their capacity for growth and innovation (Figuroa-Domecq et al., 2024). Informational failures in rural and semi-urban credit markets exacerbate this gap.

In light of these findings, it is essential to move towards a substantially more inclusive, decentralized, and coherent tourism development model that reflects the territorial diversity of the Salvadoran Pacific coast. The empirical evidence gathered in this study provides valuable insights by demonstrating the clear willingness of both tourists and local entrepreneurs to participate in transforming these beaches into competitive destinations. This potential, however, requires for its realization the creation of an enabling environment that can only be generated through concerted public policy actions, strategic investment, and strengthening of local capacities.

The study suggests that any development strategy for these beaches must be approached from a systems perspective, where isolated interventions in specific dimensions (infrastructure, training, promotion) will be insufficient if robust mechanisms for institutional coordination, access to financing, and effective community participation do not accompany them.

CONCLUSIONS

Tourism development in El Salvador cannot and should not be limited to a few established enclaves, but rather it is imperative to extend it to those historically neglected coastal territories that, as demonstrated in this study, possess the necessary attributes to become sustainable destinations. The less crowded beaches in the department of La Libertad represent, in this sense, a genuine strategic opportunity to significantly diversify the national tourism offer and reduce current regional disparities.

The research showed that, through comprehensive interventions focused on four main areas—(1) strengthening local capacities with a focus on management, languages, and digitalization; (2) access to financing adapted to the needs of micro and small entrepreneurs; (3) strategic and collaborative digital promotion; and (4) effective institutional coordination through public-private-community working groups—these communities can be fully and successfully integrated into the country's tourism development.

These findings go beyond mere description to the realm of actionable proposals, offering a concrete framework that could be implemented through a pilot program in 2-3 of the studied beaches, for subsequent scaling to the rest of the coastline with similar potential. The feasibility of this framework is demonstrated by the identification of specific tourist demands and latent capacities of local entrepreneurs, as well as by the documentation of precise gaps that can be addressed through targeted policies.

Consequently, it is strongly recommended that decision-makers prioritize these areas in the agenda of national

sustainable tourism plans. Their inclusion should not be viewed as a secondary complement, but as an essential component of a renewed public policy explicitly aimed at achieving three fundamental objectives: territorial balance, social equity in the distribution of the economic benefits of tourism, and respect for local cultural identities. The implementation of this approach would represent a substantial step towards a fairer and more efficient tourism governance model in the Salvadoran Pacific coastal region, while also contributing to Sustainable Development Goals 8 (decent work and economic growth), 10 (reduced inequalities), and 12 (responsible consumption and production). Future research could delve deeper into the specific design of financing instruments adapted to these contexts, as well as the analysis of tourism value chains that maximize the local economic benefits of tourism.

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