

Article

# Sustainable Tourism and Natural Protected Areas: Exploring Local Population Perceptions in a Post-Conflict Scenario

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**Abstract:** The expansion of urban areas around the world and the application of the sustainability paradigm to tourism discourses has favored an increase in the number of people visiting natural protected areas (NPAs) in their leisure time. While tourism is desired to boost the economy of destinations, mismanagement can bring negative consequences for social–ecological systems, particularly in post-conflict rural scenarios. In the context of a broader ethnographic research, we analyzed the perceptions of the local population about tourism development in the NPA Jaltepeque Estuary (El Salvador, Central America) and the establishment of a Biosphere Reserve in the area, using structured questionnaires and Multiple Correspondence Analysis for the typification of social actors. We found that overall, the population regards positively the development of tourism in the area. Fishermen are the only ones who highlight the negative economic consequences of tourism development, claiming disparity in the distribution of benefits and an increase in the cost of living. We conclude that although tourism development is an activity desired by local people, there is a need in the community to discuss how this process of socio-economic transformation should be approached and an evident conflict between two different models: the one desired and offered by the population and the one that is currently being developed in the nearby Costa del Sol corridor.

**Keywords:** biosphere reserve; El Salvador; sustainable tourism; local development; community-based tourism; post-conflict scenarios



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## 1. Introduction

Natural protected areas (NPAs) are experiencing a rise as tourism destinations [1]. This increase seems related to the expansion of urban areas and indoor activities [2–4], and to the perception of the benefits that human–nature interactions provide to mental wellbeing [5,6] and physical health [7,8]. The implementation to tourism discourses of the sustainability paradigm that emerged after the Second World War as a reaction to the social–ecological impacts of developmentalism, influenced the appearance of new tourist motivations and behaviors [9]. Modalities such as ecotourism in NPAs or visits to post-conflict territories ("phoenix tourism", process through which conflict issues become a new heritage) [10] under sustainability criteria, appear as alternatives to traditional mass tourism [11].

The world's tourism panorama shows a greater tendency to interregional tourist flows due to spending, speed, and comfort issues [12], although nowadays interrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic. This dynamic has begun to vary due to the decrease in

prices of international travel and the market introduction of remote, emerging destinations with competitive prices. New destinations which generate interest among tourists [10] often include developing countries, NPAs established on fragile rural fabric [13] and after war territories [14]. These places usually have an unexplored and an unexploited natural and cultural capital that often fits into the imaginary of alternative tourism and that can be used to attract tourism [15–17]. Thus, in these regions well-managed tourism can be an important tool for post-conflict recovery and territorial development. In this sense, tourism can promote the social overcoming of past catastrophes and a cultural patrimonialization carried out by the inhabitants [10,13], even leading to the regeneration of an ethnic identity [18]. Tourism's flexibility to adapt to new conditions facilitates the expansion of offer and market segmentation. In these cases, the list of exploitable tourist resources contains both natural areas and territories devastated by war [15].

In this context, NPAs, originally established as instruments of environmental conservation, can be used as tourism attractor resources in a strategy of appropriation and commodification of attributes with monetarist purposes [19,20]. Strong competition among nature-based tourist destinations to achieve a better position in the tourism industry, especially in places with social instability or in post-conflict contexts, has driven the application of marketing strategies and the re-symbolization of the resources offered by these areas [16,17]. Consequently, cultural practices are at risk of being distorted in their adaptation to the demands of authenticity by tourists, modifying patterns and behavioral traits, values, and relationships, and thus influencing the processes of cultural identification [21]. Moreover, the instability of these destinations is an important risk factor since the emergence or threat of wars, attacks, political imbalances, and natural or economic catastrophes can reduce or even stop the arrival of visitors, who would choose alternative destinations [22]. The impact of the current COVID crisis on the social vulnerability of poor and dependent tourist destinations has undoubtedly highlighted the need to take tourism management seriously. Worldwide, the NPAs have shown some inefficiency in relation to the management of tourism. Different authors propose a participatory and consensus approach instead of the traditional top-down decision-making [23,24]. In this context, the United Nations, through the concept of Biosphere Reserve (Man and Biosphere program, MaB), seeks to explicitly improve local participation in decision-making and has become a leading paradigm of NPA management in many countries [25].

Community-based tourism (CBT) rises to overcome the above-mentioned risks of tourism development. Specially designed to support disadvantaged societies, CBT favors the equitable distribution of benefits and is compatible with other environmental, economic and heritage development policies [26]. It is considered one of the most relevant forms of tourism in relation to the socio-environmental sustainability of the territories in which it is developed [27]. It is characterized by an organizational structure in which local populations play the main role in controlling and organizing tourism [28]. The resilient functioning of CBT depends on the involvement of the local governance in decision-making, through the interaction of its main actors [29,30]. This tourism model considers it essential to seek a socio-environmental sustainability that includes the natural environment, the socio-cultural particularities of the inhabitants and the mutual influence between both spheres [27]. As such, tourism is considered as a complementary activity to pre-existing productive practices [31]. In order to ensure adequate environmental management and social and economic development, the local appropriation of tourism resources, the participation of local agents in the tourism activity and the equitable distribution of its benefits, which will be reinvested to address the community's own need and those of the environment, are essential [28]. Its correct operation will also stimulate social cohesion and sense of community [18]. Although there are multiple success cases, CBT must be contextualized in specific destinations, considering their particular environmental and cultural characteristics [26].

Aligning the different views of stakeholders on development is difficult [32] and more so in a context where the reestablishment of a society shaped by war has sharpened

a marked social heterogeneity, reinforcing different structural positions of power [33]. Different stakeholders have unequal access to resources that they could potentially benefit from through tourism development and also an uneven knowledge of what tourism development implies [34]. Thus, we hypothesize that the different social actors have different perceptions of tourism as a tool for sustainable local development. For this, we have focused on a post-conflict area, the Jaltepeque Complex in El Salvador, with an incipient tourism development from the perspective of the CBT. The natural and cultural values of this area offer a significant attraction for tourism, especially for nature-based tourists. It is the third most important estuary in El Salvador, containing one of the last mangrove forests in Central America. The Jaltepeque Estuary was declared a Conservation Area (CA), grouping within its limits many Protected Natural Areas that would otherwise lack an ecological corridor to connect with each other [35]. This wetland is a biodiversity hotspot that includes locally threatened species and a strategic location in the migratory cycles of waterfowl. As a whole, the wetland and the adjacent coastal zone play a very important role in the context of the Mesoamerican biological corridor (it constitutes the midpoint between the large mangrove areas of Guatemala and the Gulf of Fonseca), in addition to being important in the prevention natural catastrophes (such as floods or earthquakes) and erosion control and soil fixation. For this reason, this area has been internationally recognized as a Ramsar site [36].

Declaration of NPAs take the risk of being oriented toward the profitability of the territory through a patrimonialization that re-symbolizes the space as a tourist attraction. This encourage its exogenous consumption and a management of the territory designed more for foreign people than local population. The change of use of these spaces is rarely consulted with its inhabitants, who instead suffer its daily implications. Increasingly, the demand for sun and beach tourism and residential tourism oriented to a high-income profile begins to threaten the ecosystems of Jaltepeque, affecting fishing and agriculture under the pressure of tourist expansion, especially due to urban growth and waste dumping [37]. In fact, the economic benefits derived from tourism have little articulation with local economies and fall on exogenous agents [38].

The aim of this paper is to assess these different perceptions and opinions on the establishment of a Biosphere Reserve and the possibilities for the development of nature-based tourism in Jaltepeque Estuary. Local participation in decision making is a distinctive element with respect to other tourist models and fundamental for its correct operation and resilience of the destinations where it is implemented. Therefore, the first step for the development of a Biosphere Reserve under the CBT model in Jaltepeque is to ask about the will of its inhabitants in its implementation and detect structural problems of a post-conflict destination that hinder a correct governance system. Results will be useful to inform existing local development initiatives based on CBT. The method developed in this paper aims to be a useful tool for the establishment of future inclusive and sustainable tourism management plans.

## 2. Materials and Methods

### 2.1. Study Area—Social–Ecological Description

The study area is Jaltepeque-Bajo Lempa (Jaltepeque from now on), located in the south-central coastal plain of El Salvador, between the Jiboa (west) and the Lempa (east) rivers (Figure 1). The area, with a size of 49,454 ha, is a NPA listed as a Conservation Area (groups of NPAs and the territories that serve as nexus, according to the environmental legislation of El Salvador) and a Ramsar Site, since 2011 (“Jaltepeque Complex”, the second biggest brackish water area and intertidal forested wetland in El Salvador). Jaltepeque borders the Biosphere Reserve and Ramsar Site “Jiquilisco Bay”. The general morphology of Jaltepeque is one of a coastal plain whose maximum is 10 m above the sea level. Paired with its tropical savanna climate [39], this makes the mangrove thrive in the area, thus reaching an extension of 7599.43 hectares. Other ecosystems represented in the Conservation Area are mostly seasonal tropical forests whose extension has been reduced due to the expansion

of crops. The mangrove acts as an important refuge for fauna, especially when it comes to the nesting of some turtles classified as in critical danger by the IUCN.



**Figure 1.** Location of the Jaltepeque region (bordered in red) in El Salvador (Central America). The figure shows the different types of conservation categories established in the area. The map has been elaborated and edited by Urbigis, a freely accessible tool. Through this link <https://urbigis.com/0617ccee-8e40-4f66-8769-112f08fe809b.sel> (accessed on 10 February 2021) it is possible to access and edit this map. You can find more information on handling the tool at <https://help.urbithings.com/help/> (accessed on 10 February 2021).

The area includes six municipalities: San Pedro Masahuat, Santiago Nonualco, San Juan Nonualco, Zacatecoluca, San Luís La Herradura (all of them belonging to the department of La Paz), and Tecoluca (belonging to the department of San Vicente). The biggest and only city within its boundaries is San Luís La Herradura, the homonymous head of municipality; the rest of the population (35,900 inhabitants from the 48,529 total; [40]) lives scattered in rural communities which comprise approximately the 54% of the total population of the municipalities [41]. The occupation of the population census is mainly distributed between the primary sector (agriculture and fishing, 41.03%) and the services sector (small stores or restaurants, 51.28%) [42]. A high percentage of the residents (61.54%) only have basic studies [42]. In the municipalities, the most common age class is adults ranging from 19 to 59 years old (47.43%), followed by the youth between 7 and 17 years old (28.5%) [41].

In the 1950s, the area underwent significant land use changes related to the expansion of cotton crops. The strengthening of the oligarchic “Agro-export Model” at the expense of agriculture for domestic consumption, caused serious dysfunctions in the sustainable development of the region and led to poverty to a large part of the local population, especially the peasants [43]. The land and wealth distribution gap escalated over the decades and sparked a Civil War that spanned 12 years (1980–1992), even though the Government had tried to contain the public uproar with a failed Agrarian Reform. The war completely changed the socio-economic structure of the area, and displaced people from the highlands to the coastal plain. This transformation forced the establishment of a new form of social organization based on communities, which has been crucial in helping the rural population in case of natural disasters or for political representation purposes.

Starting in the 1990s, El Salvador experienced a sudden increase in tourism arrivals and in the income generated, which brought great development expectations [44] with the government recognizing tourism as a “new economic sector” [45]. This rapid increase continued into the 21st century, and although the 2001 earthquakes and the attack on the World Trade Center slowed the development [46], El Salvador remained one of the emergent travel destinations according to WTO [47]. As stated by CORSATUR (Salvadoran

Tourism Corporation, Spanish acronym) [48], most of the international tourists (1.5 million in 2017) come from Central America (57.8%) and North America (35.3%). Approximately 21% of the internal tourism (the total being 10,966,218 visitors in 2017) is done in rural areas, with the main reasons for visiting being friends and family (76.07%) and holidays (11.10%). The most common age range for the domestic visitors is 0 to 15 years old (29.66%), followed by 16 to 30 years (25.81%) and 31 to 45 years old (21.20%); more than half of them are employed (57.04%). Regarding their occupation, housewives (27.07%) and permanent workers (28.79%) have the highest percentages among them. There is no data regarding the visitors in Jaltepeque.

The tourist profile of Jaltepeque estuary is characterized by the demand for sun and beach since the sixties and is currently oriented towards residential tourism with high purchasing power. The growing environmental impacts of this model have fostered interest in the development of other products linked to ecotourism and rural community tourism [37]. The study area has a Tourism Operational Plan, not updated since 2008, while its Management Plan recognizes tourism as an activity that must be regulated according to the capacity of the environment. The main initiative in regards of tourism development comes from local tourism associations (atomized and segregated by municipalities); there are at least three official associations in the area, those being La Nueva Pita (which was once integrated in the Tecoluca Tourist Association), the Tecoluca Tourist Association, and the Zacatecoluca Tourist Association. The last one in particular has been recognized as “weak” in regards of its functioning and purpose by the Participatory Strategic Plan of Zacatecoluca [49]. Private investment exists in the area in the form of private–public participation between the aforementioned tourism associations and private partners, but it is fair more prominent in the form of the establishment of resorts in the Costa del Sol boulevard, with poor benefit to local economies. At present, the tourist flow to this area is scarce and mainly internal, although the small cities and villages bordering it have seen an influx of new tourists thanks to the Pueblos Vivos plan to promote their cultural values.

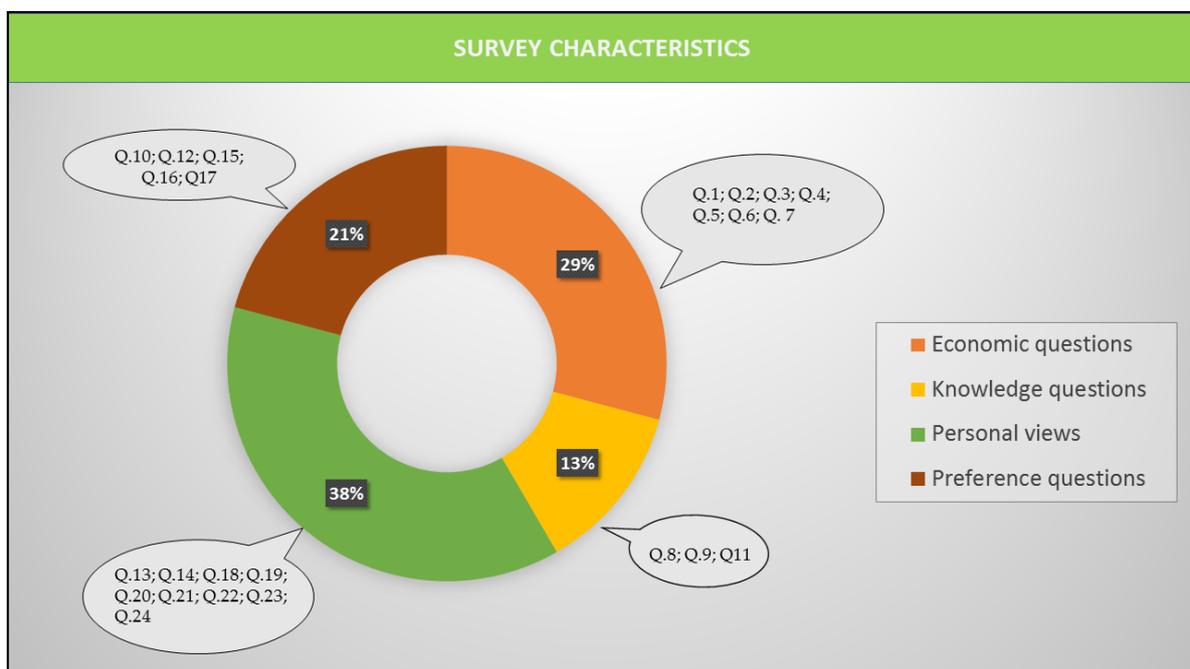
## 2.2. Data Collection

The data used in this study has been collected on a survey based on quantitative questionnaires among the local population of the Bajo Lempa region, with the aim of knowing and quantifying both their perception of different aspects related to the study area and their conservation and management preferences. Over two one-month stays in the department of San Vicente, in El Salvador (August 2018 and September 2019), information was collected both in the field through participant observation in local committees, touristic places, and through informal talks, in depth interviews, meetings, and group discussions with local stakeholders and key informants from the area (NGOs, Los Nonualcos Municipal Association and La Nueva Pita Tourist Association). The forums and talks developed addressed the positive and negative impacts of tourism, public services, existing environmental problems, and the possible establishment of a Biosphere Reserve in the current Ramsar site. This initial qualitative approach, prior to the main survey [50], involved 60 individuals. The information was collected in field notebooks and processed using the discourse analysis method [51], which allowed us to identify their shared concerns regarding the aforementioned themes. The research methodology was mainly aimed at obtaining and exploring the opinions, preferences, and attitudes of the residents, and based on their comments, it allowed us to generate questionnaires that provided the necessary quantitative information to apply statistical methods for subsequent data analysis [52,53]. Thus, a questionnaire was designed with 24 key questions related to the sociological profile of the respondents and their perceptions and concerns (Appendix A Table A1) [54–57]. Face-to-face questionnaires were carried out among the population of Tecoluca, Zacatecoluca and San Luis la Herradura, through a random sampling within each locality. The sampling effort was severely influenced by the population dispersal in the rural zones and their own willingness to allocate time for replying to the questionnaires, as it sometimes

interfered with their day-to-day economic activities. From this sampling 39 completed questionnaires were considered to be valid for succeeding analyses.

### 2.3. Data Analyses—Socioeconomic Characterization and Typification of Social Actors

The quantitative data obtained from the questionnaires performed to the local population were classified according to four categories, with different representation or relative weight (%) in the survey: personal views, knowledge, economic, and preference questions (Figure 2). From the completed questionnaires, we designed a matrix of 39 observations (people interviewed)  $\times$  24 variables (people's answers to the questions Q<sub>1</sub>–Q<sub>24</sub>). The information thus obtained allowed us to carry out both a descriptive analysis of the socioeconomic profile of the respondents, by means of graphical tools (bar charts) of their predominant social and economic descriptors, and a typology of the main social actors, at local level [58].



**Figure 2.** Categories of the questions raised in the survey, based on their relative weight in the survey. The numbers corresponding to the survey questions (Q1–Q24) are represented in the speech bubbles.

For the typification of the social actors, we applied Multiple Correspondence Analysis (MCA) and Hierarchical Cluster Analysis on the matrix of people interviewed  $\times$  answers to the questions, supported by SPAD statistical software [59], that allowed us to implement the strategy of multivariate exploratory analysis. The MCA is a descriptive or exploratory multivariate technique whose objective is to summarize a large amount of data in a reduced number of dimensions, with the least loss of information possible. Its approach is similar to that of factorial methods, with the exception that this method is applied to categorical or ordinal (qualitative) variables. This technique seeks to describe, in a space of few dimensions or factors, the structure of associations between a group of categorical variables, as well as the similarities and differences between the observations or individuals described by those variables. Thus, new axes (or factorial variables) are obtained so that a reduced number of them optimally synthesizes the information provided by the original variables. Subsequently, to form groups of people, we performed a hierarchical cluster analysis calculated from the first seven axes of the MCA and considering the socio-economic variables as well as those about knowledge and preference.

The classification process followed three phases [60,61]: (i) hierarchical aggregation: successive agglomeration of the two closest elements into groups using Ward's aggregation

criterion. This process, represented graphically by the so-called “hierarchical tree or dendrogram”, provides the structure of underlying homogeneities in the data that facilitate the choice of the typologies of interest for their description; (ii) final partition: it is the cut of the hierarchical tree that shows the aggregation process to decide the final number of typologies. The selection of the cut of interest was made from the histogram of the aggregation indices and the dendrogram. The group’s consolidation process was carried out using the k-means method, taking as the initial partition the one obtained when cutting the aggregation tree; (iii) class characterization: makes reference to the description of the clusters based on the variables of the study. The description consists of characterizing each class by the variables that present percentages higher (or lower) than the percentages in the total set. For this, comparable statistics and contrast tests were calculated with the values of an  $n(0, 1)$  distribution to determine the statistically significant variables for each class.

The elaboration of the clusters allowed us to perform an analysis of the perception of tourism by the different social types obtained as well as their knowledge about the environment and their preferences for the use of the land.

### 3. Results

#### 3.1. Socioeconomic Characterization of the Surveyed Population

Figure 3 shows that the percentage of respondents according to their gender is very similar, with about 8% more women surveyed than men. It is interesting to highlight that half of the people surveyed had only basic studies. The majority age group is between 31 and 60 years. Respondents can be classified into five large groups according to their occupation, with an almost equal distribution between the service sector (51.28%) and the primary sector (41.03%).



**Figure 3.** Graphic description of the socioeconomic characteristics of the surveyed population. The results are indicated in percentages according to gender, educational level, occupation, and age.

#### 3.2. Environmental Knowledge of the Respondents

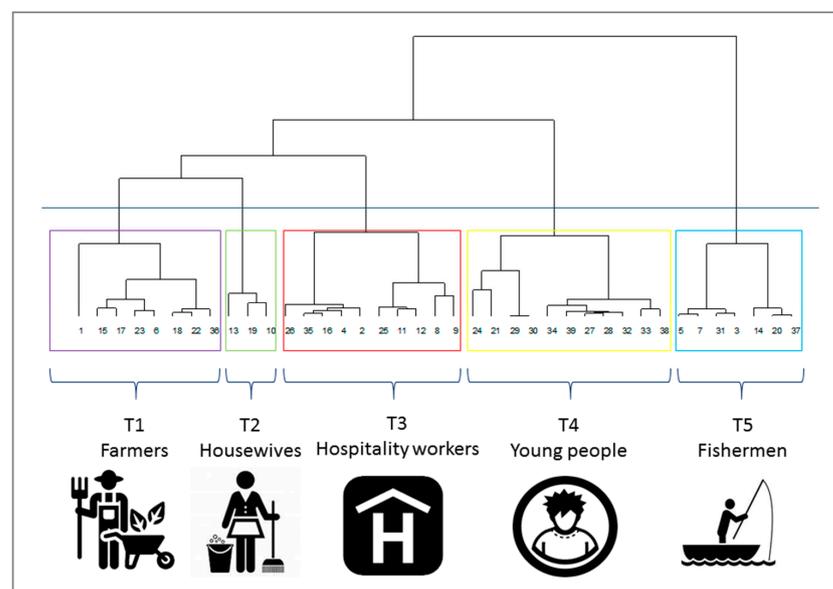
From the analysis of the questionnaires (see Appendix A Table A1), we have observed that 60% of the respondents reported knowing that they resided in a Ramsar site a wetland of international importance. In addition, 82% of them knew that, due to this type of administrative figure of territorial management, there are certain limitations of land use in that area.

It is important to note that almost 61% of those surveyed were unaware of the UNESCO Biosphere Reserve (BR) management category. Once informed in detail about its

function and operation, including the fact that the neighboring territory of Jiquilisco is a BR, 92% of the people surveyed were satisfied with potentially declaring the Jaltepeque Estuary a BR in a similar way.

### 3.3. Local Population Typology

The results of the MCA and the subsequent hierarchical classification analysis on the factor coordinates of the first 7 ordination axes obtained, allowed us to identify five groups within the local population, with their occupation being the main difference between them (i.e., the most significant discriminant variable) (Figure 4). Thus, group T1 is characterized by male farmers over 60 years of age, while group T2 mainly consists of housewives above 60 years of age; the T3 group is made up of female hospitality workers, between the ages of 31 and 60 years, with basic knowledge about nature conservation. They know that they reside in a Ramsar site, and they also know the meaning of the BR protection category and express their desire to maintain it. The group T4 is characterized by young people under 30 years of age, who work in small companies and other commercial activities. They have secondary and higher education and prefer development options different from land conservation. Finally, the T5 group consists of men engaged in the fisheries sector, with an age range from 31 to 60 years. This social type is characterized by its lack of interest in and knowledge about nature conservation and sustainable development. The members of this group did not answer the question about their opinion on the potential establishment of a BR in Jaltepeque, since, as expressed in the interviews, they are unaware of this tool for environmental conservation and management. However, they explicitly expressed their lack of interest in the sustainable management of the study area, as well as in its tourism development.

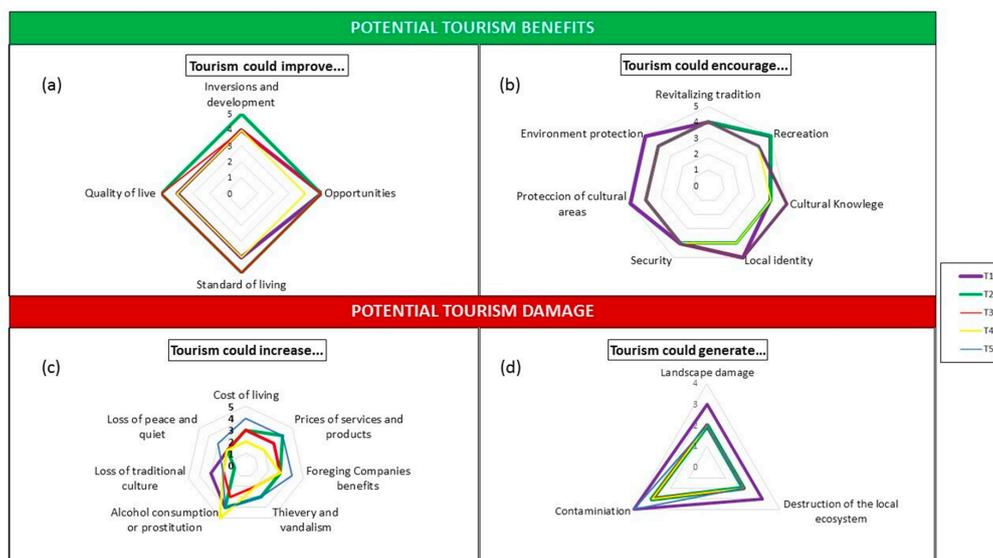


**Figure 4.** Dendrogram of the hierarchical cluster analysis calculated from the first 7 axes of the MCA. The five groups of social actors are differentiated, and their main discriminant variables are indicated.

### 3.4. Tourism Impact Perception on the Territory

The analysis of the results (Appendix B Table A2) highlighted the existence of evident discrepancies between social groups regarding their opinion on the possible positive and negative effects that the development of tourism in the territory may entail. The responses to the questionnaires showed great expectations in reference to the benefits derived from tourism, mainly focused on merely economic aspects (such as income, investments, or infrastructure, among others; Figure 5a). The perceptions of the different groups of people diverged slightly when the respondents were asked about more cultural and identity

aspects such as tradition, the protection of nature or the feeling of belonging (Figure 5b). However, the answers to the questions about the possible negative impacts of tourism were more heterogeneous and scored with a mean value (Figure 5c,d). Specifically, the farmers (group T1) assigned the highest scores both to the benefits that tourism development could bring, highlighting the greater protection of the environment and the stimulation of local identity (Figure 5b), and to its negative impacts, mainly focused on the loss of local culture (Figure 5c), the increase of pollution and the alteration of landscapes and ecosystems (Figure 5d). The social group of fishermen (T5) significantly highlighted the negative impact that the development of tourism in the area could have on the cost of living and the prices of products and services. Likewise, this group strongly believed that the gains derived from tourism would mainly benefit foreign companies (Figure 5c). Despite the different opinions of groups T1 and T5 on the possible negative effects that a greater tourism pressure may generate in the study area, both considered that an increase in tourist activity could improve the standard and quality of life of the local population, as well as provide better infrastructure and boost investment and opportunities in the area.



**Figure 5.** Radar charts representing the responses of the people surveyed to questions about the possible positive and negative effects that tourism could have on the territory. Subsections (a–d) group the questions according to the category to which they belong.

The groups corresponding to housewives (T2), hospitality sector (T3) and young people (T4), were closely in support of tourism development in the study area. All of them, with slight differences in some of the questions they were asked, considered that tourism could bring many positive social–ecological consequences (Figure 5a,b) and that the negative effects associated with increased tourism could not be very significant (Figure 5c,d).

When respondents were asked about the negative effects of tourism on the economic sector, a general response was obtained: "Prices will surely rise if the influx of tourists increases. People will want to benefit from them, of course." Furthermore, all groups agreed that tourism development would increase the consumption of alcoholic beverages or the incidence of prostitution.

#### 4. Discussion

Community based tourism (CBT), with an effective local participation in tourism development can be an effective tool to promote sustainable land planning, development, and tourism management, especially in sensitive protected areas [62]. On the basis that the conservation and development of a territory can be achieved simultaneously, the NPAs have frequently promoted tourism to support both the conservation of biodiversity and

the livelihood of the local communities [63,64], and even for many PAs, mutual coexistence with local communities is an important management requirement [65]. However, several studies around the world show that NPAs often, and for different reasons, fail to create positive links with local people [66–68]. The rapid growth of nature-based tourism is an important perspective to improve their living conditions and their involvement in the management of their own territory, contributing to local economy, reducing poverty, and helping to develop rural areas [69–71]. Therefore, the perceptions and attitudes of local communities towards the development of tourism should be taken into account in land planning and management since the community support is essential for operating and developing sustainable tourism [53].

In this study we have characterized the perception and opinions of the local population of a post-conflict territory with high natural perceived values, with the aim of informing local development initiatives based on CBT and the establishment of a biosphere reserve. From the analysis of the declarations of the stakeholders, our results show that the development of nature-based tourism in the Jaltepeque Estuary generates two conflicts in the local community; the first of them related to the divergence of opinions within the population itself and the second derived from the disagreement with the touristic model proposed by the authorities of El Salvador.

The typification of the local population, based on their opinions and preferences towards the tourist development of the area, shows occupation as the main feature that differentiates the identified social groups. A marked gender separation between occupations is noteworthy, since men usually work in the primary sector (agriculture, and fishing) and women work as housewives or in the service industry (small stores or restaurants). This dynamic is transferable to the way the community is shaped, since women tend to organize themselves in their own groups and are considered as those who manage resources, especially household incomes [72].

The overall agreement the locals showed regarding the positive impacts seems to fall into a well-known trend. Social perceptions about the economic benefits generated by tourism are usually common in emerging or consolidated destinations, although awareness of the impacts of touristification and overtourism has become enormously widespread in recent years, especially in Europe, since tourism has become part of the agenda of social movements [73]. The lack of involvement and knowledge about the dynamics of tourism development usually encourages these arguments [34]. They do not contemplate the implications of a tourism management that does not adequately regulate exogenous implementations or the costs derived from the maintenance of the destination (hygiene, security, health, tourism infrastructure, etc.), nor the effects on the historical socioeconomic structure, which will generally tend towards outsourcing and the disappearance or transformation of traditional productive activities, effects that will influence unequally depending on the social structure [74]. Similarly, the impacts on sociocultural factors generated by the tourism system are often overlooked. The meaning of historical practices, labors or rituals, public conduct, status criteria, family interactions, neighborhood relationships, or personal representations change more slowly than the economy or the environment under the effects of tourism, making them more difficult to perceive and manage [75].

The study of the knowledge, perceptions, and assessments of the society on environmental aspects is an important instrument to know its implication in these subjects [76]. In the case of study, the knowledge about sustainable tourism development that local stakeholders demonstrate, appears to be low in view of the apparent contradictions of the farmers' collective. On the one hand, their opinions on the benefits of tourism in relation to local environmental knowledge or the protection of nature stand out, despite the fact that they could be one of the groups most affected by the possible limitations implied in nature patrimonialization. Although, on the other hand, they point out the impacts that tourism would generate on landscape, pollution, and the destruction of ecosystems or culture.

Of all the identified actors who took part in the survey, fishermen were the ones most reticent about the role that tourism could play in improving the livelihood of the residents.

They were adamant about the negative economic impacts and the possible inequalities it could spark, with many declaring that families closer to the shore or the riverbanks would benefit more from tourism than the others. It should be noted that fishermen, nowadays, offer their services as boatmen to locals and tourists. Other case studies have shown that fishermen's cooperatives tend to position themselves for or against the implementation of NPAs or tourism developments based on their leading role in decision-making, the strength of their union organization and the level of access and appropriation of resources susceptible to become tourist attributes as well as the type of synergies established between the different stakeholders in relation to the management of the territory [77]. Another possible factor to consider is the role played by drug trafficking in Central America, as it often uses certain extractive activities, including fishing, for money laundering, with major consequences for conservation governance [78].

The Salvadoran tourism industry, especially in the coastal regions, is characterized by hotels, ranchos, and resorts, often coupled with tour operators. A quick search on Airbnb in the Jaltepeque Estuary shows a clump of these type of accommodations, mainly in the Costa del Sol boulevard. The resorts and ranchos offer their own services of catering and often pair up with boatmen, they also advertise private beaches (even if they do not legally own the beach portion), and many have swimming pools. This type of tourism, commonly known as sun-and-beach tourism, does not allow income to be redistributed among the locals [79]. Probably many of those claims about tourism only benefiting a small part of community come from this experience, especially in the case of fishermen. According to the locals, the advertisers of these lodges scare away the tourists because of their aggressive marketing, which evidences a lack of training on the matter.

In El Salvador, tourism is considered an important sector and an opportunity. In 2018, the Ministry of Tourism (MITUR) conducted a survey and concluded that 99% of the participants believed that "tourism should be a national priority, as it contributes to the prosperity, sustainability, education, multiculturalism, and independence of the country" [80]. However, it is not clear which path the Administration is going to take; so far the declarations of Nayib Bukele, the actual President of the Republic, seem more inclined towards imitating the Dominican Republic, a country known for its foreign-owned large-scaled tourism enclaves [81]. He also recently stated his desire to convert El Salvador into a reference country for surf tourism, "without turning it into a 'Miami' with luxury hotels at the beach" and without sacrificing sustainability [82]. Certainly, the new National Tourism Plan of El Salvador mentions its desire to pursue sustainability and what they call "social tourism", which seems to be just another term for "community tourism". Previously, "rural tourism" had been synonymous with "community tourism" and had its own local identity ("Mesa de Turismo Rural Comunitario"). At present this initiative remains inactive. The use of this mixed terminology between rural and community tourism could explain the difficulty of tracking CBT initiatives in the country and the scope of actions carried out in this context. However, there are some examples of the implementation of CBT. Thus, the International Trade Center (ITC; 2003–2007) started a CBT project in Chalatenango. Although the reaction it obtained from the population is unknown, it could be considered quite successful as tourism was integrated into the local secondary school curriculum and the Ministry of Tourism replicated this project in five more undisclosed destinations [83].

Finally, results also reveal a context with important deficiencies when implementing effective and sustainable CBT. Training on tourism management and its implications is a crucial issue for the empowerment of communities [29], a sentiment that seems to be shared by other Salvadoran communities when asked [84]. Self-management must be accompanied by the recognition and appropriation by local populations of heritage resources that may become tourist attributes [28], thus avoiding the trivialization of their meanings. Furthermore, internal conflicts of interest and lack of communication and trust between different stakeholders is shown as another damaging element that may be a reflection of significant imbalances in the power structure of society. As mentioned, governance and solidarity are essential for the proper functioning of this tourism model in

which the distribution of profits can revert to the community and the environment [26]. In this sense, efforts should be directed towards an adaptive management that allows a tourism development complementary to historical productive activities, economically profitable, socio-culturally equitable, and sustainable from a heritage perspective.

The results of this study can be used to inform and promote CBT-based development initiatives in the Jaltepeque Estuary, whose high natural, cultural, and historical values are relevant tourism attractors. Jaltepeque has at least seven declared NPAs around its limits, each of them with unique characteristics (mangrove, flooded forests, and archeological rests from a pre-Columbian saline to name a few), and a rich past related to the Civil War, which could be exploited in order to recover the historical memory, as the Peace Accords demanded. Post-conflict destinations have a specific demand related to phoenix tourism, which, beyond the morbidity of war, focuses its gaze on the benefits it can bring to the economic reconstruction of these places [10]. Together with the particularities of the CBT, it can be a good opportune orientation in case of tourism development.

With proper management, people living in NPAs could develop an environmental awareness and benefit from it when they start to apply it in their actions and livelihood [85]. Jaltepeque residents displayed fluency when voicing their environmental concerns and what they wanted for their territory, which is a step in the right direction as it eases the social strain put on the local administrations in case they want to pursue a “green” agenda. Specific attention to the needs and perceptions of fishermen seems necessary, due to their reluctance for a CBT development, since a special care must be taken in order to not displace local economic activities. In a general historical context in which vulnerable local communities have frequently been displaced from areas selected for environmental protection or their access to natural resources has been restricted [69,86–89], we highlight the importance of the participation of all local actors in the proposals for land planning and sustainable management of the territory in order to ensure both the social and economic benefits of tourism flow to the communities, as well as the environmental conservation [90–92].

The current COVID context has led to significant limitations in tourist mobility and has revealed the weaknesses of tourism dependence worldwide. The world tourism system is strengthening the industry with the aim of returning to the previous situation as soon as possible. This circumstance, however, can be an opportunity to rethink traditional tourism, orienting it towards non-massive and dependency-generating models, in which local travel, socio-environmental respect and local participation are prioritized.

## 5. Conclusions and Recommendations

Depending on the design and application of management strategies, tourism could be beneficial for the communities of Jaltepeque, who not only desire a touristic development but also have taken steps towards it, aiming at what they call “a sustainable model”. However, community-based tourism as a concept has not been approached by neither the locals nor the administrations. We emphasize the need for an organized plan (even a new Operative Plan only for tourism) in order to guarantee the correct implementation of a possible tourism development in the area. This plan should be discussed within the communities to consider all possible stakeholders and social actors and minimize future conflicts.

The social–economic dynamics that have influence on the diverse views on tourism development in Jaltepeque can and should be analyzed in depth to attain a picture of the full local structure which ultimately will determine the inclusive management approach of the area. A distribution of the income and the benefits generated by the different activities (primary sector vs. services sector) could be insightful regarding its possible diversification in a CBT scenario and its importance in the household management. The establishment of a biosphere reserve in the study area, with adequate regulatory schemes that avoid its rhetorical use, can be an effective management tool that allows promoting the harmonious

development of a sustainable tourism model with benefits for the local population and the environmental conservation.

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## Appendix A

**Table A1.** Survey form used in the data collection.

- 
1. Nationality
  2. Municipality of birth
  3. Gender
  4. Age
  5. Place of residence
  6. Level of studies
  7. Occupation
  8. Do you know that you reside within a RAMSAR Wetland and Conservation Area?  
 Yes  No  No response
  9. Do you know that there are certain limitations of use in this area according to the zoning?  
 Yes  No  No response
  10. Would you agree with declaring this area a Biosphere Reserve?  
 Yes  No  No response
  11. Did you know about the figure of the Biosphere Reserve before I told you about it?  
 Yes  No  No response
  12. (IF NOT) What conditions would you set to change your opinion about the declaration of a Biosphere Reserve here?
  13. You think that the declaration of the zone as a BR could be:  
 Very positive  Positive  Indifferent  Negative  Very negative  Don't know
  14. Personally and knowing that you already live within a protected area, to what degree do you think that declaring the area as a BR could benefit you?  
 A lot  Quite a bit  Little  Not at all  Do not know
  15. With which of the following subjects you find the declaration of a BR in the area is more connected (MULTI-ANSWER, 2)  
 Conservation  Environment in general  Tourism promotion  Sustainable social and economic development  Learning and awareness  Other  Do not know
  16. Name three cultural attractions in your area:
  17. And three natural attractions:
-

Table A1. Cont.

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18. Do you think that during these years public institutions have worked in your area?	
<input type="checkbox"/> A lot <input type="checkbox"/> Quite enough <input type="checkbox"/> Fair <input type="checkbox"/> Little <input type="checkbox"/> Not at all <input type="checkbox"/> Do not know	
19. And the social agents?	
<input type="checkbox"/> A lot <input type="checkbox"/> Quite enough <input type="checkbox"/> Fair <input type="checkbox"/> Little <input type="checkbox"/> Not at all <input type="checkbox"/> Do not know	
20. How important is tourism to your family's subsistence?	
<input type="checkbox"/> Very important <input type="checkbox"/> Fairly important <input type="checkbox"/> Indifferent <input type="checkbox"/> Not very important <input type="checkbox"/> Not at all important <input type="checkbox"/> Do not know	
21. Do you see it possible to diversify your family's income in the event that Jaltepeque develops tourism in the area?	
<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> No response	
22. From 1 to 5, where 1 is "very dissatisfied" and 5 is "very satisfied", rate the services in your area:	
Public services	Social services, police, local government, public health service
Educational system	Public schools, professional development
Environment	Geography or territory, environmental conservation, climate, appearance of beaches, cities or towns
Recreational opportunities	Parks and other leisure opportunities
Economics	Business, cost of living, employment opportunities
Social cohesion	Cohesion, culture of association and citizen participation
Transport	Transport infrastructure
Utilities (1)	Access to electricity or water
Utilities (2)	Coverage and especially Internet access
23. From 1 to 5, where 1 is "strongly disagree" and 5 is "strongly agree", rate the possible positive impacts of tourism:	
	Increase in investments, development, and more infrastructure
	More job opportunities
Economic	Contributes to improving the standard of living
	Tourism is one of the main sources of wealth for the economy, or it could be
	Tourism contributes to revitalizing traditional arts
	Better quality of life
	More recreational activities
Social and cultural	Better understanding of other cultures / countries / regions
	Revitalization of the feeling of belonging of the locals
	Improves security
	Improves the protection of buildings, monuments and natural areas
Environmental	Improvement in environmental protection
24. From 1 to 5, where 1 is "strongly disagree" and 5 is "strongly agree", rate the possible negative impacts of tourism:	
	Increased cost of living
Economic	Higher prices for products and services
	Benefits only a small portion of residents
	Tourism benefits go more to foreign companies and individuals
	Increase theft and vandalism
	Increased alcohol consumption, prostitution
Social and cultural	Increase in the exploitation of the locals
	Change or loss of traditional culture
	Coexistence problems between locals and tourists
	Tourists enjoy privileges that residents do not have
	Loss of tranquility in the area
Environmental	Damage to the landscape (understood as disruption of the landscape due to the construction of infrastructure)
	Destruction of the local ecosystem
	Increase in pollution

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## Appendix B

**Table A2.** Results of questions 23 and 24 of the survey, regarding the perception towards the impacts of tourism. The participants were asked to score from 1 to 5 the following sentences, where 1 means “completely disagree” and 5 “completely agree”. The mean scores for each type of stakeholder (T1–T5) are shown in the table.

Sentences Regarding the Impact of Tourism	Score per Social Type				
	T1	T2	T3	T4	T5
23.1. Increase in inversions, development and more infrastructure	4	5	4	4	4
23.2. More job opportunities	5	5	5	4	4
23.3. It contributes in improving the standard of living	4	5	5	4	4
23.4. Tourism is, or could be, the main source of wealth for the economy	4	4	4	3	3
23.5. Tourism contributes to revitalizing traditions	4	4	4	4	4
23.6. Better quality of life	4	5	5	4	3
23.7. More recreational opportunities	5	5	4	4	4
23.8. Better understanding of other cultures	4	4	5	4	5
23.9. It increases the sense of belonging of the locals	5	4	5	4	5
23.10. More security	4	4	4	4	4
23.11. Increase in the protection of monuments, natural areas and buildings	5	4	4	4	4
23.12. Increase in the protection of the environment	5	4	4	4	4
24.1. Rise in the cost of living	3	3	3	2	4
24.2. Higher prices of services and products	3	4	3	2	4
24.3. It benefits only a small part of the locals	3	4	2	3	4
24.4. Tourism benefits go to individuals or foreign companies	3	3	3	3	4
24.5. Increase of thievery and vandalism	3	3	2	2	3
24.6. Rise in alcohol consumption or prostitution	4	4	3	5	4
24.7. Rise in the exploitation of locals	3	2	3	4	4
24.8. Change or loss of traditional culture	3	1	2	2	2
24.9. Problems of coexistence between locals and tourists	1	1	2	2	2
24.10. Tourists enjoy privileges that the locals do not have	4	3	3	2	3
24.11. Loss of peace and quiet	2	2	2	2	3
24.12. Landscape damage	3	2	2	2	2
24.13. Destruction of the local ecosystem	3	2	2	2	2
24.14. Increase of pollution	4	3	3	3	4

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