




Challenges and Opportunities of Post-COVID-19 Tourism in Lago Agrio Canton, Sucumbíos Province

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ABSTRACT

This research shows the most outstanding challenges experienced by tourism in the city of Lago Agrio after the passage of the coronavirus pandemic, as well as the measures to be employed to promote recovery after the crisis. For the development of this work, qualitative research with a documentary approach was carried out, based on primary and secondary information sources that provide data regarding the impact of the coronavirus on tourism; likewise, a situational diagnosis was carried out to determine the current situation of the canton, which facilitated the identification of favorable aspects and adverse circumstances surrounding the city in question. Thanks to the interpretation obtained after the application of qualitative tools for the treatment of information, it is concluded that the lack of planning in the tourism field minimizes the possibilities of reopening tourism in the city. Finally, an action plan was elaborated, with strategies aimed at the post-pandemic tourism reactivation of Lago Agrio district, within the framework of sustainability, and for the benefit of its stakeholders.

Keywords: Pandemic, planning, reactivation, strategies.

INTRODUCTION

Tourism over time has managed to position as a resilient activity, generating opportunities, by being a dynamic phenomenon of great adaptive capacity. For Sánchez (2015), "tourism is a retractable phenomenon because it is contracted by events and situations that imply a certain danger for tourists such as attacks, robberies, murders, crimes or other acts of another nature" (p.68). In other words, the appearance of adverse scenarios, modify the perception of the traveler in front of the tourist activity, generating fear and uncertainty, by being able to disturb an entire productive sector, as it happened during the arrival of the coronavirus pandemic in December 2019, where the tourism industry was one of the first to be directly affected, and one of the last to recover in its totally. For Bauzá & Melgosa (2020) the recovery of tourism is linked to the level of uncertainty that the pandemic has generated in the population, and it shows that this could trigger two scenarios: "The paralysis (not knowing what to do) or the creativity (a way to find new ways of action that respond to the challenges of a situation that, in some measure, the drama of COVID-19 has changed)" (p.20).

In Ecuador, the uncertainty due to the health crisis plus the lack of an emergency plan for these eventualities, betray the cognitive crisis suffered by the tourism sector in front of fortuitous cases such as those caused by the pandemic, and as a consequence of that there is evidence of a slow tourism reactivation in a national level, but it is much more noticeable in the Ecuadorian Amazon region, specifically in the canton Lago Agrio.

The lack of a roadmap, with guidelines and actions that promote the revitalization of the sector, constitute the justification for this research, which seeks to know first-hand the challenges that tourism went through in Lago Agrio due to the pandemic, as well as the

current perceptions regarding the evolution of tourism, and the possible opportunities in a post-coronavirus stage. In the first phase, the situational diagnosis of the Lago Agrio canton is reviewed, which details its history, physical-spatial, ecological-territorial, socioeconomic, political, and environmental areas; In addition, the main tourist attractions of the canton are detailed. In the development of the second phase, we determinate the methodology to be applied in the research, a SWOT analysis is carried out to specify important aspects of the canton that will be very useful for the development of the third and final phase, in which the elaboration of an action plan is proposed, with guidelines, programs and strategies that seek the tourist reactivation of the canton.

This research work has the general objective of generating ideas and strategies that promote reactivation of the tourism sector of Lago Agrio canton, through an action plan, which encourages articulated and linked work between the different actors and tourism managers of the canton, and it also collaborates with the revitalization of the local economy for the benefit of the interest groups involved in a present and future post coronavirus.

THEORETICAL CONTEXTUALIZATION

Tourism is an activity that has been carried out since ancient times, initially for rest or leisure purposes, and over the years, it has taken on broader connotations that encompass other objectives. Thus, according to Boullón (2006), "tourism is the result of a social phenomenon whose starting point is the existence of leisure time and the development of transportation systems". One of the most representative definitions states: "tourism is a social, cultural, and economic phenomenon that involves the movement of people to countries or places outside their usual environment for personal, professional, or business reasons" (UNWTO, 2008). Likewise, tourism is seen as an enhancer of the regional and global economy, generating opportunities and development. According to estimates from the Ministry of Tourism of Ecuador (MINTUR), tourism in the country constituted the third main source of non-oil income, contributing around \$2.3 billion to the national economy in 2018, and approximately \$1.8 billion in 2019 (FENACAPTUR, as cited in Banda, 2021, p. 16).

The unexpected arrival of the coronavirus pandemic in 2020 changes the economic landscape and leads to the stagnation of the entire tourism industry. From another perspective, the pandemic is seen as an opportunity to urge central governments to evaluate the state's reaction and response capacity to tourism issues. As mentioned by Proaño Lucero et al. (2020), "It is important to take measures to learn from the crisis, which has revealed gaps in the government's and industry's preparation and response capacity." On the other hand, the passing of the pandemic can be seen as a new opportunity to rethink the way tourism is being conducted and to change the paradigm, now with a focus on more sustainable tourism. This term is understood as: "The balance between maximizing the use of economic, social, cultural, and natural resources of the destination area versus the satisfaction of visitors and the negative impacts that can occur on the host society or the environment" (Lalangui et al., 2017).

Similarly, the COVID-19 pandemic has posed significant challenges for the tourism industry; however, it has also created opportunities that destinations should be seized, related to innovation, sustainability, and adapting to new traveler demands and expectations. The recovery of tourism will require a combination of efforts and strategies to capitalize on these opportunities and address the challenges that persist.

Likewise, (Fletcher et al., 2020) propose using the crisis to make structural changes in the tourism activity, focusing on a future model that prioritizes proximity tourism (Rajmil Bonet,

2020), based on greater integration of tourists with the territory and its values (Orchiston et al., 2016). Moreover, the effects of the coronavirus are strongly conditioning the activity, as it directly affects the foundations of the tourism system: mobility and interpersonal contact (Ortega et al., 2020).

In this regard, it is important that the balance and harmonization of tourist spaces are guided by proper planning and management. "Its purpose is the organization of human actions on the territory, and it deals with harmoniously solving the construction of all kinds of things, as well as anticipating the effect of the exploitation of natural resources" (Boullón, 2006, p.58).

Consequently, the development of tourism must be projected in a harmonious space, with characteristics that make it an attractive destination, with tourist attractions and products that give it prominence over the competition. According to Acerenza (2015), they must fulfill the expectations of the tourist, meeting a certain number of requirements including "tourist attractions, facilities for enjoying them, and possibilities of access to the place where these facilities are offered" (p.22). Similarly, a fundamental aspect to promote the tourism reactivation of a destination is its promotion and marketing. According to Kotler et al. (2011), "Promotion refers to activities that communicate the advantages of the product and persuade the target customers to buy it," making the offer visible to everyone. In Ecuador, a series of tourism development strategies focused on new technologies and innovation are being implemented to contribute to the reactivation of this sector. Among the most important are: Strengthening internal tourism and rural tourism, based on the high-quality parameters demanded by visitor attention (MINTUR, 2022). Rural tourism in Ecuador is a key sector for the socio-economic revitalization of many areas. Considering the COVID-19 health crisis, forecasts suggest that rural tourism could be one of the first tourism niches to recover. The main reason is that it takes place in less crowded areas and offers a wide range of activities in natural and outdoor spaces (Hosteltur, 2020). Hosteltur (2020) proposes four major opportunities for sector reactivation: consolidating sustainable rural tourism development, promoting community tourism, agrotourism, and magical towns of Ecuador, strengthening governance of tourist destinations and training. The health crisis and the closure of tourism businesses provide a perfect opportunity to improve the training of all sector agents.

In conclusion, for all these variables to materialize, it is essential to have a roadmap that includes possible strategies, goals, and objectives for planning, policy creation, accessibility, promotion, sustainability, among others, compiled into an action plan where the primary ingredient is innovation. This plan should specify the execution of each program in the short, medium, and long term, to facilitate a prompt and complete recovery of the tourism sector, especially in the Lago Agrio canton, Sucumbíos province.

METHODOLOGY

For the development of this work, a non-experimental research design with a qualitative approach is employed, specifically of a documentary type. Qualitative instruments are used for data collection, such as interviews and focus groups. Likewise, the technique of content analysis is employed for the treatment of compiled information, and the strengths and weaknesses of the research are highlighted through the development of a SWOT analysis. For a better understanding of this research, it has been summarized into 3 phases, detailed as follows:

I. FIRST PHASE: SITUATIONAL DIAGNOSIS OF LAGO AGRIO CANTON.

This study was conducted in Lago Agrio Canton, located in the northeastern part of Ecuador, within the Amazon region, specifically in the province of Sucumbíos, of which it is the cantonal head. Its territory covers an area of 3,151.26 km². According to data from the Territorial Planning Plan of Lago Agrio Canton (GADMLA, 2021), it is comprised of 8 parishes: 7 urban and 1 rural. According to INEC data (2010), the population of this canton amounts to 91,744. Lago Agrio is the birthplace and refuge of 5 indigenous nationalities settled in its territory: Kichwa, Cofán, Shuar, Awá, and the Afro population. In terms of climate, it is characterized as tropical and humid, mostly rainy, with strong winds for much of the year, and therefore susceptible to flooding. Its privileged geographical location grants it considerable natural resources, flora, fauna, and minerals, with one of the most representative being oil. The economic and productive activity of this canton revolves around trade, agricultural activities, construction, and tourism in rural areas.

II. SECOND PHASE: APPLICATION OF METHODOLOGICAL TOOLS.

This study is carried out through qualitative documentary research, in which information is gathered from primary sources, mainly research, comments, and local news found on the web. According to Bernal (2016), "Documentary research consists of analyzing written information about a specific topic, with the purpose of establishing relationships, differences, stages, positions, or the current state of knowledge regarding the topic under study" (p. 146). As for techniques and instruments, semi-structured interviews and focus groups are used, directed towards tourism authorities, managers, and stakeholders present in the canton.

Interviews: "This is defined as a meeting to converse and exchange information between one person (the interviewer) and another (the interviewee) or others (interviewees)" (Hernández et al., 2010, p. 418). For this purpose, a thematic script was developed with 6 open-ended questions directed at the main authorities of the canton.

Objective: To understand the perspectives and initiatives of the competent authorities regarding tourism in the canton.

Focus Groups: Escobar & Bonilla-Jimenez (2017) state that "Focus groups are a data collection technique through a semi-structured group interview, which revolves around a theme proposed by the researcher" (p. 52). This technique focuses primarily on those tourism service providers who are part of the tourism sector in the canton.

Objective: To interact and firsthand understand the vision of tourism managers for the canton in a post-COVID future; and to analyze the possible strategies that will contribute to the immediate reactivation of tourism in the city of Lago Agrio.

Table 1 – Participants in Interviews and Focus Groups

Interviews	Focus group
2 representatives of CAPTUR Sucumbíos	2 representatives of the Accommodation sector
1 representative director of municipal tourism	3 representatives of the Food and Beverage sector
1 representative director of provincial tourism	3 representatives of the operation and intermediation sector

Source: Own elaboration.

Subsequently, the information obtained from interviews and focus groups is encoded and interpreted using the content analysis method. Content analysis is a technique to study any type of communication in an "objective" and systematic manner, quantifying messages or content into categories and subcategories, and subjecting them to statistical analysis

(Hernández et al., 2010, p.260). Likewise, a computer-assisted qualitative analysis is conducted using the Maxqda software, aiming to synthesize conclusions from data extracted from interviews and focus groups. Finally, the SWOT analysis tool is applied to determine the current stance of the object of study, emphasizing the strengths and weaknesses of the research. "SWOT analysis consists of evaluating the strong and weak factors that, together, diagnose the internal situation of an organization, as well as its external evaluation, meaning opportunities and threats" (Ponce-Talancón, 2007).

III. THIRD PHASE: PROPOSAL OF AN ACTION PLAN

Based on the information gathered in this research, it is proposed as a strategic solution to develop an action plan that formulates potential strategies and guidelines contributing to the tourist reactivation of Lago Agrio Canton in a post-COVID phase.

RESULTS

Lago Agrio Canton is a megadiverse destination with a highly varied tourist offer, ranging from nature tourism to eco-adventure activities. The Nueva Loja parish is one of the most visited at both national and international levels due to its parks. The PERLA Park, which is more of a protective forest, and the ecological tourist park, are its main attractions. The latter serves not only for recreational activities but also for research purposes, with its primary mission being the conservation of existing biodiversity. In summary, there is significant tourist potential and community interest in revitalizing tourism and boosting the local economy. However, neglect and indifference from public entities regarding essential matters such as infrastructure and roadways, coupled with the lack of proper direction and a roadmap in the field of tourism, hinder the possibilities of tourism reactivation in the post-COVID stage.

RESULTS FROM INTERVIEWS AND FOCUS GROUPS

Using the statistical software Maxqda, the obtained information is interpreted by quantifying the most frequently used words in the conducted interviews. These words correspond to the participants' requests or requirements, yielding the following outcomes:

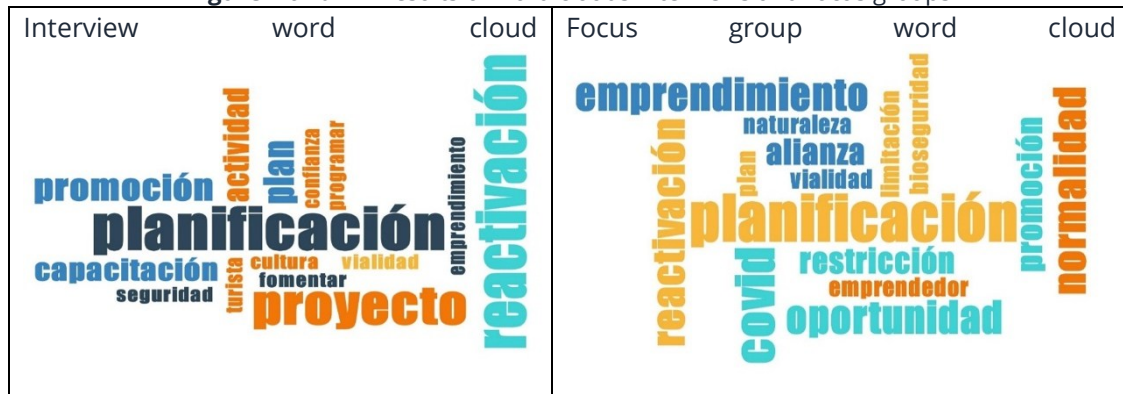
Table 2 – Table of frequency of words from interviews and focus groups

Interviews			Focus group		
Word	%	Range	Word	%	Range
planification	1,74	1	planification	2,41	1
reactivation	1,74	1	covid	2,01	2
project	1,58	3	entrepreneurship	1,61	3
plan	1,10	4	normality	1,61	3
promotion	1,10	4	oportunity	1,61	3
activity	0,95	6	reactivation	1,61	3
capacitation	0,95	6	alliance	1,20	7
trust	0,63	8	promotion	1,20	7
culture	0,63	8	restriction	1,20	7
entrepreneurship	0,63	8	biosecurity	0,80	10
promote	0,63	8	entrepreneur	0,80	10
program	0,63	8	limitation	0,80	10
security	0,63	8	nature	0,80	10
tourist	0,63	8	plan	0,80	10

roadwork	0,63	8	roadwork	0,80	10
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Source: Own elaboration.

Figure 1 and 2 – Results of word clouds interviews and focus groups



Source: Own elaboration.

After a thorough analysis of the opinions provided by tourism service providers, as well as by the authorities, there is clear evidence of high expectations regarding planning in the tourism context, as well as in reactivation and promotion matters. A variable that is still perceived as latent is that of the pandemic, due to humanity still being in a transition period towards a post-COVID era. After collecting, transcribing, and systematizing the information, the respective analysis is carried out by filtering and categorizing the research results using the content analysis method. The following categories are established for this purpose: tourism situation, degree of impact, budget, planning, and received support. These variables were considered for the proposal of the action plan.

ACTION PLAN

Mission: Contribute to sustainable, conscious, and inclusive tourism development in the city of Lago Agrio by proposing strategies and guidelines that ensure compliance with current biosecurity standards, while respecting and conserving the ancestral native territory. This should empower and benefit the local population and vulnerable groups in society, both directly and indirectly.

Vision: The city of Lago Agrio will be recognized as a sustainable and inclusive tourist destination with unique and innovative tourism products that preserve and strengthen the cultural identity of Amazonian communities. This will be achieved through responsible tourism activities that contribute to the improvement of the local population's quality of life.

AXES AND STRATEGIC LINES OF THE ACTION PLAN

To determine the strategic lines and axes of action, the strategies obtained from studies on the current situation of Lago Agrio and its SWOT analysis have been used as a basis. Through hierarchical grouping, the following strategic axes have been determined:

Political and Institutional Development: This will enable the coordination of efforts with government agencies to manage the development and growth of the canton's infrastructure.

Sustainable Development: This will promote the conservation of existing resources and the identification of a new catalog of tourism products present in the canton.

Economic-Social Development: This will involve working together with the community to generate benefits for the locality, strengthen tourism, and improve the quality of life of the inhabitants.

Marketing: This will promote the dissemination of the canton's tourism offerings, thereby increasing the demand for local tourism ventures.

The following table provides details of potential programs and/or actions, along with their respective objectives and strategic lines, which will contribute to the strengthening and revitalization of tourism in the canton.

Table 3 – Action plan for the strengthening and reactivation of the tourism sector of Lago Agrio

Line of action	Strategic line	Objectives	Accions	Priority
Development political and institutional	policies of planning	Promote the improvement of the urban and tourist planning of the city.	1) Generation of programs, projects, and policies that prioritize potentially touristic areas of the city. 2) Improvement of public spaces in the city and regulation of territory usage, according to the tourist activities to be carried out.	high
	Policies of biosecurity	Ensuring the health and biosecurity safety of tourists and residents of the canton.	1) Development of biosecurity plans in accordance with current regulations. 2) "Regular inspections in tourist establishments.	high
Sustainable development	Tourism Resource Management	Identify and highlight the natural and cultural resources of the canton.	1) Creation of a new and detailed tourist inventory. 2) Development of training in hospitality and tourism culture.	high
	Strengthening of the offer.	Promote the conservation of the existing natural resources in the canton.	1) Promote the development of products based on rural and nature tourism that align with the trends of the new tourism offerings. Implementation of training in sustainable tourism. 2) Creation of a digital post-COVID tourism guide.	high
Socioeconomic Development	Inclusion and Integration	Promote social cohesion through strategic cooperative alliances.	1) Implementation of joint activities involving the community, public entities, and private tourism stakeholders. 2) Establishment of agreements with private investors, academia, and small entrepreneurs to carry out tourism projects or local initiatives.	high
	Popular economy	Promote local investment.	1) Coordination with local government entities to facilitate the necessary processes for the establishment of tourism businesses. 2) Creation of incentives that encourage the improvement and	high

				maintenance of tourist attractions in the city.	
	Promotion and Positioning	Capture attention of domestic and foreign tourists, investors	the	1) Organization of fairs and festivals that promote Lago Agrio as an alternative destination and magical town. 2) Creation of permanent promotional campaigns and participation in national tourism fairs.	high
Marketing	Digital marketing	Diversify tourism distribution channels		1) Generation of multimedia and audiovisual content showcasing the city and its resources, promotion on the web, social media, and applications highlighting the existing offerings and facilitating commerce through digital channels. 2) Creation of an in-person and virtual familiarization trip (fam-trip) that positions Lago Agrio as a potential and bio-secure destination and enables gaining prominence in the national and international tourism market.	high

Source: Own elaboration

CONCLUSIONS

The situational diagnosis of Lago Agrio canton allowed us to observe the shortcomings that the tourism sector was facing before the pandemic, which were further exacerbated after its passage.

Interpretation of the gathered information through group sessions determined that even though the canton boasts numerous tourist attractions and unique natural resources in the region, neglect, and minimal investment in public works, especially in terms of road infrastructure and accessibility to the city, hinder tourist influx, reduce development opportunities, and delay the process of tourism reactivation.

The applied SWOT analysis determined that the canton possesses the necessary resources and attractions to evolve from being just a pass-through city to becoming a nature reference in the country. Nevertheless, better urban and tourist space planning is needed, along with consultation and economic support for this sector, as well as significant contributions towards the development of projects and programs in the tourism domain.

Following the pandemic, more travelers are opting for types of tourism such as nature-based, experiential, personalized, bio secure, and digitized, where they can enjoy and disconnect from daily activities, but above all, have a unique and memorable experience.

On the other hand, the effects generated by the pandemic on the economy are quite significant. However, it is relevant that recovery strategies are based not only on proposing more restrictive sustainability criteria from degrowth or post-growth theories but rather on

self-imposing restrictions, consumption redistribution, resource utilization. This crisis indicates that the hope for change should emerge from demand (Ortega et al., 2020).

Based on the and the research findings, an action plan was designed consisting of 8 fundamental strategic lines with actions aimed at addressing the most visible problems of the canton. The plan aims to promote a more sustainable, personalized, experiential, and bio secure tourism, focusing on the post-growth of the destination through innovation.

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AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS (CREDIT)

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The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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ETHICS STATEMENT

This study did not involve human participants or animals and therefore did not require ethical approval.

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