

# Naranjal: Strategic ecotourism destination for economic reactivation and post-pandemic security in Ecuador

## Naranjal: Destino ecoturístico estratégico para la reactivación económica y seguridad post-pandemia en Ecuador

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### ABSTRACT

In the post-pandemic context, tourist destinations must adapt to the growing demand for natural, safe, and low-crowded places. In Ecuador, crime, overcrowding in traditional destinations, and poor planning hinder the competitiveness of areas like Naranjal, which has significant eco-tourism potential. However, this potential remains untapped due to inadequate infrastructure and promotion. This study analyzed Naranjal's tourism supply and demand to identify its potential market. A qualitative and descriptive approach was employed through an action-research process, including data collection, bibliographic analysis, and surveys. Analytical-synthetic and inductive-deductive methods were used to assess the tourism system and current trends. Observations, probabilistic sampling, and triangulation ensured reliable results, revealing tourists' preference for authentic, nature-focused experiences in secure and peaceful environments. The findings emphasize the urgency of improving the tourism system to position Naranjal as a safe ecotourism destination. Leveraging its natural resources for ecotourism could promote sustainable economic reactivation, offering visitors a secure and environmentally respectful experience.

**Keywords:** Ecotourism, security, Naranjal, supply and demand.

### RESUMEN

En el contexto pospandemia, los destinos turísticos deben adaptarse a la creciente demanda de lugares naturales, seguros y poco concurridos. En Ecuador, la delincuencia, la superpoblación en los destinos tradicionales y la mala planificación obstaculizan la competitividad de zonas como Naranjal, que tiene un importante potencial ecoturístico. Sin embargo, este potencial sigue sin explotar debido a una infraestructura y promoción inadecuadas. Este estudio analizó la oferta y demanda turística de Naranjal para identificar su mercado potencial. Se empleó un enfoque cualitativo y descriptivo a través de un proceso de investigación-acción, que incluyó recolección de datos, análisis bibliográfico y encuestas. Se utilizaron métodos analítico-sintético e inductivo-deductivo para evaluar el sistema turístico y las tendencias actuales. Las observaciones, el muestreo probabilístico y la triangulación aseguraron resultados confiables, revelando la preferencia de los turistas por experiencias auténticas y centradas en la naturaleza en entornos seguros y pacíficos. Los hallazgos enfatizan la urgencia de mejorar el sistema turístico para posicionar a Naranjal como un destino ecoturístico seguro. Aprovechar sus recursos naturales para el ecoturismo podría promover una reactivación económica sostenible, ofreciendo a los visitantes una experiencia segura y respetuosa con el medio ambiente.

**Palabras clave:** Ecoturismo, seguridad, Naranjal, oferta y demanda.

## INTRODUCTION

Globally, the concept of "post-pandemic" has been extended beyond health issues, focusing on the economic and social recovery of the regions, since the economic or structural effects of the disease are still visible in some Latin American countries. In Ecuador, the post-pandemic period shows that tourist destinations have changed in their use and management, since nowadays visitors are looking for open spaces, without agglomeration, with little informal commerce, minimizing the risk of criminal insecurity, i.e., the movement of tourists changed with the arrival of the disease, The movement of tourists has changed with the firm decision to consider as the main element for the selection of places to visit, a regulated and not exceeded carrying capacity, in a healthy and safe environment, allowing little visited areas to increase the flow of tourists, eager to visit areas for leisure and recreation with these qualities.

Security has also become a variable that adds up when considering choosing a destination, being a generalized inconvenience throughout the country, which is fought daily; although administrative inefficiencies have complicated police work, however, tourism, is an element that contributes important economic items for the country, is constantly monitored, so that the actions of law enforcement officers, communities and the government itself through its public institutions, take control of the different tourist areas, driven by the current tourist boom to visit ecologically safe natural areas.

In Ecuador, there are natural areas that in the last decade have been proposed as alternative safe ecotourism destinations, one of them is the aforementioned Naranjal canton, belonging to the province of Guayas, located 90 kilometers south of Guayaquil, towards the province of El Oro, on the road that connects Guayaquil with Machala, this place has "tourist resources of potential interest, such as hot springs, cold water pools, the river, a trail, flora, fauna and a pleasant climate, however, the use of the resource is minimal" (Barrero Manso, 2018), despite the fact that in many communes of the canton tourism has been developing with its basic strategies, improvised, improvised and with a pleasant climate, a trail, flora, fauna and a pleasant climate, however, the use of the resource is

minimal", despite the fact that in many communes of the canton tourism has been developing with its basic strategies, improvised or poorly managed, since they do not have real planning or adequate infrastructure, causing the tourist flow is not a benchmark of development and local momentum, undermining the economic income, and that these become minimal or scarce.

The rural and communal areas of the canton of Naranjal stand out for their natural wealth and great potential, although tourism development in these areas is still limited; despite this, they have begun to arouse the interest of visitors, who discover in their landscapes a new source of inspiration, even though the diversity of natural resources of the canton remains little known. Naranjal and its surroundings have the potential to become key destinations for ecotourism or green tourism, oriented toward environmental awareness. The poor use of these spaces has generated the migration of residents to large cities, leaving these areas unprotected, weakening efforts to strengthen the community, affecting security management, and limiting the inclusion of quality natural spaces, key factors for sustainable development and the confrontation of insecurity in a post-pandemic context.

It is considered relevant to present an identification and descriptive update of the characteristics of the existing natural resources in the canton, recognizing them as key elements of incidence in the ecotourism activities to be offered. Therefore, thanks to an analysis of tourism supply and demand in the locality, the potential of the canton of Naranjal will be known, and it will be recognized as a new reference for green tourism in Ecuador, and it will be seen as a tourist destination with a variety of attractive products to promote local development.

## BACKGROUND

According to EL UNIVERSO (2023), "The constant escalation of violence that has been experienced in Ecuador (...) has led, for example, the Global Initiative Against Organized Crime (CITOG) to rank the country as one of the most crime-ridden countries in the world". In addition, Bertha Garcia, a security expert, mentions that we have reached these levels in Ecuador because there is complete

neglect in the security sector, especially for not having clear policies, and that it is time to reorder and reorient the institutions, laws, and the system in general.

Tourism in Ecuador according to journalistic sources, in the first eight months of the year the arrival of visitors and the registration of tourist establishments had increased, despite security issues; information provided by the Municipality of Quito mentions that 94% of non-resident visitors to the city were evidenced of the expected goal for the year 2023, even against the most recent warnings of the US ambassadors in June who issued a new security alert for its citizens, where he recommends not to travel to several cities in the country, due to the risk of being a victim of kidnappings, murders, robberies, or others.

Natural resources have become a letter of introduction for many countries, useful for the local development of Latin American peoples. According to Dourojeanni (1986), it is said that natural resources are "The patrimony of the people, their wealth and their inheritance. The environment in which man lives as a species. The natural resource commonly used after the Second World War was the beaches, a resource that exists in excess on the coasts of South America; that is why, when this new development model was implemented, hotels and increasingly imposing enterprises were built. "This form of organization of the coastal space oriented to traditional tourism led to the rapid growth of these areas without adequate planning or corrective measures to mitigate the harmful environmental impact (Villavicencio Liera, 2014, p. 13).

However, that tourist flow at the end of the 20th century, and beginning of the 21st century, has been progressively changing, much more with the global arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic, turning ecotourism or nature tourism into a segment that according to Villavicencio Liera (2014), benefits the organization of trips and transfers to little known or visited places, to discover new expectations of enjoyment in minimally crowded spaces, away from mass tourism in nature environments that

allow new satisfactions connected with the rescue of family health.

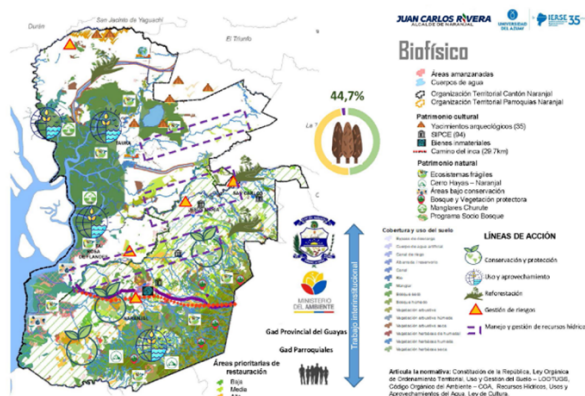
Similarly, Vargas C., et.al. (2017, p. 207), state that natural resources must be used responsibly to avoid causing damage to the environment and local communities, which would be the main ones affected. These resources satisfy basic needs and are key elements that provide value to many rural areas in countries such as Ecuador. Proper management of these resources makes them an essential capital to innovate and strengthen current productivity chains.

Alviar Ramírez, M. (2005) considers that in the past, the use of the environment for non-agricultural activities was of concern due to the inadequate exploitation of land and resources without control by the authorities. Currently, sustainable tourism is being promoted to alleviate areas of mass tourism, boost the local economy in rural towns, and offer experiences in contact with nature, in purer and healthier environments, minimizing risks such as COVID-19.

The strategy is to recognize the attributes that some rural places of Ecuador have, for this, it is necessary to verify through an analysis of the current situation of the elements of the tourism system that accompany the existing natural resources. Taking as a study the sector of Naranjal, a place that attracts more and more tourists and visitors every day, entering the new lists of competitive destinations for its uniqueness of eco-friendly spaces, where the application of terms such as "eco", "green", "responsible", "sustainable" stands out as follows (Guzmán Ramo, Monza & Valenzuela, 2016).

It is essential to rescue and value the open spaces, protected areas, and natural resources of Naranjal, as well as of the whole country, including cultural heritage, showing that their consideration for tourism activity is vital to demonstrate that sustainable development is not so utopian and that, although it may seem complicated, it is possible to find the balance of sustainable aspects that humanity lost long ago in its relationship with nature (Guzmán Ramo, et. al. 2016, p. 89).

**Figure 1. Biophysical distribution of canton Naranjal**

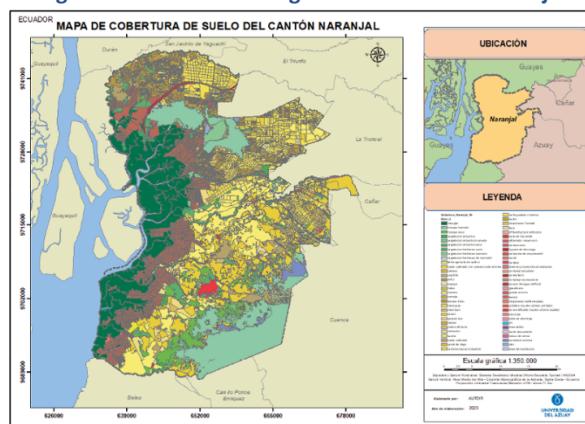


Source: (ALCALDÍA DE NARANJAL, 2024).

The canton of Naranjal is located in the south of the Province of Guayas in District No. 5 of the Littoral Region, 91 km from Guayaquil and approximately 25 meters above sea level, territorially it is formed by an urban parish and four rural parishes, with an area of 155,938.256 hectares (2015 km<sup>2</sup>) and a population of 53,800 inhabitants. Prefectura Ciudadana del Guayas, 2024: It is in the coastal region of Ecuador as the "Land of Enchantment" for its unique and extraordinary attractions, settled on an extensive plain, between the rivers Chacaycu and Bucay, highlights its tropical rainy climate, with average temperatures of 22 to 23 o C, plus its interesting elevations as the Perequete and Mate Hills, which are part of the Cordilleras de Churute and Masvale. (Sanchez Alvarado, 2016, p. 36).

The Naranjal canton, as shown in Figure 1, despite having 84% anthropized soil, is characterized by being highly productive, with mangrove-type vegetation between slightly and moderately altered, where productive soils predominate in 61%, unlike the protection soils, which occupy 31% distributed between 15.1% unconserved forests and 16% of PANE (Subsystem Heritage of Natural Areas of the State). Production soils are subdivided into agriculture with 49.1%: cocoa 13%, sugar cane 13%, rice 11%, banana 9.9%; aquaculture with 9.57%, mainly shrimp farms. The subdivision of protection soils corresponds to mangrove 14%, humid forest 13%, and shrub and herbaceous vegetation 12% (IERSE et. al., 2024), as shown in Figure 2.

**Figure 2. Land use coverage of the canton of Naranjal**



Source: Institute of Sectional Regime of Ecuador (2019), Ministry of Agriculture and Livestock - SIGTierras Project (2010). Instituto de Estudios de Régimen Seccional del Ecuador, Universidad del Azuay & GAD Municipal del cantón Naranjal (2020). Update of the Development and Land Management Plan of Canton Naranjal.

Naranjal is undoubtedly considered a canton enriched by its natural spaces, since, according to Boullón (1999), natural attractions are seen from an aesthetic point of view and are considered raw material for tourism, which is why they become the main motivation for visitors to these natural sites; Sanchez Alvarado (2016), classifies the tourism resources of this canton according to the OAS-CICATUR Methodology, likewise applies its valuation and hierarchy, obtaining the results in Table 1.

**Table 1. Hierarchization of Naranjal's Tourism Resources**

Natural resources	Location	Hierarchization
Waterfalls	Coop. 23 Nov.	III
Tourist viewpoint	Coop. 23 Nov.	III
Birdwatching trail	Coop. 23 Nov.	III
Agricultural areas of the Aromo	Coop. 23 Nov.	III
San Pablo River	San Miguel Commune	III
San Pablo River Nature Trail	San Miguel Commune	II
Hot springs spring	San Miguel Commune	II

Source: Retrieved from (Sanchez Alvarado, 2016), (Barrero Manso, 2018).

In addition, several web pages that promote the attributes of NARANJAL, classify the tourist sites of the canton and its surroundings based on the opinions of travelers, considering the quality, quantity, age, and consistency of the opinions, being the most mentioned attractions those presented in Table 2.

**Table 2. Most mentioned tourist attractions of Naranjal**

Tourist attractions
The 7 Cascades or Beech Hill
The Shuar Community
The San Miguel community
Mirador del Tigre
Cacao & Mango Farm
Manglares De Churute Ecological Reserve
Aguas Calientes Jesús María
The Inca Trail

Source: Autonomous Government of Naranjal (2024).

Among the most outstanding resources are the Manglares Churute Ecological Reserve, with 50,000 hectares, an important tourist destination where

visitors can explore it only with a guide and find a variety of fauna, such as anteaters, ocelots, and howler monkeys, the Shuar Hot Springs Center, located 8 km from the Pan-American Highway, offers waters with healing properties and a 20-meter waterfall, ideal for those seeking relaxation; The Cerro de Hayas is another natural attraction, with waterfalls, rivers and abundant flora and fauna; finally, the Inca Trail allows you to explore archaeological remains during a four-hour hike into the Ecuadorian highlands. In addition, Naranjal offers a new ecotourism trail promoted by the Prefecture of Guayas, a winding dirt road, which is bordering the mountain in the middle of cocoa plantations, a journey of about 2,000 meters that leads from the town of San Miguel to the spring where the source of its hot springs.

Therefore, the question arises: How can Naranjal, through a tourism diagnosis, take advantage of its natural resources, its ecotourism potential and contribute to the development of new products that promote economic reactivation and strengthen security in post-pandemic Ecuador?

According to Ceballos-Lascuráin (1998), ecotourism is "travel to relatively undisturbed natural areas, intending to enjoy, study and appreciating the landscapes, flora, and fauna, as well as cultural manifestations, through responsible tourism that conserves the environment and benefits local populations", a concept updated by Kelly S. Bricker & Susan Snyman (2023), who emphasize that ecotourism should not only provide direct economic benefits for conservation and local communities but also minimize the impact on the environment. This concept was updated by Kelly S., Bricker & Snyman, S. (2023), who emphasize that ecotourism should not only provide direct economic benefits for conservation and local communities but also minimize negative impacts on the environment and provide positive experiences for both tourists and residents.

Ecotourism, when developed responsibly, generates positive economic and social impacts, such as local employment in tourism activities in natural areas. According to Albán Yáñez et. al. (2019), this activity favors employment and economic development in communities near protected areas, improving the quality of life and promoting awareness and respect for cultural and

natural heritage. Thus, ecotourism becomes a source of income that strengthens the local economy. The IUCN (International Union for Conservation of Nature), for the year 2022, proposes the project "Sustainable Tourism and Protected Areas in a Post-COVID World" In Peru, this strategy seeks to recover local spaces, making them more visible and highlights the importance of planetary conservation. It reaffirms the theory of sustainable development, where economic, social, and environmental principles are linked to protecting the planetary system and achieving a balance between communities and the environment.

### **Ecuador and economic recovery**

In Ecuador, the post-pandemic economic reactivation focused on stabilizing the economy, supporting businesses, and generating employment. Key strategies included mass vaccination, incentives to SMEs, labor reforms, tourism promotion, infrastructure investments, agricultural promotion, fiscal restructuring, social support to vulnerable sectors, international alliances, and logistical improvements. Although these measures mitigated the economic impact, challenges such as informal employment, poverty, and public debt persist (Ministry of Tourism of Ecuador, 2020).

Ecotourism is presented as a key alternative for the reactivation of local economies, especially in rural areas, by fostering economic activity, protecting natural resources, and promoting social inclusion. According to FAO (2021), it boosts the creation of direct and indirect jobs, such as tour guides and local suppliers, reducing dependence on cities and promoting the circular economy in rural communities. Agritourism remains an important tool for strengthening rural economies (Diareme, 2023).

The conservation of protected areas and natural landscapes is promoted through income from parks and reserves, supporting reforestation projects, and environmental monitoring with the participation of local communities (UNT, 2020). Ecotourism, by diversifying sources of income in rural communities dependent on agriculture, strengthens economic resilience in the face of external shocks, such as pandemics and climate

change (World Bank, 2021). Community-based tourism, focusing on domestic visitors, helps communities maintain income even when international tourism declines, as it did during the COVID-19 pandemic (UNEP, 2021).

Ecotourism adds value to local traditions, gastronomy, dance, folklore, and the commercialization of handicrafts, and encourages pride in the population, promoting and reinforcing cultural identity. It fosters environmental education among tourists and residents, creating awareness of the importance of conserving the natural environment and the adoption of sustainable practices (UNT, 2020).

"The Ecuadorian government has implemented various policies and programs to support SMEs, such as tax incentives, export facilities, and business training programs, these initiatives seek to strengthen their competitiveness and sustainability." (Cevallos Gorozabel, 2024). The attraction of green investments, i.e. well-structured ecotourism projects with sustainable infrastructure, such as eco-lodges, and clean technologies for energy and waste management, has increased. Finally, to ensure the success of ecotourism, community training in environmental management, sustainability certifications for tourism activities, collaboration with NGOs and governments, and digital promotion of destinations are required, as green tourism seeks to promote sustainable development and mitigate climate change. (Saleh & Faisal, 2024).

### **Security as a basis for tourism development**

Perception of safety is a critical factor in the success of any tourism destination, as it directly influences travelers' decisions when choosing their next destination and their overall experience. Discuss how perception of safety is crucial to the success of any tourism destination, and how insecurity can negatively affect visitor flow. Perception of safety is crucial for tourists when planning their trips, as destinations with conflict, crime, natural disasters, or pandemics often see a decrease in visitors (UNT, 2020). When a destination is perceived as safe, tourists feel more reassured, which increases the likelihood that they will return or recommend it (Tarlow, 2014). Destinations with high safety standards, including health and risk controls, are



more attractive than those with negative perceptions. During and after the COVID-19 pandemic, biosecurity measures were key to regaining traveler confidence (WWTC, 2021).

Security is also vital to protect investments in tourism infrastructure and ensure economic stability in local communities. When a destination is perceived as safe, it attracts greater investment and promotes job creation in sectors such as transportation, hospitality, and recreation (UNEP, 2021).

It is essential to implement strategies to improve the perception of security, such as transparent communication with updated information on security measures, training of tourism personnel in risk management and emergency response, and cooperation between governments, tourism companies, and security forces. In addition, campaigns should be developed to highlight the destination's actions to ensure the safety of visitors, since without a positive perception, any tourism strategy could be compromised.

Natural resources are key tourism attractions globally, offering unique experiences and connections with nature. Elements such as mountains, beaches, jungles, and protected areas are valued for their beauty, biodiversity, and geological features. According to Guaita Martínez et. al. (2020), cited by Béjar Tinoco et. al. (2024), many countries have implemented policies to regulate tourism and protect the environment, especially in developing countries. Natural resource-based tourism can promote conservation and generate economic benefits if managed sustainably. However, without proper control, it can cause negative impacts such as environmental degradation. Naranjal's natural resources, with their biodiversity and breathtaking landscapes, are ideal for ecotourism and bird watching, offering unique experiences. As Béjar Tinoco, et. al. (2024) points out, sustainable tourism must balance economic activity with the conservation of the environment and its biodiversity.

### Post-Pandemic context

The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly transformed tourism trends, orienting preferences towards outdoor and nature destinations, away

from urban agglomerations. This inclination responds to the desire of travelers to find open spaces that offer health security and contact with natural environments. According to the United Nations Tourism (UNT), nature, rural tourism, and road trips have become popular choices due to travel constraints and the search for outdoor experiences. There has also been an increase in the popularity of less crowded places away from the crowds, such as rural destinations and natural parks, reflecting the search for authentic experiences and the need to escape the urban hustle and bustle. This shift in tourism preferences highlights the importance of promoting and developing natural destinations such as Naranjal, which offer safe and quality experiences, contributing to the well-being of travelers and the sustainable development of local communities.

### Tourism diagnosis:

A sector wishing to become a tourism power must consider aspects such as management, promotion, and the gathering of updated information to achieve the much-desired local development, necessary for the economy to become profitable (Butler, 1980), which stresses the need for periodic evaluations to manage tourism development. (Ceballos- Lascuráin, 1998). In addition, he emphasizes the need for a comprehensive diagnosis for the sustainable development of tourism. Weaber (2001), stresses the importance of carrying out detailed diagnostics to understand the carrying capacity and environmental impacts of tourism. Vera (1997), stated in, (Ricaurte Quijano, 2009, p. 11) "A physical-territorial approach indicates that the diagnosis consists of the analysis of the basic components of the tourism structure-supply and demand- of the use and structure of the territory, as well as of the environment of the site to be planned", (Hall, 2008), defends the importance of tourism diagnoses for the planning and management of destinations. Ricaurte (2009) mentions that: "tourism diagnosis, in general, is understood as the search and systematization of information related to tourism supply and demand in the destination" (p. 11) and in turn this author states that the diagnosis serves three specific purposes: to define the current situation, substantiate solutions, and establish baselines to implement strategic actions.

Similarly (Briassoulis, 2002), in its book "Tourism and Sustainability: (Binns & Nel, 2002) New Challenges and New Opportunities", examines the need for tourism diagnostics for sustainable management and the development of tourism destinations. explore and state that tourism diagnostics can guide regional development and adaptation of tourism strategies, Budeanu, et.al. (2016) and Mason (2020), highlight the importance of conducting diagnostics to understand the impacts of tourism and plan effectively. As well as Moyle, et.al. (2021) consider that diagnostics are crucial for sustainable tourism development and mitigation of negative impacts.

It is therefore considered important as a general objective to determine how Naranjal can use its natural and ecotourism resources to develop products that promote economic reactivation and strengthen security in post-pandemic Ecuador.

## METHODOLOGY

Tourism research is a key element in providing innovative solutions to social problems so for this work under the research-action process, the qualitative approach was considered because, through the review of bibliographic sources and the use of data collection techniques, it is possible to know the current reality and the characteristics of the place, thus performing the respective analysis of the information obtained, providing a feasible proposal as a solution to the problem.

A descriptive type of research was used to characterize and understand the object of study, according to the context, field work was conducted, to carry out the respective observations through visits, which allows for exhaustively documenting the characteristics of the natural resources, such as flora, fauna, soils, and water sources, in their geographical, social and cultural context. Its results are easily interpretable, which facilitates communication with communities and stakeholders. In addition, it provides up-to-date data through fieldwork, serving as a basis for subsequent more complex investigations, and at a moderate cost compared to other more technical approaches.

Through the analytical-synthetic methods, each element of the tourism system was analyzed and

the difficulties faced by the research context were understood, achieving a better understanding of the object of study; employing the inductive-deductive method, the appreciations and requirements that the current tourism demand requests for the natural resources of Naranja to be more attractive for ecotourism were obtained.

Observation was used as an empirical method to collect data that characterized the natural resources as potential spaces for ecotourism development through the use of direct observation cards. Similarly, the survey technique was considered, which, through a bank of questions as a data collection instrument applied to tourists arriving in the canton, criteria were obtained that demonstrate the opinions of visitors or tourists regarding the desire for authentic connection with nature, in environments that offer tranquility, discovery and more genuine contact with the environment, away from the crowds and mass tourism; places that allow a more intimate and respectful experience with biodiversity, and are usually sought by those who value conservation, and mainly that provides the security that both locals and strangers desire nowadays.

A population or universe of tourists from neighboring cantons was selected, considered as potential demanders of ecotourism activities, who are motivated to visit the natural resources of Naranjal, applying the calculation of the infinite sample formula, with a 5% margin of error, a 95% reliability coefficient and probabilities of occurrence and non-occurrence of 50% each. The surveys applied required the use of online formats and the sampling applied was simple probabilistic.

However, among the weaknesses or limitations of this methodology is the impossibility of identifying causes or effects related to natural resources, since it only describes their current situation. The quality of the data depends on the precision of the researcher, and observations can be influenced by personal biases. In addition, this approach does not delve into complex dynamics and has limited generalizability, as the results may not apply to other rural areas. External factors, such as climate or accessibility to the study area, may also affect observations.



Nevertheless, scientific rigor is demonstrated through the use of triangulation, confronting the results with the theory, whose personal conclusion demonstrates critical reflection on the variables under study and the importance of taking advantage of the natural resources of Naranjal, ensuring through the proposal of ecotourism strategies the economic reactivation of the canton and the strengthening of a destination that guarantees physical and psychological safety to the visitor and/or tourist

## RESULTS AND DISCUSION

As a result of the situational diagnosis of Naranjal, among the elements that make up its tourism system, the following stand out: infrastructure such as accessibility, potable water service, sewage service, electrical system, garbage collection service, waste collection service, health care service, communication service, and signage.

To reach the canton and some of the communes from Guayaquil, first-class roads are used, such as the Pan-American Highway E25, an asphalt road in good condition, and the alternate roads have deficiencies that should be addressed as soon as possible. The trails used for different activities such as accessing the primary forest are rustic, not very elaborate, but in good condition, mainly because they are not very old structures built by the inhabitants of the communities, trails that allow visitors or hikers to enter sectors such as waterfalls, mangroves, lagoons, or various little-known tourist attractions.

The canton of Naranjal is divided into an urban parish and four rural parishes which are Jesús María, San Carlos, Santa Rosa de Flandes, and Taura; it also has communities such as the Shuar and has received significant support from various government entities. The government of Azuay has contributed to issues related to the supply of drinking water to the community of San Miguel, while the provincial government of Guayas and the decentralized autonomous government of Naranjal promoted the construction of the Bailey Bridge, a work long requested by the community. They have also received collaboration from Naranjal's tourism department, which has organized training, fairs, and activities to promote tourism development in

the area. Unfortunately, the commune still lacks a comprehensive community development plan.

The main economic activities in the commune include agriculture, poultry farming, pig farming, home construction, and tourism. However, it is important to note that most of the jobs generated by tourism are informal. The community also actively participates in activities such as group work, minga, and community assembly, reflecting strong local organization. In terms of their strengths in tourism, there are several people with experience in guiding, culinary skills, and knowledge in accounting and administration, which could enhance the development of this sector (Barrero Manso, 2018).

Although tourism is not their main source of income, the community considers it a key alternative for local development, valuing tourists and visitors. The Thuar Entza community offers tourism and gastronomic activities that are essential to their livelihood, given that agriculture is not enough to cover their economic needs. This disposition towards tourism reflects their potential to diversify their sources of income and strengthen their local economy (Graciani Vera, 2016).

To get to the commune from Guayaquil, you can take public transportation to Naranjal and, from there, a local bus or cab; three cooperatives operate for \$3.00 per passenger. If traveling in your own vehicle, there are two tolls, while motorcycles and bicycles are exempt from payment. In the canton there is a varied gastronomic offer, while in the communes there is food service with typical dishes such as seco de gallina, chicken, duck, wings, rice with stew, and roasted ripe, accompanied by drinks such as juices, soft drinks, and water, for large groups, it is recommended to book in advance. Accommodation is varied, with affordable places to Airbnb for family vacations, including some inhabitants of the communes are adapting their homes to provide lodging service to tourists, which is a very favorable point for the development of the place.

The tourist sites, as well as some communities such as the Shuar, offer certified guide services for tours in the forest and for visitors who go to the waterfall, but due to the growing demand, they choose to allow visitors to enter without a guide, weakening

the possibility of a safe tour. The attractions that are currently being offered to tourists are described in Table 3.

**Table 3. Tourist attractions are currently offered in Naranjal**

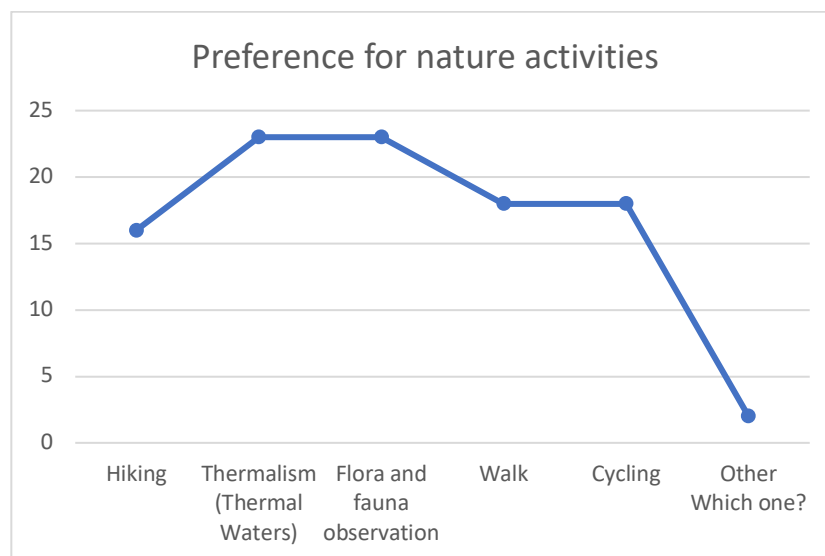
Tourist attraction	Description	Location
Shuar Hot Springs Center	It offers thermal waters with high curative power, diversity of exotic animals and rituals of the Shuar indigenous culture. Recognized for its hospitality.	8 km from the Panamerican Highway, near Balao Chico, 1.5 hours from Guayaquil.
Manglares Churute Ecological Reserve	Natural heritage with biodiverse mangroves, legends and sounds of birds and howler monkeys. An outstanding international tourist destination.	Canton Naranjal, 45 minutes from Guayaquil on the road to Machala.
Cerro Hayas	670 m above sea level with rich vegetation, medicinal plants and natural diversity.	Foothills of the Molleturo mountain range, km 4 of the Naranjal-Machala Road.
Las Chozas	Built with bijao leaves and cane, they offer typical dishes of the Shuar culture (fish ayampaco, chicken, guanta) and other traditional dishes of the Coast (rice with chicken, dry, fried fish).	Near the Shuar Center.
The Tuna Waterfall	Impressive 20 m waterfall, surrounded by Shuar beliefs that suggest the presence of purifying spirits at sunset.	2hours from the Shuar Center.
The Shuar Center Pools	Two thermal pools with temperatures of 40°C, changing.	Inside the Shuar Hot Springs Center.
Swimming pools in the San Miguel Commune	Two pools of thermal waters and two of cold water, with depths from 1.30 m to 1.50 m. Admission: \$1.50 adults, \$0.75 children. Guidance on use and benefits offered by the community members in charge.	San Miguel Commune, Canton Naranjal.
Hot Springs	At the point where the hot springs emerge, the water is hotter and steaming. Surrounded by huge rocks and lush vegetation, it allows visitors to walk around the spring and climb up to the rocks to take pictures.	In the spring of the San Miguel commune, canton Naranjal.

Source: Own elaboration taken from de (Alcaldía de Naranjal, 2024).

Among the responses obtained, 35% of the respondents' main motivation for traveling is rest or pleasure; 59% prefer to travel accompanied by their family, and 52% have more than 3 people in their group; 53% rarely preferred to visit natural areas before the pandemic, due to the lack of existing information, while in the current post-pandemic stage, 8% travel constantly to these areas to get away from saturated places that offer mass tourism. Unfortunately, 41% of those surveyed are unaware of the wealth of natural resources that the canton possesses; and 64% consider it very important that when visiting this place, it has services that complement the offer of nature tourism or ecotourism within most required components is the infrastructure, such as drinking

water, sewage and electricity service in 59%, access roads in excellent condition in 58%, security in 67%, signage in 36% and customer service in 59%. Demonstrating that security is a key factor for the good development of ecotourism activities; finally, it is highlighted that 58% of respondents are happy to arrive and know these places, making them a potential reference for safe spaces to visit to develop rest and recreation activities such as Thermalism (Hot Springs) and observation of flora and fauna with a preference of 23%, Hiking, Trekking, cycling, between 16 to 18% and other activities away from the overload of tourists of the traditional destinations of the region and the country, as it is exposed in Figure 3.

**Figure 3. Demand preferences for ecotourism**



Source: Surveys applied to tourists visiting the canton.

## CONCLUSIONS

The COVID-19 pandemic has changed the preferences of tourists, who now prefer natural and low-crowd destinations, which presents an opportunity for Naranjal, with its unique natural resources. However, its ecotourism development is limited by the lack of adequate infrastructure, tourism planning, and poorly designed strategies. To take advantage of its potential, it is essential to implement a land management plan and a comprehensive tourism diagnosis.

Insecurity remains a challenge, so collaboration between communities, local government, and security forces is crucial to ensure a safe environment for visitors. In addition, Naranjal's diverse natural resources, such as hot springs, waterfalls, and ecological trails, offer a significant attraction for ecotourism, provided they are managed sustainably.

Ecotourism can be key to post-pandemic economic reactivation, diversifying sources of income in rural communities and reducing their vulnerability to crises. To ensure its success, community training, the adoption of clean technologies and sustainability certification are essential.

The perception of safety is essential to attracting tourists and investment, so transparent communication and multisectoral collaboration are essential. Tourism research has identified that Naranjal's natural resources can be a key attraction for ecotourism, contributing to the economic reactivation of the canton. Surveys reveal a demand for authentic experiences in peaceful and nature-friendly environments.

In summary, Naranjal has great ecotourism potential that, if well managed, can contribute to local economic development and become a sustainable and safe destination, attracting tourists looking for experiences far removed from mass tourism. Since ecotourism is an integral strategy that combines economic development, environmental conservation, and social inclusion, the sustainable use of the area's natural resources can contribute significantly to post-pandemic economic reactivation, strengthening the security and well-being of local communities while promoting responsible tourism for the canton and the country.

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