

Entrepreneurship in Costa Rica's Ecotourism Sector: A Pathway to Local Development

Bouderbala Faiza

PhD, Senior Lecturer, University of Algiers 3; member, Laboratory for Digitalisation and Economic Forecasting in
Algeria, Algeria
bouderbala.faiza@univ-alger3.dz
<https://orcid.org/0009-0003-5183-9260>

Received: 19/04/2026

Accepted: 10/06/2026

Published: 29/09/2026

Abstract

Ecotourism entrepreneurship offers opportunities to connect biodiversity conservation with local economic development, yet its contribution depends on the conditions under which enterprises operate and communities participate. This article examines Costa Rica as an illustrative case of how environmental assets and institutional support can shape entrepreneurial opportunities in ecotourism. The discussion focuses on the relationship between small-scale ventures, protected areas, regulatory frameworks, and incentives intended to support environmentally responsible tourism. It considers how these elements can enable enterprises to integrate commercial objectives with conservation and community well-being. The central argument is that biodiversity provides a foundation for ecotourism, while its translation into local development requires supportive institutions and meaningful connections between tourism businesses and local communities. From this perspective, entrepreneurial activity constitutes a potential mechanism for linking visitor demand to locally embedded economic opportunities, rather than an automatic guarantee of sustainable development. Costa Rica's experience provides a framework for considering how conservation-oriented tourism policies can support enterprise formation while maintaining environmental and social objectives. The article contributes to discussions of sustainable tourism by identifying the institutional and community conditions that warrant attention when assessing ecotourism entrepreneurship as a pathway to local development.

Keywords: ecotourism entrepreneurship; local development; sustainable tourism; biodiversity conservation; community participation; institutional support; Costa Rica.

1. Introduction: Since the mid-twentieth century, the tourism industry has evolved towards new forms of tourism, including ecotourism, an environmentally responsible form of tourism that places value on natural resources and biodiversity. Demand for ecotourism has grown steadily, particularly among visitors who value the aesthetic qualities of natural environments and local cultures. Since the 1990s, this shift has increasingly attracted entrepreneurs, especially those developing innovative ventures aligned with the changing orientation of this promising industry.

Entrepreneurship in ecotourism generally involves small-scale business ventures that develop innovative responses to environmental and social challenges within the tourism industry. Such ventures seek to integrate economic, environmental, and social objectives while supporting the well-being of local communities.

Costa Rica's experience with ecotourism entrepreneurship, particularly its focus on serving local communities and improving living conditions, has earned international recognition. It is widely regarded as one of the pioneering examples of ecotourism development. According to the Costa Rican Tourism Institute, the country received 2.91 million tourists in 2024, of whom 67.9 per cent - approximately 1.98 million visitors - were ecotourists.

The success of the Costa Rican model was not accidental. The country has deliberately created a supportive environment for eco-entrepreneurs by drawing on its exceptional biodiversity - estimated at 6 per cent of global biodiversity - while establishing national parks and ecological reserves, enacting relevant legislation, and introducing incentives. These measures were intended to strengthen the ecotourism industry and position it as both a pillar of the national economy and a source of local development. Costa Rica therefore provides a valuable case for examining the conditions under which ecotourism entrepreneurship can generate economic, social, and environmental benefits.

a) Research problem:

Against this background, the study addresses the following main research question:

How has entrepreneurship in ecotourism contributed to sustainable local development in Costa Rica?

b) Research hypotheses:

The study is based on the following two hypotheses:

- ❖ Costa Rica has relied primarily on its natural assets to attract innovative projects in the ecotourism sector;
- ❖ A distinctive feature of Costa Rica's experience in ecotourism entrepreneurship is its emphasis on community leadership.

c) Research objectives:

The study seeks to achieve the following objectives:

- ❖ To present the concept and main components of entrepreneurship in ecotourism;
- ❖ To identify the development path that enabled Costa Rica to become one of the world's leading ecotourism destinations;
- ❖ To review the policies, initiatives, and measures adopted to promote entrepreneurship in ecotourism in Costa Rica;
- ❖ To examine the effects of the growth of ecotourism entrepreneurship on local communities and their standard of living.

To address the research question and assess the hypotheses, the study adopts a descriptive approach. This approach makes it possible to examine the main features of Costa Rica's experience and to analyse its contribution to improving the living standards of local communities.

2. Environmental Entrepreneurship in the Tourism Sector: Ecotourism has become an important approach underpinning many tourism projects because it integrates the three dimensions of sustainability: economic, social, and environmental.

Since Schumpeter introduced innovation as a central concept in economic analysis in the twentieth century - broadly understood as the creation of new possibilities in the economic sphere - increasing attention has been paid to innovation in ecotourism. From the 1980s onwards, this field expanded substantially and became an important area of entrepreneurial activity and research.

2.1 Ecotourism: Tourism is no longer confined to conventional seaside and mountain destinations; growing attention is now directed towards wildlife, plant life, biodiversity, and local cultures. The term 'ecotourism' was introduced in 1983 by H. Ceballos-Lascurain. The International Ecotourism Society (TIES) defines it as 'responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and ensures the well-being of local communities, whilst providing interpretation and education'. (The international ecotourism society, 2025)

Although ecotourism is described using several related terms - including environmentally friendly tourism, soft or green tourism, responsible or alternative tourism, and adventure tourism - its core principles remain consistent: minimising environmental damage, encouraging environmentally responsible visitor behaviour, respecting local communities and biodiversity, and supporting the conservation of natural tourism areas.

Consequently, ecotourism has become closely associated with rural development and sustainable local development. Its principal criteria include:

- ✓ Preserving biological and cultural diversity through ecosystem protection;
- ✓ Ensuring the sustainable use of biodiversity while creating employment opportunities for local communities;
- ✓ Sharing economic and social benefits with local communities through their participation in ecotourism projects and activities;
- ✓ Prioritising natural resources whose original characteristics remain largely intact, while protecting them from adverse visitor impacts;
- ✓ Emphasising the value of ecological sites, particularly those associated with flora, fauna, and local cultures.

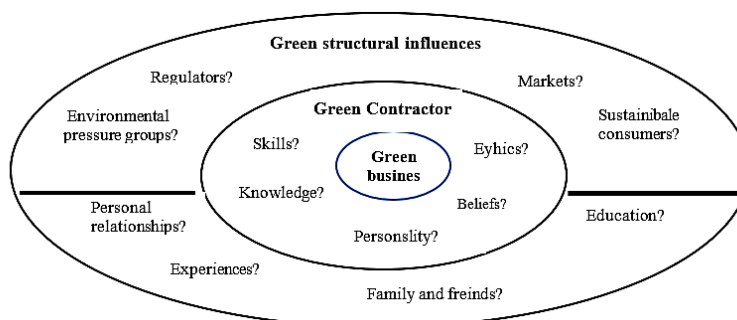
2.2 Environmental entrepreneurship: Interest in environmental, green, and sustainable entrepreneurship has expanded considerably, first as a subject of research and later as a field of economic activity. In the tourism sector, environmental entrepreneurship often takes the form of small-scale ventures whose objectives combine environmental protection and the well-being of local communities with the generation of an economic return on investment.

The following definitions highlight key dimensions of environmental entrepreneurship:

- ✓ 'Environmental entrepreneurship is the pursuit of new business ventures in response to a specific opportunity, with the aim of generating profit and having a positive impact on the environment, such as reducing greenhouse gas emissions and utilising renewable energy, among other things....' (*Kotchen, 2009, p. 28*)
- ✓ 'Environmental entrepreneurship aims to solve environmental problems through the market; it interprets environmental challenges as gaps and transforms them into business opportunities based on a business model grounded in environmental and ethical considerations.' (*Steurer, 2013*) The importance of this approach extends beyond the provision of environmentally friendly products; it can also support a broader transition towards sustainable business systems.
- ✓ 'All green practices incorporated into products, services, production processes, technology or organisation—whether technical or managerial—are green innovations' (*Gunawan, 2012, p. 02*) . Such practices form an important basis for environmental entrepreneurship, which has developed in response to the adverse effects of conventional production on natural resources and biodiversity.
- ✓ Environmental entrepreneurship is shaped by several external and internal factors. Some external influences are relatively 'hard', such as regulation and tax incentives, whereas others are 'soft' and relate to social and cultural conditions. As Figure 1 indicates, these factors form the broader environment in which environmental entrepreneurs operate. The inner dimension reflects the entrepreneur's own

characteristics - including personality, competencies, knowledge, and beliefs - which influence how external conditions are interpreted and, ultimately, the types of environmental ventures that are developed. These relationships are illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Factors influencing environmental entrepreneurship. Strong structural influences (hard)



Weak structural influences (soft)

Source: (Taylor & Walley, 2003, p. 17)

2.3 The environmental entrepreneur: The emergence of entrepreneurs who combine environmental awareness with entrepreneurial activity has produced a distinct profile in entrepreneurship, commonly described as the 'environmental entrepreneur' or 'sustainable entrepreneur'.

An entrepreneur is generally understood as an innovator who introduces new ways of addressing problems. In this context, an environmental entrepreneur develops sustainable solutions to environmental challenges through a business model that also generates economic returns. Such ventures involve both environmental and economic risks and may carry a higher degree of uncertainty than conventional projects. (Kummitha, 2020, p. 87)

Environmental entrepreneurs seek to transform tourism and related industries so that nature, tourists, and local communities can benefit simultaneously. Their business models therefore combine socio-economic value creation with environmental value creation, (Schaper, 2002) through innovations in products, services, technologies, or organisational practices that address environmental problems while generating income and supporting sustainable economic growth.

The environmental entrepreneur can act as a catalyst for social and economic change by using new technologies, methods, and ideas to develop business-based solutions to environmental problems. Environmental entrepreneurs may also provide services to other organisations, helping them strengthen environmental leadership and integrate sustainability principles into their business models. (Steurer, 2013, p. 07)

Environmental entrepreneurs possess a number of characteristics that distinguish them from conventional entrepreneurs, as summarised below:

Table 1. Distinguishing between conventional and environmental entrepreneurs

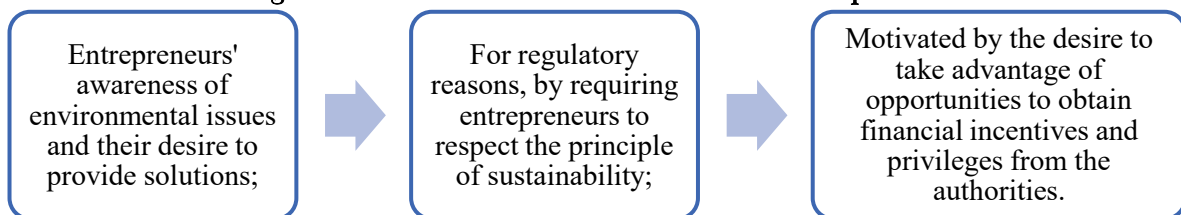
	Conventional entrepreneurs	Environmental entrepreneurs
Primary objective	Maximise profit.	Protect the environment and develop solutions that support environmental sustainability.
Performance orientation	Focus on financial ratios and return on investment.	Consider the organisation's positive impact on the community and the environment.
Ethical trade	Ethical trade is considered where it supports the firm's commercial objectives.	Promote sustainable operating conditions that protect the rights of workers and producers.
Environmental legislation	May view new environmental regulations as constraints on business activity.	Generally supports environmental legislation and seeks to integrate it into the business model.
Stakeholders	Primarily seeks to satisfy shareholders.	Seeks to create value for a broader range of stakeholders.
Relationship with technology	Adopts technologies that improve product quality and reduce costs.	Prioritises technologies that improve performance without causing environmental harm.
Size of the organisation	Generally seeks organisational growth and expansion.	Often operates on a small scale, with growth constrained by environmental and mission-related objectives.

Source: Based on (Bernard, Kharrouby, & Levy-Tadji, 2013, pp. 2-4)

Environmental entrepreneurs are motivated by the possibility of combining profit generation with environmental and social responsibility. They develop products, services, or technologies that address environmental problems while supporting sustainable economic growth. Environmental entrepreneurship does not necessarily require the creation of a new venture; it may also involve introducing an innovative management approach within an existing organisation in order to improve its environmental performance.

An environmental entrepreneur may be an individual or a group of individuals motivated by the factors presented in Figure 2.

Figure 2. Motivations of an environmental entrepreneur

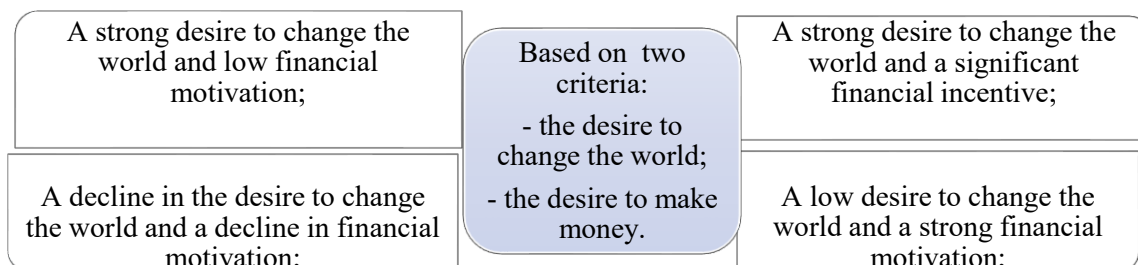


Source: Based on : (BOURDIN, Chenane, & Mohand Said, 2022, p. 5)

Several researchers have proposed classifications of environmental entrepreneurs (*Walley & Taylor (2002); Schaltegger,(2002)*), distinguishing between entrepreneurs who consider environmental

conservation to be the foundation of their business, and those who have become environmental entrepreneurs primarily through circumstance or by exploiting a market opportunity to increase profits. This study adopts the motivation-based classification illustrated in Figure 3.

Figure 3. Classification of environmental entrepreneurs by motivation



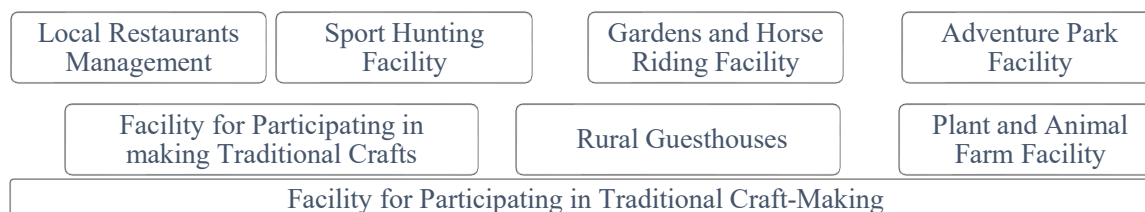
Source: (Gibbs, 2009, p. 72)

2.4. Entrepreneurship in ecotourism: As concern for environmental protection and the rational use of natural resources has increased, innovation in tourism has increasingly focused on sustainable practices. These innovations are often incremental and non-technological and can be grouped into four broad categories: (Alexandre-Leclair & Liu, 2014, pp. 177-178)

- ✓ Product or service innovation, including the diversification of tourism accommodation to provide visitors with new experiences;
- ✓ Process innovation, including the use of modern information and communication technologies to develop tourism sites and enhance visitor engagement;
- ✓ Marketing innovation, including new distribution channels, personalised tourism services, and the association of a product brand with a particular destination;
- ✓ Organisational or institutional innovation, including certification and classification schemes implemented by non-governmental, local, or international organisations to assess compliance with environmental objectives, such as the sustainability certification awarded by the Costa Rican Tourism Institute.
- ✓ Ecotourism ventures often take the form of micro, small, or medium-sized enterprises and display characteristics that distinguish them from conventional tourism businesses. For example, an environmentally responsible hotel or farm may incorporate waste management, provide organic agricultural products to visitors, use environmentally friendly cleaning products and equipment, limit the built area of the site, use natural construction materials such as wood and stone, and rely on sustainable energy sources. (Salmanova, 2022, p. 253)

Ecotourism entrepreneurs engage in a range of activities, summarised in Figure 4.

Figure 4. Models of entrepreneurship in ecotourism



Source: (Kasalak, Akinci, & Yurcu, 2016, p. 597)

3. Key factors in Costa Rica's transformation into a leading ecotourism destination: Costa Rica is a small Central American country bordered by Nicaragua to the north, Panama to the south-east, the Pacific Ocean to the west, and the Caribbean Sea to the east. It has more than 1,200 km of coastline and a highly diverse topography, which can make internal travel between regions challenging.

Although Costa Rica accounts for no more than 1 per cent of the Earth's surface, it is home to 6.5 per cent of the world's biodiversity and 3.5 per cent of its marine biodiversity; national parks and protected areas make up a quarter of its total area, giving it the highest proportion of protected areas in the world. (www.greenworldadventures.com, 2025, p. 04)

The population is estimated at approximately 5.3 million in 2025, distributed over an area of 51,100 km², corresponding to a population density of about 104 inhabitants per km². Spanish is the official language, and the national currency is the Costa Rican colón (CRC).

3.1 Security consolidation phase: Costa Rica is distinguished by a high degree of political and security stability. Internal security is maintained by civilian police forces, while external security is supported through international agreements and peaceful relations with neighbouring countries.

This institutional context reflects Costa Rica's decision to abolish its army permanently following the 1948 civil war. The decision symbolised a long-term shift in public priorities towards education, health, and social development, and contributed to Costa Rica's international reputation for peace and demilitarisation.¹

3.2 Ecological degradation phase: Costa Rica was once largely covered by dense forests, and much of the population depended directly on natural resources for its livelihood. Agricultural expansion, particularly coffee and banana cultivation, together with overgrazing, contributed to substantial deforestation during the twentieth century. Deforestation peaked in the 1970s, when approximately 60,000 hectares were cleared annually, and forest cover had fallen to about 31 per cent by 1981. (Brücher, 2015)

As international coffee prices declined, Costa Rica began to explore alternative land uses and increasingly shifted from export-based revenue towards tourism-related income. In the early 1970s, the country took important steps to develop its tourism potential, beginning with the establishment of the National Parks Authority in 1970 to protect biodiversity, conserve natural areas, and strengthen environmental awareness.

3.3 Environmental awareness and infrastructure development phase: Some researchers trace the foundations of Costa Rica's tourism development to the 1940s and 1950s, when major transport infrastructure was expanded. In 1946, the completion of railway lines and the extension of the Pan-American Highway improved access to the Pacific coast, particularly Guanacaste, which later became one of the country's most developed tourism regions.

The international airport opened in 1957, and the government, in partnership with private investors, established the airline 'LACSA', with routes to Miami and major Latin American capitals. By the 1980s, LACSA had become one of Central America's largest airlines. Work on a second airport began in the

¹: The country has a long-standing tradition of national elections and has experienced only minor disruptions to the democratic election of presidents since 1920. The main exception was the brief civil war of 1948, during which the founder of modern Costa Rica (José Figueres Ferrer), whilst in provisional presidency, abolished the army, nationalised the banks, curbed communist extremism and insisted on holding free elections after 18 months of stability.

mid-1970s; it opened to international flights in 1994. Road construction also expanded substantially, reaching a network of approximately 30,000 km by 1983. (Geoffrey & Spadafora, 2016, p. 5)

Between 1950 and 1970, Costa Rica developed a growing domestic market for beach and nature tourism, initially serving three main categories of visitors: (Jambol, 2014, p. 1)

- ✓ Birdwatchers, wildlife enthusiasts, and botanists, attracted by the country's rich biodiversity;
- ✓ Visitors seeking adventure and outdoor activities, including river rafting, surfing, and long-distance hiking in forested areas;
- ✓ Visitors seeking alternatives to conventional hotels. Following the 1974 decision to designate 25 per cent of the country's territory as national and public parks that could not be sold, local residents increasingly developed traditional homes, small rental farms, and guesthouses near protected areas. According to the study, 80 per cent of Costa Rica's hotels still have no more than 20 rooms, a distinctive feature of the national tourism market.

3.4 Establishment of ecotourism: From the 1980s onwards, international interest in Costa Rica increased significantly, particularly after President Óscar Arias received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1987. Journalists, conservationists, researchers, and businesspeople increasingly visited the country and highlighted its biodiversity, political stability, social development, and emerging model of sustainability-oriented tourism.

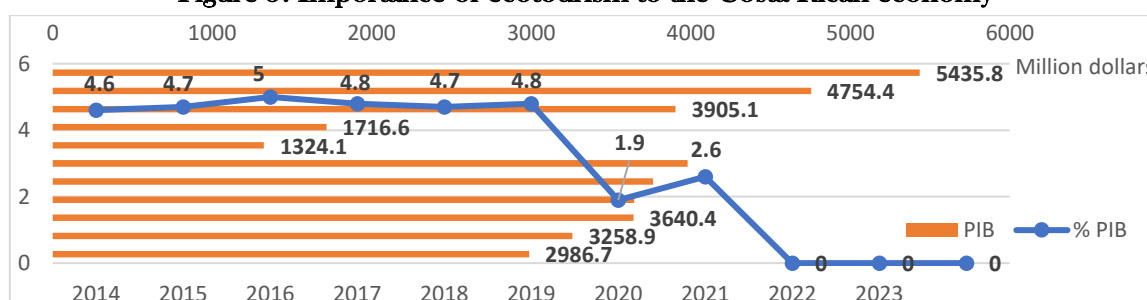
By the early twenty-first century, Costa Rica had become a leading international ecotourism destination. The country is reported to have 30 national parks, 51 botanical reserves, 13 forest reserves, and 8 biological reserves, alongside exceptionally rich flora and fauna. (Kyle, 2025)

Tourist arrivals also expanded markedly over time, rising from an annual average of 6,000-7,000 visitors in the mid-1950s to 155,000 in 1970, 435,000 in 1990, and 1.1 million in 2000.

4. Ecotourism in the Costa Rican economy: figures and indicators: Tourism is one of the pillars of the Costa Rican economy. The country recognised its tourism potential at an early stage and invested in national parks, protected areas, and supporting infrastructure. These investments helped establish Costa Rica as an internationally recognised destination and a reference point for sustainable ecotourism.

4.1 Importance of tourism to the Costa Rican economy: The following indicators illustrate the sector's contribution to the domestic economy.

Figure 5. Importance of ecotourism to the Costa Rican economy



Source: (BCCR & ICT, 2020) & (ICT I. C., 2023)

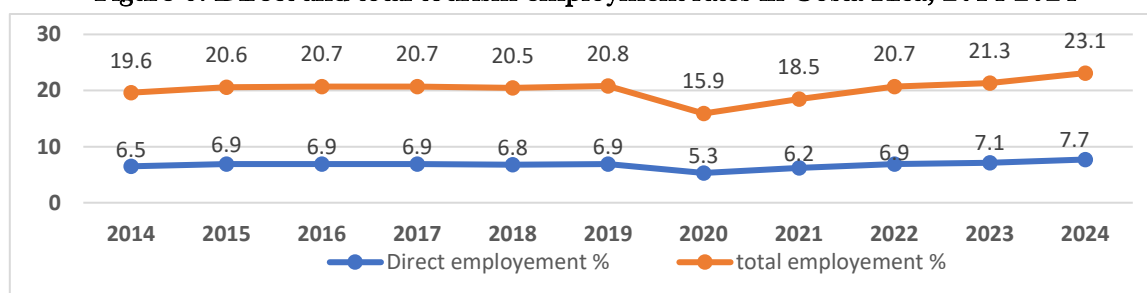
The tourism sector has generated substantial value added for the Costa Rican economy. In 2024, tourism contributed US\$5,435.8 million in value added. By comparison, export revenues from coffee, bananas, and pineapples amounted to US\$344.38 million, US\$1,240.46 million, and US\$1,357.6 million, respectively, in the same year. These figures underline the major contribution of tourism to the national economy.

According to the Costa Rican Tourism Institute, average expenditure per tourist amounted to US\$1,508 in 2024, compared with US\$1,746 in 2023. Total tourist expenditure reached US\$5,433.6 million in 2024 and US\$4,751.2 million in 2023, making tourism an important source of foreign-exchange earnings.

4.2 Contribution of tourism to employment: A notable feature of Costa Rican tourism is its strong reliance on local labour. The sector supports employment directly through accommodation, food services, transport, and other tourism activities, as well as indirectly through related industries. Total tourism-related employment reached 549,048 workers, including 183,016 in direct tourism jobs.

Figure 6 presents the shares of direct and total tourism-related employment.

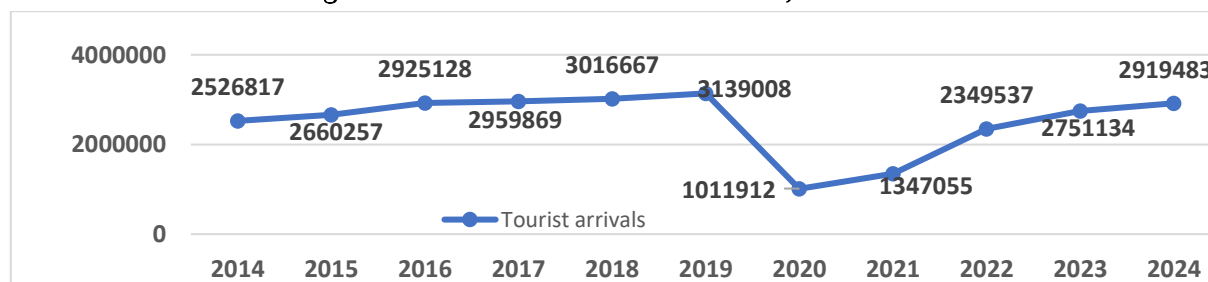
Figure 6. Direct and total tourism employment rates in Costa Rica, 2014-2024



Source: (ICT, 'Direccion de planeamiento y de desarrollo turistico', 2025)

4.3 Tourist arrivals in Costa Rica: Tourist arrivals followed a generally upward trend over the study period, with the notable exception of 2020, when the global health crisis severely disrupted international travel (Figure 7).

Figure 7. Tourist arrivals in Costa Rica, 2014-2024

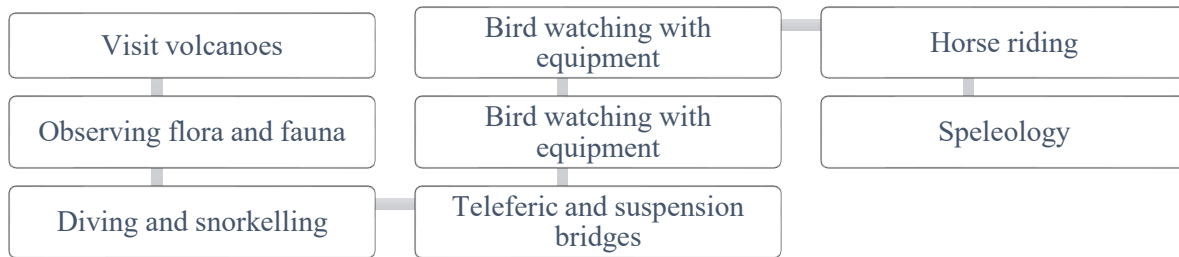


Source: (Direccion de estrategia turistica, 2025)

Tourist arrivals reached 2.919 million in 2024, with most visitors entering through international airports. North America accounted for 68.15 per cent of arrivals and Europe for 16.37 per cent. According to the Costa Rican Tourism Institute, 53.76 per cent of visitors were between 25 and 54 years of age. Tourist expenditure amounted to US\$5,433.6 million in 2024, compared with US\$4,751.2 million in 2023.

4.4 Ecotourism activities in Costa Rica: According to the Costa Rican Tourism Institute, ecotourists represented an estimated 67.9 per cent of all visitors in 2024, compared with 67.7 per cent in 2023. This corresponds to approximately 1.982 million ecotourists and highlights the scale of the market for ecotourism operators. Figure 8 presents the main activities undertaken by these visitors.

Figure 8. Activities undertaken by tourists interested in ecotourism in Costa Rica



Source: (ICT, 2025)

In 2024, 69.1 per cent of tourists chose accommodation such as hostels, lodges, and forest lodges, while 27 per cent visited national parks, based on estimates for 2023 and the first half of 2024. Among the most visited sites were Manuel Antonio National Park (16 per cent) and the volcano attraction identified in the source data (12 per cent). (*CID & ICT, 2025*)

5. Dimensions of ecotourism entrepreneurship in Costa Rica: Demand in Costa Rica's ecotourism market continues to grow, and the country has become a leading destination for environmentally conscious travellers. In response, investors have increasingly focused on sustainable tourism ventures that incorporate renewable energy, water conservation, waste recycling, and passive or natural heating, while relying on local labour to generate income and preserve local traditions and culture.

5.1 Forms and examples of ecotourism business ventures in Costa Rica: The country's abundant natural resources have created a wide range of entrepreneurial opportunities in ecotourism.

The most significant forms include the following:

✓ **Eco-lodges and small eco-hotels:** Many entrepreneurs have established locally owned guesthouses and small accommodation businesses that combine environmental sustainability with comfortable visitor experiences and a distinctive local identity. According to the source used in this study, returns on investment for such ventures generally range from 5 to 20 per cent.

Many eco-lodges have been awarded the highest level of the 'CST' sustainability certification, including Luna Lodge, Barinqueen Resort, Lapa Rios, Finca Exotica, and Iguana Lodge Beach Resort & Spa; (*Garcia, 2023*)

✓ **Ecotourism operators:** Entrepreneurs have developed ecotourism packages that showcase Costa Rica's biodiversity and frequently involve local communities and local guides;

✓ **Community-based tourism initiatives:** Entrepreneurs work with local residents to provide tourism experiences centred on cultural heritage and traditional practices, including hand-woven textiles and local cuisine. ACTUAR, discussed below, is one example;

✓ **Educational programmes, workshops, and applied research:** Entrepreneurs have used the country's natural assets to develop education, training, and research programmes focused on environmental conservation and wildlife protection. (Author, 2025)

5.2 Characteristics of ecotourism entrepreneurship in Costa Rica: Ecotourism entrepreneurship in Costa Rica is characterised by several distinctive features:

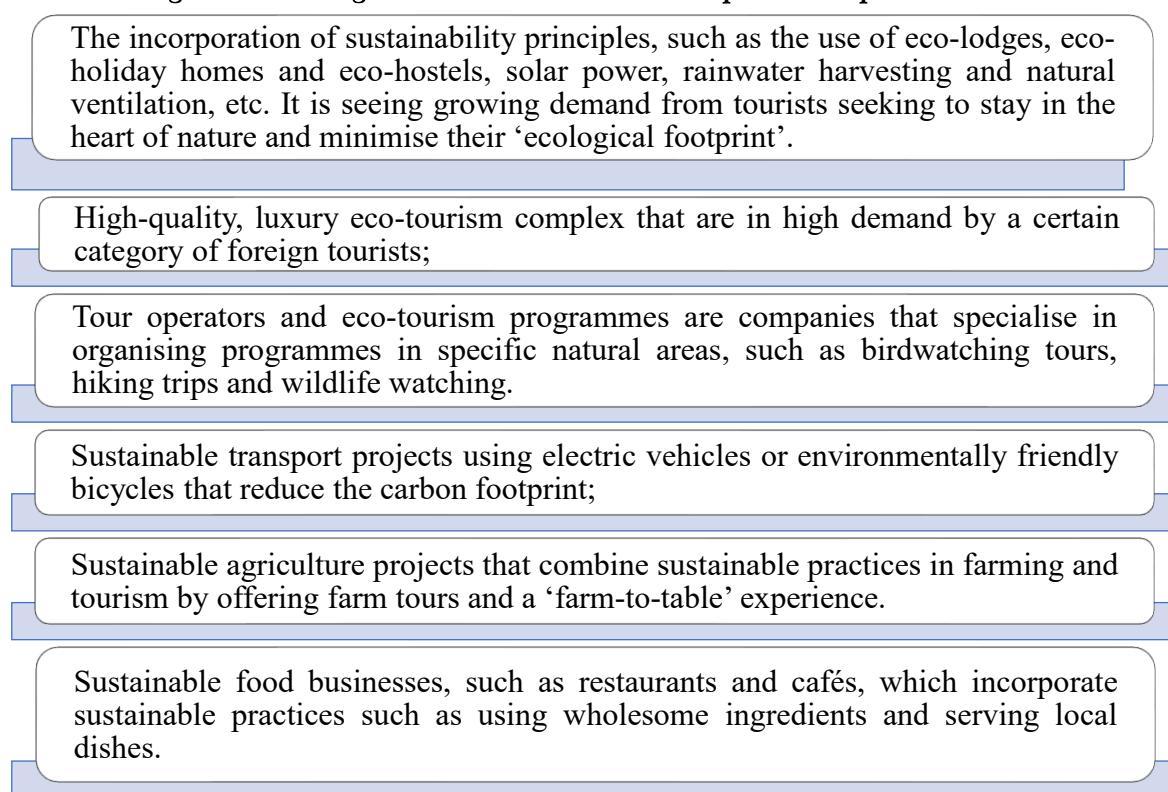
✓ Costa Rica includes some of the earliest entrepreneurs in this field, with pioneering ventures integrating sustainability and local communities since the 1970s, including Finca Rosa Blanca and Lapa Rios Ecolodge; (*Jambol, 2014*)

✓ A strong emphasis on small-scale ventures, in contrast with more capital-intensive segments of the global tourism market. Approximately 70 per cent of establishments are small enterprises, including guesthouses, tourism companies, and sustainable transport businesses;

- ✓ The active involvement of local communities, which is an important factor in delivering distinctive, high-value-added services; (Clower, 2024)
- ✓ The mobilisation of multiple stakeholders - including public authorities, citizens, entrepreneurs, and visitors - around sustainability objectives. This includes renewable energy and carbon-neutrality initiatives, tax incentives for start-ups, and the use of innovation and technology in tourism promotion, including digital marketing through 'Essential Costa Rica' and other public sustainability programmes;
- ✓ The development of specialised products and services that reflect Costa Rica's local environmental and cultural context.

5.3 Examples of ecotourism ventures launched by entrepreneurs in Costa Rica: Figure 9 presents selected models of sustainable tourism entrepreneurship that have expanded in response to growing tourist demand and the associated business opportunities.

Figure 9. Leading models of ecotourism entrepreneurship in Costa Rica



Source: (Clower, 2024) & (Costa Rica expert, 2025)

5.4 Successful ecotourism entrepreneurship models in Costa Rica: Small and medium-sized enterprises are particularly active in Costa Rica's ecotourism sector. Many hold the Certification for Sustainable Tourism (CST), at levels ranging from one to five leaves, helping environmentally conscious tourists identify businesses that meet sustainability criteria. According to the Costa Rican Tourism Institute, CST-certified businesses are expected to meet conditions such as the following: (www.ict.go.cr, 2026)

- ✓ The business seeks to minimise greenhouse-gas emissions and other forms of pollution or chemical damage to the environment.
- ✓ The business manages the waste it generates in order to minimise adverse environmental impacts.
- ✓ The business implements programmes to reduce water and electricity consumption across its facilities.

- ✓ The business complies with applicable standards, particularly those relating to environmental protection, archaeological heritage, and safety.
- ✓ The business promotes national traditions and customs, local cuisine, and domestic handicrafts.
- ✓ The business undertakes actions for the management and conservation of natural resources.
- ✓ The business uses natural and biodegradable products and recycles materials that can be reused.
- ✓ The business encourages visitors to discover Costa Rica's natural wealth and to contribute to its protection.
- ✓ The business employs and trains residents of the local community, drawing on their knowledge of the area and its natural environment.

The following section presents selected examples of major ecotourism ventures in Costa Rica.

a) 'Finca Rosa Blanca' café and guesthouse: This family-run hotel is located near San José and combines hospitality with coffee production and art. Its 14 guest rooms, swimming pool, garden, and wellness centre are designed to provide a distinctive local experience. (Costa Rica expert, 2025) The guesthouse and organic coffee farm was founded in 1985 by the Jambol family. According to the cited source, it was the first family-run hotel to achieve the highest level of CST certification and the first carbon-neutral hotel. Its sustainability initiatives include:

- ✓ A fully local workforce, thereby contributing directly to the local economy;
- ✓ Measures to optimise electricity and hot-water consumption, including the use of solar energy and the avoidance of chemical additives in the swimming pool;
- ✓ A recycling programme and measures to avoid hazardous chemicals;
- ✓ A long-term tree-planting programme involving 5,000 saplings over 25 years, together with the promotion of organic farming;
- ✓ Training and education for staff, guests, and local residents on environmental protection, human health, and environmental justice;
- ✓ Respect for and promotion of cultural heritage.

b) Lapa Rios Hotel and Restaurant: The hotel was established in 1993 and the restaurant was added in 2019. The property comprises 17 chalets within a 400-hectare forest reserve and holds sustainability certification from the Costa Rican Tourism Institute as well as certification under the Blue Flag Ecological Programme. Its sustainability measures include the following: (Lapa Rios, 2025)

- ✓ Energy: a system of 220 solar panels and 10 hydroelectric turbines supplies the energy required for water heating in the hotel's suites and villas and in staff accommodation;
- ✓ Water: wastewater is channelled through a modern sewage-treatment system; organic cleaning products are used in bathrooms and laundry facilities; and swimming pools are disinfected using salt and stabilisers rather than chlorine;
- ✓ Waste: organic waste is separated from other waste for on-site treatment or transfer to a recycling centre;
- ✓ Flora and fauna: an agreement signed with the National University in 2020 provides photographic equipment, technical support, accommodation, and meals for researchers;
- ✓ Management: the administrative team is composed of local staff.

c) Rancho Margot project: Rancho Margot is a 160-hectare farm located in a mountainous forest and founded by biologist J. Sostheim. In 2004, the founder set out to transform the farm into a self-sufficient venture based on organic crop production, livestock rearing, and sustainable resource management. The project includes guest accommodation, energy generation from water and waste, a structured waste-

management programme, a swimming pool supplied by a natural water source, and locally styled wooden furnishings.

In 2012, the project was classified as a carbon-neutral environmental centre and now functions as a living laboratory for sustainable resource management. It welcomes volunteers - including tourists, engineers, researchers, and members of the public - who participate in animal care, crop production, environmental-awareness programmes, workshops, and other activities. (Rancho Margot, 2025)

d) ACTUAR Community-Based Rural Tourism Association: ACTUAR is an innovative network of community-based ecotourism initiatives that brings together small enterprises offering accommodation, catering, travel and booking services, and traditional cuisine in partnership with local residents. Its model is based on providing an authentic experience of rural life and Costa Rican identity within a natural, cultural, and community setting.

The project applies sustainability principles to service delivery while integrating economic and social objectives. It generates income through local employment, particularly for women; helps small enterprises market their products and services to broader markets; creates income opportunities for neighbouring landowners; encourages ecotourism entrepreneurship in rural areas; promotes cooperation among local economic actors; contributes to improvements in rural living standards; and involves residents in the sustainable management of their environment.

In environmental and cultural terms, the project promotes alternative technologies such as solar energy, waste recycling, and rainwater harvesting. It also seeks to preserve local identity, cultural assets, and heritage while encouraging creativity in products and services with an authentic rural character. (ACTUAR, 2025)

6. Results and discussion: Factors promoting ecotourism in Costa Rica: Costa Rica's emergence as a global leader in ecotourism was not accidental; it resulted from the interaction of several mutually reinforcing factors. The discussion focuses on two dimensions that appear particularly important: the country's natural assets and the policies, plans, and programmes implemented by successive governments.

6.1 Exploiting the country's natural diversity: Costa Rica possesses a combination of natural assets that is unusual for a country of its size, and this endowment has played a central role in its emergence as a leading ecotourism destination. The principal natural and security-related factors include:

- ✓ Exceptional natural diversity, including beaches, rainforests, volcanoes, and rich wildlife. The country's relatively small size allows visitors to experience several of these environments within a short period;
- ✓ Its geographical proximity to the United States is an important market advantage. US tourists represent a major segment of international tourism demand and account for a substantial share of visitors to Costa Rica; (McKeone, 2011, p. 10)
- ✓ Costa Ricans' strong attachment to nature and their early participation in ecotourism as active stakeholders;
- ✓ A high degree of political and security stability, together with peaceful relations with neighbouring countries, which has strengthened Costa Rica's international reputation;
- ✓ A standard of living that is relatively high compared with several other Central American countries.

6.2 Developing appropriate strategies and policies for the Costa Rican tourism model: Successive Costa Rican governments have promoted environmental awareness by involving civil society in the protection and sustainable use of natural resources.

The government has played a central role in establishing the ecotourism industry by adopting legislation and regulations that provide a framework for private investment and entrepreneurial activity.

In 1984, the government introduced regulations through the Costa Rican Tourism Institute that provided tax incentives and exemptions for tourism-related businesses, including hotels, transport companies, airlines, and travel agencies. Because the framework was considered to benefit foreign investors more than local investors and small domestic enterprises, amendments were introduced in the mid-1990s to facilitate the development of local firms. (Geoffrey & Spadafora, 2016, p. 5)

During the first year of President Figueres' four-year term, the government developed a programme aimed at reducing the high rate of deforestation recorded during the 1980s while strengthening the foundations of ecotourism. The 1994 initiatives included the following: (*Courvisanos & Ameeta, 2000, p. 12*)

- ✓ Introducing a carbon tax to support the restoration of tropical forests on fallow agricultural land, together with an electricity tax intended to encourage energy conservation;
- ✓ Replacing an oil-fired power station with a new thermal power station;
- ✓ Halting the Papagayo project, which involved the construction of large-scale, environmentally unsustainable hotels and a golf course on the Pacific coast, as well as stopping the construction of an environmentally harmful paper mill;
- ✓ Committing to expand national parks and wildlife reserves to approximately 25 per cent of the country's land area;
- ✓ Supporting the National Institute of Biodiversity (INBio) in cataloguing Costa Rica's species;
- ✓ Promoting selective forest use, whereby forests generate marketable products without being cleared;
- ✓ Introducing an environmental education programme in which staff from protected areas provide full-day field lessons in biology for secondary-school students six times a year;
- ✓ Establishing a national programme to promote fast-growing, low-cost local bamboo as an alternative to timber and concrete in housing construction;
- ✓ Introducing a fuel tax that made fuel prices in Costa Rica 20-30 per cent higher than in neighbouring countries;
- ✓ Encouraging the conservation of privately owned rainforests and their use as ecotourism destinations;
- ✓ Promoting 'research holidays', in which visitors pay to participate in research activities during their stay.

The government later introduced a market for tradable pollution permits, allowing foreign companies to compensate for greenhouse-gas emissions by financing forest conservation.

Costa Rica relies almost entirely on renewable sources for electricity generation - reported in the source as 99 per cent, rising to 100 per cent by the end of 2025 - including hydroelectric, wind, and geothermal power. This energy mix has helped keep greenhouse-gas emissions relatively low. (*Rica esencial Costa, 2025*)

Subsequently, legislation required tourism projects to undergo environmental impact assessment, and the Costa Rican Tourism Institute introduced the Certification for Sustainable Tourism, discussed below.

This period was also marked by a substantial inflow of foreign investment into tourism and the construction of large hotels, particularly beachfront developments. In response, the government introduced regulatory measures, including local ownership and residency requirements, to limit excessive foreign control over the domestic tourism industry. (Brücher, 2015, pp. 6-7)

6.3 Supporting the ecotourism industry through governmental and non-governmental institutions:

Costa Rica's ecotourism success has also depended on sustained institutional support and inter-organisational cooperation. Key institutions include the Ministry of Education, the Costa Rican Tourism Institute (ICT), the Ministry of Natural Resources, Energy and Mines, the Organization for Tropical Studies (OTS), and the National Institute of Biodiversity (INBio).

These institutions played an important role in early conservation initiatives by strengthening public awareness of environmental issues and the threats facing biodiversity, thereby encouraging broader participation in environmental protection.

The Costa Rican Tourism Institute (ICT) has played a central role in tourism policy. It originated as the National Tourism Board in 1931 and was reorganised under its current institutional framework in 1955, with the objective of supporting tourism development. (Geoffrey & Spadafora, 2016, p. 05)

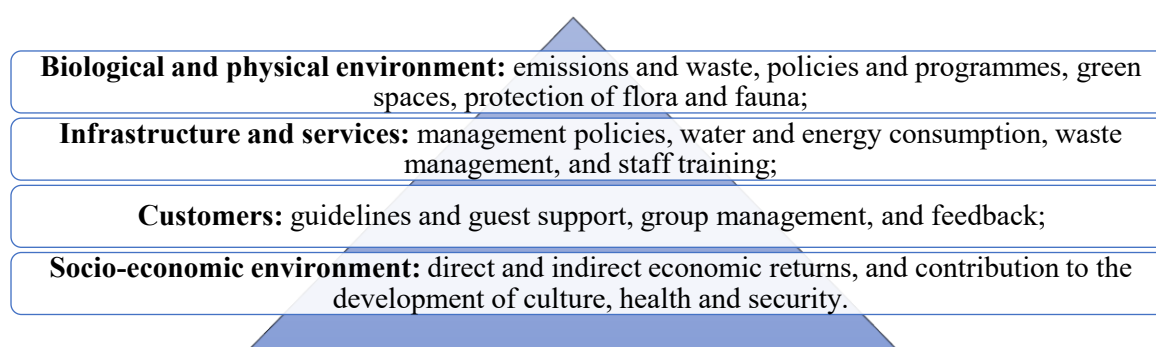
The Institute also administers several certification and responsibility programmes, including the *Certification for Sustainable Tourism*, the *Ecological Blue Flag Programme*, and the *Code of Conduct*.

✓ **Certification for Sustainable Tourism (CST):** The CST is a technical instrument designed to promote sustainable tourism in Costa Rica. Introduced in 1998, the scheme originally used a five-level scale to indicate the degree of a firm's compliance with sustainability criteria.

Level one indicates that a tourism business has taken initial steps towards sustainable practices, whereas level five identifies firms regarded as leading examples of sustainability. (Brücher, 2015, p. 07)

To operate formally in the tourism sector, a business or organisation must obtain the relevant tourism permit and/or sustainability certification from the Costa Rican Tourism Institute, depending on the applicable requirements. The certification is intended to encourage firms to move towards a sustainability-oriented business model and evaluates 152 criteria across four main areas using yes/no indicators.

Figure 10. Four areas covered by the Certification for Sustainable Tourism

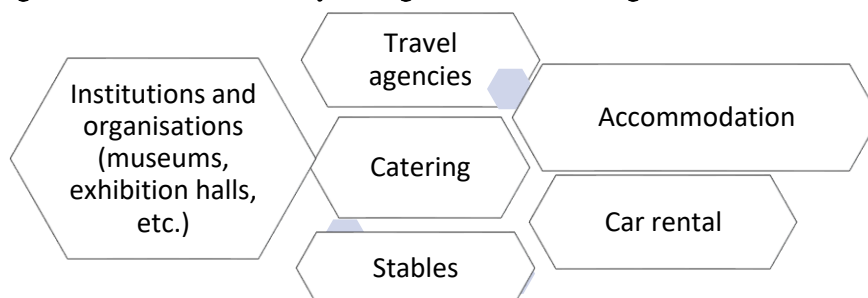


Source: (Simon, 2020)

The certification standards are internationally recognised and have been identified by the Global Sustainable Tourism Council as important sustainability benchmarks.

The Institute has certified numerous companies and organisations operating in the tourism sector. Figure 11 presents their principal fields of activity.

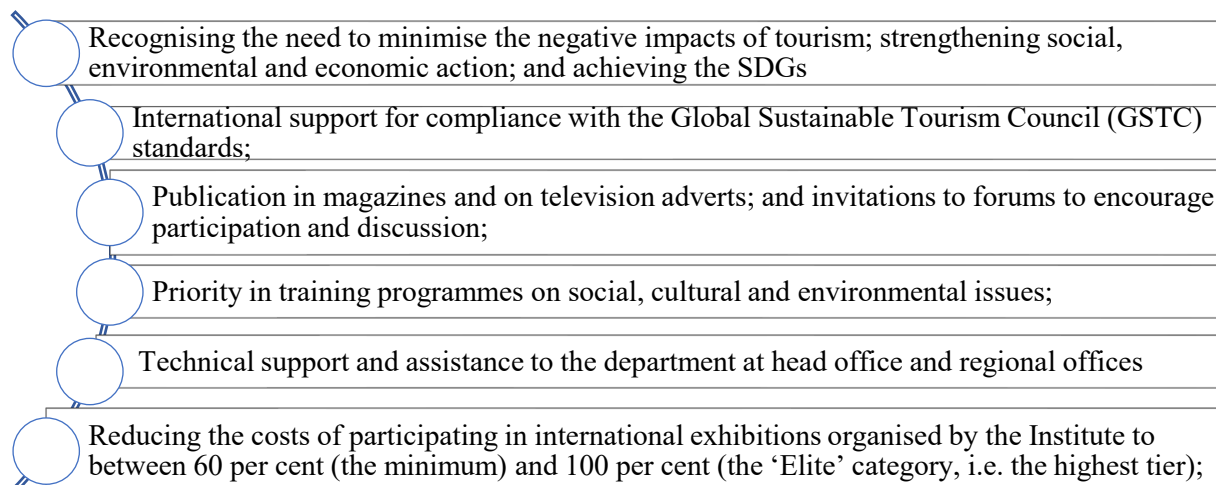
Figure 11. Fields of activity of organisations holding ‘CST certification’



Source: (Turismo sostenible, 2025)

CST-certified organisations can strengthen their competitiveness and improve resource efficiency. They are also eligible for several benefits, summarised in Figure 12.

Figure 12. Incentives and benefits available to CST-certified organisations



Source: (Turismo sostenible, 2025)

✓ **Ecological Blue Flag Programme:** Established in 1985, this programme focuses on environmental quality in coastal and other designated areas and was created to promote public health, and tourism. It is managed through cooperation among public-sector institutions and private organisations² and evaluates a set of criteria presented in Figure 13.

Figure 13. Categories of the Ecological Blue Flag Programme

² : : Based on latest resolution No. 36481-MINAET-S(2011), the programme involves the participation of the Costa Rican Institute of Tourism, the Ministry of the Ocean and Energy, the Ministry of Health, the Costa Rican Institute of Water and Sanitation, the National Chamber of Tourism, the Ministry of Public Education, the Costa Rican Network of Private Stores, the Costa Rican Electricity Institute, the Ministry of Agriculture and Livestock, the Costa Rican Social Security Directorate; in addition to the aforementioned organisations, the programme also encourages participation from the general public.



Source: (Instituto costarricense de turismo , 2025)

The qualification criteria used by the programme are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Qualification criteria used by the Ecological Blue Flag Programme

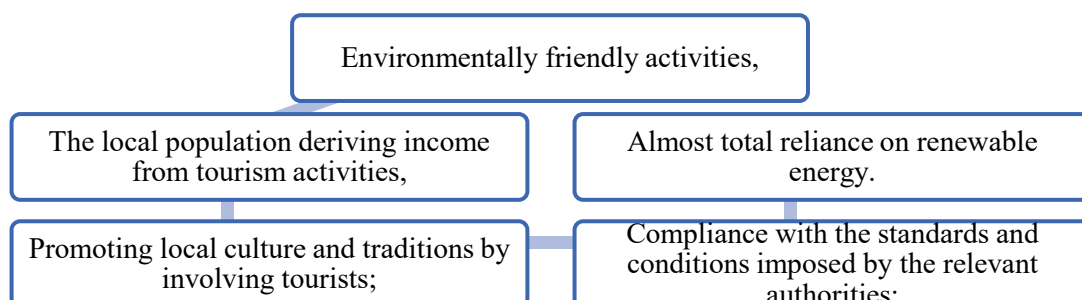
Criteria	Percentage
Microbiological quality of marine water	35 %
Quality of water intended for consumption	15%
Sanitary quality of coastal areas	30%
Waste and landfill sites	10%
Treated industrial effluents	5%
Treated domestic wastewater	15%
Environmental education	10%
Security and management	10%

Source: (Instituto costarricense de turismo , 2025)

Under this programme, beaches that meet the required criteria receive an annual award. In 2018, 119 beaches were evaluated: five received five stars, one received four stars, 13 received three stars, and 11 received two stars. In 2023, 136 beaches received Blue Flag certification at levels ranging from one to five stars, with six beaches receiving the highest rating in recognition of efforts to maintain healthy and sustainable conditions for visitors. (visit latin Amireca, 2023)

6.4 Dimensions of the Costa Rican sustainable ecotourism model: Tourism in Costa Rica is distinctive in its strong emphasis on sustainability and its incorporation of innovation. The model is based on the principles presented in Figure 14.

Figure 14. Foundations of the Costa Rican ecotourism model



Source: Based on (Costa Rica découverte, 2025) & (Ecoterra Costa Rica, 2024)

Costa Rica has become a global reference point for sustainable ecotourism and a source of inspiration for international programmes and organisations³. This position reflects sustained efforts to embed sustainability across the tourism sector. The national expression 'Pura Vida' ('Pure Life'), widely used as a greeting, also conveys a broader cultural emphasis on well-being, simplicity, and a positive relationship with everyday life.

Table 3. Analysis of the business models of the cases presented above

Case	Business model	Key characteristics
'Finca Rosa Blanca'	Ecotourism venture supporting local development through employment and education	Combines organic coffee production with ecotourism, employs local staff, and supports education.
'Lapa Rios'	Sustainable tourism venture supporting local development through employment	Extensive use of renewable energy and sustainable water and waste management; support for scientific research.
'Rancho Margot'	Environmental and tourism innovation supporting local development through employment, education, resource management, and volunteering	Centre for organic farming and animal husbandry that also provides environmental-awareness workshops for local residents.
'ACTUAR'	Community-based ecotourism supporting local development through employment and improved living standards	Collaboration between rural communities and entrepreneurs to integrate environmental assets with cultural heritage.

Source: Author's elaboration based on the cases presented above

7. Conclusion: Costa Rica is a global leader in ecotourism and one of the world's leading nature-based tourism destinations. According to the Costa Rican Tourism Institute, the country received 2.91 million tourists in 2024, with ecotourists accounting for approximately two-thirds of total arrivals.

The country has made substantial progress in creating a sustainability-oriented business environment that supports entrepreneurship in ecotourism.

Since the early 1970s, Costa Rica has sought to capitalise on its biological and cultural assets by adopting sustainability-oriented regulations and legislation, designating approximately 25 per cent of its territory as protected areas and nature reserves, introducing tax incentives, and creating institutions responsible for monitoring environmental performance and awarding sustainability certifications.

Together, these measures have strengthened the ecotourism industry and created a favourable ecosystem for innovative ecotourism ventures.

³ : Costa Rica is an important member of the Committee on Tourism and Sustainability (CTS), which was established in 2013 as the successor to the Committee on Sustainable Development and Tourism (TDDT), and is chairing the committee for the period 2023–2027.

Costa Rica now hosts a range of pioneering business models that innovate in the delivery of ecotourism experiences by combining three objectives:

environmental conservation and positive environmental impact; the empowerment of local communities through participation; and the generation of financial returns.

The main findings of the study can be summarised as follows:

- ❖ A key factor in the success of the Costa Rican model is the long-standing involvement of multiple stakeholders - government, entrepreneurs, and local communities - and their shared awareness of sustainability principles;
- ❖ Public policy has also promoted sustainability in complementary sectors, particularly energy (98% sustainable sources), while encouraging technological innovation that supports ecotourism development;
- ❖ Innovative sustainable tourism ventures in Costa Rica are predominantly small-scale. Approximately 70 per cent of accommodation providers are small establishments with fewer than 20 rooms, and many integrate tourism services with local environmental and cultural assets;
- ❖ A defining feature of sustainable tourism ventures is the development of distinctive experiences, including organic-farm visits, stays with rural families, and participation in traditional crafts, which add value and local identity to tourism services;
- ❖ Local communities are strongly integrated into ecotourism projects, with local residents accounting for a substantial share of employment in many ventures.

Based on these findings, the study proposes the following recommendations:

- ❖ Strengthen political and institutional support for ecotourism entrepreneurship through regulations, incentives, and policy instruments that create a favourable business environment for innovative ventures;
- ❖ Valorise and invest in the country's natural, cultural, and social assets in order to strengthen the distinctiveness and competitiveness of the tourism offer;
- ❖ Promote the participation of local communities in ecotourism entrepreneurship in order to reinforce local identity, improve the prospects for venture sustainability, and strengthen local development.

Ecotourism entrepreneurship can therefore serve as a bridge between environmental conservation and local development by enabling communities to transform local natural assets, traditions, and cultural resources into sources of income and value added for the economy.

Bibliography

1. BOURDIN, S., Chenane, A., & Mohand Said, A. T. (2022, October). `Motivations et difficultés des éco-entrepreneurs en Algérie : le rôle des dispositifs publics d'accompagnement`. *Innovations*, pp. 1-32. doi:10.3917/inno.pr2.0138
2. Brücher, M. (2015). *Ecotourism in Costa Rica: Which Tools and Techniques were Used in Order to Develop to One of the Most Popular Destinations for Sustainable Tourism?*. COLOGNE BUSINESS SCHOOL (CBS).

3. Kasalak, M. A., Akinci, Z., & Yurcu, G. (2016, October). Ecotourism Entrepreneurship, the Features of Ecotourism Entrepreneurship, Problems and Solutions. pp. 596-601.
4. Schaper, M. (2002, June). 'The Essence of Ecopreneurship'. *Greener Management International*, pp. 26-30. doi:DOI: 10.9774/GLEAF.3062.2002.su.00004
5. The international ecotourism society. (2025). *What is ecotourism?* Consulté le 07 23, 2025, sur www.ecotourism.org
6. visit latin Amireca. (2023, March 28). *'136 Blue Flag beaches in Costa Rica'*. Consulté le 07 15, 2025, sur www.visit-latin-america.com
7. (2025). Consulté le 07 10, 2025, sur Turismo sostenible: www.torismo-sostenible.co.cr
8. ACTUAR. (2025). *Essential Costa Rica*. Consulté le 07 20, 2025, sur www.fr.visitcostarica.com
9. Alexandre-Leclair, L., & Liu, Z. (2014, April). 'Innovation et entrepreneuriat, le cas du secteur du tourisme à Paris intramuros'. *Innovations*, 2(44), pp. 169-185. doi:10.3917/inno.044.0169
10. Author, G. (2025, 01 10). *'Eco tourism guide: how to recognize a responsible and sustainable tourism business'*. Consulté le 07 19, 2025, sur www.travel4wildlif.com
11. BCCR, B., & ICT, I. (2020). *'Cuenta Stélie turismo'*.
12. Bernard, S., Kharrouby, A., & Levy-Tadji, T. (2013, May). 'L'éco-entrepreneuriat, un objet de gestion non identifié ? *'Entrepreneuriat, PME durable.. 2012. <hal-00822234>*, pp. 1-20. Récupéré sur <https://hal.archives-ouvertes.fr/hal-00822234>
13. CID, & ICT. (2025). *'Hobitos vacacionales'*. Consulté le 07 22, 2025, sur www.ict.go.cr
14. Clower, R. (2024, 10 30). *'The rise of eco-tourism in Costa Rica and property investment opportunités'*. Consulté le 07 18, 2025, sur www.bluewaterpropertiesofcostarica.com
15. Costa Rica découverte. (2025). *'L'écotourisme et le Costa Rica'*. Consulté le 07 10, 2025, sur www.costarica-decouverte.com
16. Costa Rica expert. (2025). *'Costa Rica cultural hotels'*. Consulté le 07 18, 2025, sur www.costaricaexperts.com
17. Courvisanos, J., & Ameeta, J. (2000). 'ECOTOURISM IN COSTA RICA: AN ECONOMIC FRAMEWORK OF ANALYSIS'. Australia: School of Economics, University of Tasmania.,
18. Direccion de estrategia turistica. (2025). Consulté le 07 22, 2025, sur www.app.powerbi.com
19. Ecoterra Costa Rica. (2024, 10 1). *'Costa Rica tour companies: FAQs for first time travelers'*. Consulté le 06 15, 2025, sur www.ecoterracostarica.com
20. Finca Rosa Blanca. (2025). *'Finca Rosa Blanca Hotel, Costa Rica Coffee farm and INN'*. Consulté le 07 20, 2025, sur www.fincarosablanca.com
21. Garcia, C. (2023, 03 27). *'Our favorite eco lodges in Costa Rica, Peninsula Costa Rica'*. Consulté le 07 19, 2025, sur www.travel4wildlife.com
22. Geoffrey, J., & Spadafora, A. (2016, Dec 16). 'Creating ecotourism in Costa Rica, 1970-2000'. *Cambridge University Press*. doi:10.1017/eso.2016.50
23. Gibbs, D. (2009). 'Sustainability entrepreneurs, ecopreneurs and the development of a sustainable economy'. *Greener management international*, pp. 63-78. doi:10.9774/GLEAF.3062.2006.au.00007
24. Gunawan, A. A. (2012). 'Ecopreneurship concept and its barriers: a literature review', (pp. 01-14). Récupéré sur www.researchgat.net/publication/321769891
25. ICT. (2025). Consulté le 07 22, 2025, sur www.visitcostarica.com
26. ICT. (2025). *'Direccion de planeamiento y de desarrollo turistico'*. Consulté le 07 22, 2025, sur www.ict.go.cr
27. ICT, I. C. (2023). *'Divisas turismo 2023'*.
28. Instituto costarricense de turismo . (2025, 07 15). *Ecologic Blue Flag Program*. Récupéré sur <https://www.ict.go.cr/en/sustainability/ecologic-blue-flag-program.html#criteria>
29. Jambol, G. (2014). 'History in brief: ecotourism in Costa Rica'. *Global Ecotourism Network. GEN*, pp. 1-3. Récupéré sur www.globalecotourismnetwork.org
30. Kotchen, J. (2009). 'Some microeconomics of eco-entrepreneurship'. Dans G. D. Libecap, *Frontiers in eco-entrepreneurship research* (pp. 25-37). Emerald.

31. Kummitha, R. (2020). 'Eco-entrepreneurs organizational attitude towards sustainable community ecotourism development'. *Deturope, 12*(1), pp. 85-101.
32. Kyle, P. (2025, 01 11). 'Nature retreats'. Consulté le 07 17, 2025, sur '65 interesting facts about Costa Rica ecotourism': www.natureretreats.org
33. Lapa Rios. (2025). 'An amazing lodge in Central America's last remaining tropical lowland rainforest'. Consulté le 07 20, 2025, sur <https://www.laparios.com/>
34. Mckeone, E. (2011). 'Ecotourism in Costa Rica: Environmental Impacts and Management'. *Environmental Studies Undergraduate Student Theses. 45., 45*. Récupéré sur <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/envstudtheses/45>
35. Rancho Margot. (2025). Consulté le 07 20, 2025, sur www.ranchomargot.com
36. Rica esencial Costa. (2025). 'Conocé sobre nuestra *Inteligencia natural*'. Consulté le 07 10, 2025, sur www.esencialcostarica.com/inteligencia-natural/
37. Salmanova, A. (2022, April 15). 'ECOTOURISM AND ECOTOURISM ENTREPRENEURSHIP AS THE CONCEPT OF THE MODERN WORLD'. (A. University, Éd.)
38. Simon, K. (2020). 'Ecotourism in Costa Rica: How does ecotourism impact the environment and local socio-economic conditions in Costa Rica?'. Consulté le 07 11, 2025, sur <https://global-studies.shorthandstories.com/ecotourism-in-costa-rica/index.html>
39. Steurer, N. (2013). 'Eco-entrepreneurship strategies and experiences from the Switch-Asia programme'. Germany: Switch-Asia Network Facility. Récupéré sur www.switch-asia.eu
40. Taylor, D., & Walley, L. (2003). 'The green entrepreneur: visionary, maverick or opportunist?'. *Manchester Metropolitan University Business School Working paper series online*, pp. 01-20.
41. Turismo sostenible. (2025). 'Empresas y organizaciones certificadas'. Consulté le 07 10, 2025, sur Turismo-sostenible.co.cr: www.turismo-sostenible.co.cr/es/directorio
42. www.greenworldadventures.com. (2025). 'Costa Rica - Green world adventures- the best travel experience'. [www.greenworldadventures.com / info@gwacr.com](http://www.greenworldadventures.com/info@gwacr.com).
43. www.ict.go.cr. (2026, 09 05). *CST Tourism sustainability*. Consulté le 07 11, 2025, sur <https://www.ict.go.cr/en/sustainability/cst.html#a-hallmark-of-tourism-sustainability>