

## Ecotourist Networks in Tepoztlán, Morelos, Central Mexico

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### Abstract

*During the pandemic, ecotourism was severely undermined by the policies of distancing and confinement of people, although once the health contingency ended, sociocultural values and intentions to move, stay and return explained the reactivation of the local economy in Tepoztlán, Morelos, central Mexico. The objective of this work was to compare an observed model with respect to the models reported in the literature. A cross-sectional, exploratory and correlational study was carried out with a sample of 100 ecotourists selected for the reasons of transfer, permanence and return. The results show the prevalence of values and intentions as nodes of intermediation of other nodes that explain the learning of the reviewed literature with respect to the nodes that make up the explanation of ecotourism as a social phenomenon, but the inclusion of values is recognized. materialist and post-materialist in order to increase the percentage of explained variance, as well as the evaluation of public policies related to the reason for moving and the image of the local destination.*

**Keywords:** Ecotourism, Image of the Destination, Reasons for Moving, Materialistic Values, Postmaterialist Values

### 1. Introduction

Ecotourism has its roots in social and environmental movements that developed throughout the 20th century, but its recognition as a specific form of tourism began to emerge in the 1970s and 1980s [1]. Ecotourism arises in the context of environmental conservation movements and concern about environmental degradation throughout the 20th century. The growing awareness of the importance of protecting natural ecosystems and biodiversity laid the foundation for the development of ecotourism. During the 20th century, numerous protected areas were established around the world, such as national parks and nature reserves, with the aim of conserving biodiversity and natural landscapes. These sites provided the perfect setting for the development of ecotourism, offering opportunities for visitors to experience nature responsibly.

In the 1970s and 1980s, the first organized attempts to promote ecotourism as a sustainable alternative to conventional tourism

emerged [2]. Non-governmental organizations, environmental groups, and conservation agencies began to highlight the values of ecotourism, promoting the importance of traveling in a responsible and environmentally friendly manner. During the 1980s, the term "ecotourism" began to gain popularity and become recognized internationally. The definition of ecotourism was expanded to include not only environmental conservation, but also respect for local communities and the promotion of sustainable development.

In the following decades, ecotourism experienced rapid growth and became an important segment of the tourism industry [3]. Standards and certifications were established to ensure the authenticity and sustainability of ecotourism experiences. In addition, the participation of local communities in the management and benefits of ecotourism was promoted. Today, ecotourism remains a major force in the tourism industry, with a growing focus on environmental conservation, environmental education

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and community development. However, it also faces challenges such as pressure from unsustainable development and tourist overcrowding in sensitive natural areas. Ecotourism has evolved from its modest beginnings as a conservation movement into a globally recognized tourism sector that promotes environmental protection and sustainable development. Its story reflects the growing awareness of the importance of preserving natural and cultural resources for future generations.

Ecotourism theory is a conceptual approach that seeks to promote sustainable and responsible tourism, minimizing environmental impact and maximizing benefits for local communities and nature conservation [4]. The theory of ecotourism is based on the premise that tourism can be a tool for the conservation of natural ecosystems. It seeks to promote the preservation of biodiversity and natural resources by promoting responsible visitation to protected areas and raising awareness among visitors about the importance of conservation. Ecotourism focuses on providing meaningful experiences of contact with nature, but in a responsible way. This involves activities that minimize disruption to ecosystems and wildlife's natural habitat, such as hiking, bird watching, and marine life observation, among others.

Ecotourism theory recognizes that tourism can generate economic and social benefits for local communities living in natural areas [5]. It focuses on the development of tourism initiatives that promote the participation and empowerment of communities, providing employment opportunities, promoting the conservation of cultural heritage and generating additional income. Ecotourism is not only about visiting natural areas, but also about educating visitors about the importance of conservation and respect for the environment. Trained tour operators and guides play a key role in providing information on biodiversity, local ecosystems and responsible tourism practices.

Ecotourism theory advocates a holistic approach to development that takes into account not only environmental, but also economic and social aspects [6]. It seeks to balance economic growth with the conservation of natural resources and the well-being of local communities, ensuring that future generations can enjoy the same benefits. The theory of ecotourism proposes a tourism model that seeks to harmonize the enjoyment and appreciation of nature with conservation and sustainable development, promoting environmental and social responsibility in all stages of the tourist experience.

Ecotourism has developed over time in different models that emphasize various aspects of environmental conservation, community development and education. **Nature Conservation Model:** This model focuses on the protection and conservation of natural ecosystems and biodiversity [7]. It focuses on minimizing human impact on fragile natural areas and promoting the preservation of natural habitats, endangered species and unique natural landscapes. Tour operators that follow this model typically offer wildlife viewing experiences, hiking in protected areas, and environmental education activities.

**1.1. Community Development Model:** This model seeks to actively involve local communities in the management and benefits of ecotourism [8]. It focuses on promoting community participation in decision-making, the development of local tourism businesses and the creation of sustainable economic opportunities. Income generated from ecotourism is reinvested in community development projects, such as improving infrastructure, education and health.

**1.2. Environmental Education Model:** This model prioritizes awareness and environmental education as an integral part of the ecotourism experience [9]. It focuses on providing visitors with information about the importance of conservation, local ecosystems, biodiversity and responsible tourism practices. Tour operators that follow this model typically offer educational programs, interpretive tours, and workshops on environmental topics.

**1.3. Responsible Adventure Tourism Model:** This model combines the active exploration of nature with responsible and sustainable tourism practices [10]. It focuses on outdoor adventure activities, such as rafting, kayaking, trekking and climbing, but with an emphasis on minimizing environmental impact and respecting local cultures. Tour operators that follow this model typically work closely with local communities and apply low environmental impact practices in their operations.

**1.4. Cultural and Environmental Tourism Model:** This model integrates environmental conservation with the valorization of cultural heritage and local traditions [11]. It focuses on promoting knowledge and respect for indigenous and local cultures, as well as the preservation of historical and cultural sites. Tour operators that follow this model typically offer experiences that combine cultural activities, such as visits to indigenous communities or local crafts, with nature activities, such as hiking or bird watching.

These ecotourism models represent different approaches to developing and promoting ecotourism in a sustainable manner, balancing environmental conservation, community development and the visitor experience [12]. Depending on the characteristics and needs of each destination, one or more of these models can be applied to maximize the benefits of ecotourism.

The measurement of ecotourism involves evaluating various aspects related to tourism activity in natural environments and its impact on the environment, society and the economy [13]. One of the most basic indicators to measure ecotourism is the number of visitors to protected natural areas or ecotourism destinations. This indicator can provide a measure of the popularity of ecotourism in a given region.

Tourism spending associated with ecotourism can be an important indicator of its economic impact [14]. This includes income generated from the sale of tourism services, accommodation, food and activities related to ecotourism. Measuring the amount of income that flows to local communities through ecotourism is

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crucial to assessing its contribution to local economic development and community empowerment. The amount of direct and indirect employment generated by ecotourism in a region can be an important indicator of its impact on local employment and the economy [15]. A variety of indicators can be used to assess the environmental impact of ecotourism, such as ecological footprint, erosion, pollution and change in biodiversity.

Adherence to environmental management standards and sustainable tourism certifications, such as ecotourism certification, can serve as an indicator of the quality and sustainability of ecotourism operations. Visitor satisfaction is important in evaluating the quality of the ecotourism experience and can be measured through surveys, customer feedback, and online reviews. Local community participation and perception of ecotourism can be important indicators of its acceptance and perceived benefits. Measuring the success of ecotourism in environmental conservation can include indicators such as the health of ecosystems, the preservation of biodiversity, and the restoration of natural habitats. Social indicators can be evaluated such as the degree of inclusion of local communities in decision-making related to ecotourism, respect for the rights of indigenous communities, and the preservation of cultural heritage. Measuring ecotourism involves evaluating various aspects related to tourism activities in natural environments and their impact on the environment, society and the local economy.

**1.5. Indicators of Visit to Protected Areas:** These indicators focus on measuring the number of visitors to protected natural areas, such as national parks, nature reserves or world heritage sites [16]. This may include revenue data, visit frequency, visitor behavior and use of services within these areas.

**1.6. Tourist Surveys:** Surveys aimed at tourists who participate in ecotourism activities are used to collect information about their preferences, behaviors, satisfaction levels, and perceptions about the ecotourism experience [17]. These surveys may include questions about motivations for travel, activities undertaken, expenses incurred, satisfaction with the services provided, and attitudes toward environmental conservation. Environmental Impact Assessment: Environmental impact assessment instruments are used to measure and monitor the effects of tourism on the natural environment, including water quality, biodiversity, soil erosion, pollution and ecosystem alteration. Local [18]. This may involve the use of specific environmental indicators and sampling techniques to assess the state of natural resources before, during and after ecotourism activity.

**1.7. Economic Analysis of Tourism:** Economic analyzes of ecotourism focus on measuring the income generated by tourism activity in natural areas, as well as the costs associated with the provision of tourism services and the management of ecotourism destinations [19]. This may include assessing tourist expenditure, impact on local employment, creation of business opportunities and contributions to local GDP.

**1.8. Sustainable Development Indices:** These indices evaluate the sustainability of ecotourism activities considering environmental, social and economic aspects [20]. They include indicators that measure efficiency in the use of natural resources, social equity, community participation, conservation of cultural heritage and long-term economic viability.

**1.9. Ecotourism Certifications and Standards:** Ecotourism certification systems and standards provide specific criteria that tour operators must meet to be considered ecotourism [21]. Assessing and meeting these standards provides a way to measure and ensure the authenticity and quality of ecotourism experiences. However, the instruments that measure ecotourism have ignored the risk perceptions that clients build according to their satisfaction with the experience [22]. Therefore, the objective of this work is to compare ecotourism models with a proposed model in order to anticipate the risks of ecotourism experience. The present work establishes the network of risks associated with ecotourism in the municipality of Tepoztlán, Morelos, central Mexico. Are there differences between the ecotourism models reviewed in the literature with respect to the model observed in this work? Are there significant differences between the network of risks associated with ecotourism reported in the literature with respect to the observations of the present work? Hypothesis. Given that anti-pandemic policies are distinguished by the distancing and confinement of people, significant differences are expected between the risks associated with ecotourism reported in the literature with respect to the observations made in the present work [23].

## 2. Method

A cross-sectional, exploratory and psychometric study was carried out with a sample of 100 ecotourists ( $M = 34.2$   $SD = 3.2$  years of age and  $M = 9893.00$   $SD = 345.00$  monthly income) selected by their reason for destination and experience of transfer and stay. The Ecotourism Motives Questionnaire (CME-18) was used, which includes questions related to the cultural, religious, economic, educational and demographic dimensions of ecotourism motives [24]. The instrument reached a McDougal Omega reliability value (0.768) and validity with values between 0.340 and 0.659.

Respondents were contacted via email. They were informed about the objectives of the study and those responsible for the research, as well as the non-remuneration for their participation. Focus groups were organized to discuss the meanings of the concepts included in the instrument. In three phases, a group of experts evaluated the relevance of the instrument considering the guidelines of the Delphi technique. The first qualifying phase was compared with the averages so that in a second reflective phase the judges would reiterate or reconsider their initial qualification in a third defining phase. The surveys were applied at the facilities of the ecotourism center of Tepoztlán, Morelos, central Mexico. The data were captured in Excel and processed in JASP version 18. The centrality, grouping and structuring coefficients were estimated in order to be able to test the hypothesis related to the significant differences between the reviewed models and the observed model. Values close to unity were assumed as evidence of non-rejection

of the null hypothesis.

### 3. Results

The centrality parameters that refer to the intermediation of the main nodes with respect to the secondary ones highlight the values as the axes around which the other nodes rotate. It means then

that the risks associated with ecotourism depend on the values of conservation and openness to change (Conway & Cawley, 2012). In this sense, ecotourism risks are limited to an evaluative ambivalence where the sample surveyed prefers the conservation of nature and the development of the ecotourism industry such as hotels or restaurants (see Table 1).

network				
Variable	Betweenness	Closeness	Strength	expected influence
Sex	0.635	-0.914	-0.787	-0.911
Age	-0.751	-1,666	-1,211	-1,266
Income	-0.751	-1,483	-1,424	-1,855
Norms	-0.289	-0.268	-0.445	-0.262
Values	1,097	-0.064	-0.462	-0.222
Perceptions	-0.751	-0.489	-0.617	-0.194
Beliefs	-0.751	0.178	-0.436	-0.201
Attitudes	0.404	0.955	0.961	0.825
Knowledge	-0.751	0.559	0.907	0.839
Reasons	-0.289	0.870	1,014	0.972
Intention	2,483	1,446	1,305	1,217
behavior	-0.289	0.877	1,194	1,058

**Table 1: Centrality Measures Per Variable**

Ecotourism is configured in nodes limited to income. In other words, the sample surveyed recognizes that income is a central

axis of the discussion about economic growth based on ecotourism activity (see Table 2).

network				
Variable	Barrat <sup>a</sup>	Onnela	WS <sup>a</sup>	Zhang
Age	0.000	-1,113	0.000	-0.597
Attitudes	0.000	1,034	0.000	0.948
behavior	0.000	1,114	0.000	0.963
Beliefs	0.000	-0.167	0.000	-0.459
Income	0.000	-1,899	0.000	-1,698
Intention	0.000	1,257	0.000	0.630
Knowledge	0.000	0.664	0.000	1,374
Reasons	0.000	0.897	0.000	1,171
Norms	0.000	-0.114	0.000	-0.619
Perceptions	0.000	-0.384	0.000	0.030
Sex	0.000	-0.688	0.000	-0.587
Values	0.000	-0.598	0.000	-1,157

<sup>a</sup> Coefficient could not be standardized because the variance is too small.

**Table 2: Clustering Measures Per Variable**

The learning network of the sample surveyed regarding the risks associated with ecotourism begins with norms and culminates with values (see Table 3). The structure is normative and evaluative,

therefore, ecotourism can be developed from the state and institutional approach [26].

network												
Variable	Sex	Age	Income	Norms	Values	Perceptions	Beliefs	Attitudes	Knowledge	Reasons	Intention	behavior
Sex	0.000	0.094	-0.462	0.096	-0.101	0.093	0.083	0.099	0.168	0.282	0.321	0.220
Age	0.094	0.000	0.056	0.188	0.307	0.073	0.079	-0.147	-0.132	-0.076	-0.084	-0.144
Income	-0.462	0.056	0.000	-0.196	-0.035	0.011	-0.144	-0.066	-0.018	-0.036	-0.012	-0.021
Norms	0.096	0.188	-0.196	0.000	0.409	0.146	0.332	0.266	0.229	0.199	0.242	0.237
Values	-0.101	0.307	-0.035	0.409	0.000	0.447	0.462	0.298	-0.009	0.058	0.269	0.118
Perceptions	0.093	0.073	0.011	0.146	0.447	0.000	0.221	0.224	0.176	0.321	0.244	0.321
Beliefs	0.083	0.079	-0.144	0.332	0.462	0.221	0.000	0.193	0.262	0.157	0.420	0.198
Attitudes	0.099	-0.147	-0.066	0.266	0.298	0.224	0.193	0.000	0.804	0.806	0.847	0.915
Knowledge	0.168	-0.132	-0.018	0.229	-0.009	0.176	0.262	0.804	0.000	0.933	0.903	0.950
Reasons	0.282	-0.076	-0.036	0.199	0.058	0.321	0.157	0.806	0.933	0.000	0.914	0.965
Intention	0.321	-0.084	-0.012	0.242	0.269	0.244	0.420	0.847	0.903	0.914	0.000	0.930
behavior	0.220	-0.144	-0.021	0.237	0.118	0.321	0.198	0.915	0.950	0.965		

**Table 3: Weights Matrix**

#### 4. Discussion

The contribution of this work lies in the establishment of a learning network related to norms and values. The sample surveyed opts for an ecotourism industry that is conservative with natural resources, but active around hotel and restaurant modernization. The one about art warns that mountain ecotourism is distinguished by a high exposure to risks, causing differences between men and women with respect to the satisfactory experience. In this work, a learning structure of the risks associated with satisfactory experience in cultural, religious, educational and economic dimensions was observed. In this sense, a satisfactory experience depends on cultural and educational norms, among which values and intentions stand out as nodes of proximity and intermediation with respect to the other dimensions appreciated found that materialistic sociocultural values are associated with the ecotourism risk experience [27].

In the present work it was demonstrated that this node begins the process of satisfactory experience in the transfer and the image of the destination maintain that materialism corresponds to older generations with respect to post-materialism that distinguishes new generations [28]. In the proposed model, it can be seen that the learning curve of high-risk ecotourism is seen in the generations whose practices correspond to masculinity and its dominant expressiveness found that dominant masculinity expressed in their budget is associated with risk exposure [29]. An increase in the expense of transfer, permanence and return is associated with the frequency of risks. In the present work it was demonstrated that the economic dimension is concomitant to religion. If the reason for travel is to visit a sanctuary or symbol of faith, then the exposure to risk is more frequent with respect to gastronomic reasons.

Consequently, the limits of the study lie in the inclusion of variables that measure the impact of gender on the reason and decision to move, as well as its association with religious faith or cultural appreciation. The opportunity areas of the work also consist of the specification of cultural and economic variables in materialist and

post-materialist beliefs . A new model will allow us to explain with a greater percentage of variance the impact of culture on transfer, stay and return decisions [30,31].

#### 5. Conclusion

The objective of the study was to compare ecotourism models with respect to a model observed in a sample of Tepoztlán, Morelos, central Mexico. The results demonstrate the prevalence of sociocultural values that the literature identifies as materialist and postmaterialist beliefs . Furthermore, this work found that sociocultural values are linked to the intention to move, stay and return. Such findings are consistent with the literature review, although landmark studies suggest that materialistic values explain the risk exposure and satisfying experience of ecotourists. On the contrary, post-materialist beliefs are associated with religious reasons for relocation. Consequently, the extension of the study lies in the materialist and post-materialist dimensions in order to anticipate satisfactory experiences of transfer, stay and return.

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## Annex

### Cultural Dimensions:

1. What cultural aspects of Tepoztlán caught your attention the most during your visit?
2. Did you participate in any local cultural activities during your stay in Tepoztlán? (For example: festivals, events, ceremonies)
3. How do you think the local culture influenced your ecotourism experience in Tepoztlán?
4. What cultural activities or traditions do you think should be promoted more among visitors?

### Religious Dimensions:

5. Did you visit any religious site or participate in any religious ceremony during your stay in Tepoztlán?
6. How did you perceive the influence of religious traditions on the ecotourism offer of Tepoztlán?
7. Do you consider that religion plays an important role in the tourist experience in Tepoztlán?

### Economic Dimensions:

8. What was your main economic motivation for choosing Tepoztlán as an ecotourism destination?
9. How would you rate the cost of the transfer to Tepoztlán? Do

you think it was accessible?

10. Approximately how much did you spend during your stay in Tepoztlán? (Including lodging, food, activities, etc.)

11. Do you believe that ecotourism in Tepoztlán provides economic benefits to the local community?

### Educational Dimensions:

12. Did you participate in any educational or environmental interpretation activities during your visit?

13. How would you rate the availability of educational information about nature and local culture in Tepoztlán?

14. Do you consider that your ecotourism experience in Tepoztlán provided you with knowledge about environmental conservation and local culture?

15. What suggestions would you have to improve the educational offer related to ecotourism in Tepoztlán?

### Demographic Information:

16. Age:

17. Genre:

18. Country of origin:

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