

PROMOTING SUSTAINABLE TOURISM DEVELOPMENT THROUGH PARTICIPATORY STRATEGIC PLANNING: CAYO LAS BRUJAS, CUBA

Abstract

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Sustainability, participatory processes, and group training should be considered the basis of the strategic planning of tourist destinations. This study's purpose is to understand the perspectives of interested stakeholders on the tourism development of Cayo Las Brujas (Cuba) and involve them in the participatory construction of strategic planning carried out by tourism entrepreneurs in correspondence with the development of a training consulting. The methodological design corresponds to a qualitative-quantitative, deductive, and multidisciplinary research of a diagnostic-propositional and applied approach. Empirical methods were implemented, including participant observation, case studies, group work, field trips, and modeling. Findings show the diagnosis and strategic projection towards the future horizons of Cayo Las Brujas based on the perceptions and proposals of the different trained stakeholders regarding the sustainable planning of the tourist destination. The originality of the research is related to the high training and practical value of the research experience developed for the first time for this destination through training consulting, which made it possible for tourism workers to construct knowledge in a participatory manner to develop and validate the strategic plan for the sustainable development.

Keywords: tourism, sustainability, planning, strategic, participation, training consulting, Cayo Las Brujas (Cuba).

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INTRODUCTION

Tourism is a holistic, dynamic, and complex system (Roxas et al., 2020) that requires strategic planning and responsible tourism management to move toward sustainability (Rasoolimanesh et al., 2023). This approach will allow us to understand and adapt to the mechanisms that affect the functioning of the tourism system in spatial-temporal dimensions (Roxas et al., 2020) and formulate policies for its governance (Gasparini & Mariotti, 2023). Therefore, the search for compromises between environmental, economic, and social objectives could guarantee the continuity of tourism as one of the most promising and dynamic businesses globally (Streimikiene et al., 2023).

Fuchs (2023) maintains, however, that sustainable tourism presents challenges, such as being difficult to define and measure, being more expensive than some traditional forms, impacting some communities negatively, and needing more incentives for stakeholders in the sector. A study by Rasoolimanesh et al. (2023) demonstrates that the focus on sustainable tourism indicators is on European countries rather than the Global South, which means a significant gap in the investigative intervention. Concurrently, the literature recognizes that sustainable tourism development is essential to constructively involve stakeholders in planning (Spadaro et al., 2023), although designing an effective strategy is complex (Chase et al., 2023).

In many cases, a sustainable approach is not applied to planning tourism in island destinations, as business interests seek to meet the needs of the growing number of tourists within these spaces (Chi & Liu, 2023; Stojanović et al., 2024). However, new alternatives have been formulated for coastal destinations that require the assistance of stakeholders to undertake strategic planning (Edgell & Jason., 2013; Ivars et al., 2013). Therefore, it is necessary to continue to study and critically examine the best planning practices for sustainable tourism and apply them to link empirical and theoretical thinking in practical situations. Given this problem, it is necessary to guarantee the effective conservation of environmental resources without compromising the economic viability and social well-being generated by tourism (Baloch et al., 2023), which highlights the relationship between tourism, conservation, and local development (Guala et al., 2023). It is also necessary that the development of sustainable tourism uses the social capital of society to promote development (Prayitno et al., 2024), reinforcing the distinctive components of local identity and the flows, and the connections between the local and the external, which will allow them to become platforms for collaboration, exchange, and local development (Duxbury et al., 2020).

Consequently, strategic planning with a focus on sustainability is assumed as the study object, and the context corresponds to Cayo Las Brujas, a small island located off the northern coast of Central Cuba, which is part of the Cayos del Noreste de Villa Clara. The topic addressed derives from a requirement corroborated in practice, which aims to resolve problems induced by tourism development models that require reconceptualization based on sustainability principles. It constitutes a necessity for society and science by requiring new sources of scientific information that support decision-making processes, and it is a contemporary issue since strategic planning and the sustainability paradigm are novel and valuable approaches contributing to better impact management.

The scientific concern supporting the research topic comes from verifying management practices that are incompatible with the local space in Cayo Las Brujas, which generates current and potential adverse impacts. In this sense, the need to design a strategic plan was identified to guide the implementation of tourism alternatives that were adjusted to the high sensitivity of the receiving space to new tourism developments. Consequently, the following research question was formulated: What are the perspectives and contributions of the actors related to the local tourism development of Cayo Las Brujas concerning the strategic planning of the tourist destination?

This study's purpose is to understand the perspectives of stakeholders regarding the local tourism development of Cayo Las Brujas and involve them in the participatory construction and validation of the strategic planning of the island tourist destination through training consulting. It is recognized as a study premise that tourism has acquired a fundamental role in the coasts' geospatial organization and the economy of the small island systems, turning them into centers of strong economic and financial dynamics in their regional framework. In correspondence with this dynamic movement of the economy, there has been an intense production process of tourist spaces requiring new approaches, planning, and management alternatives.

This paper's content is structured in three sections. First, the results of the participatory experience's contribution to the strategic planning of Cayo Las Brujas are presented. The results of the strategic diagnosis of Cayo Las Brujas to potentiate a sustainable development model are shown below. Finally, the strategic projection of the tourism destination for sustainable development is developed.

1. LITERATURE REVIEW

The systematic treatment of the problem of sustainable planning and management of tourist destinations still needs to be improved internationally and, in the Cuban case, in the new stage of regenerative tourism (Bellato et al., 2023; Branstrator et al., 2023). The researched literature as a referential framework reflects significant conceptual contributions, procedures, and practical experiences elaborated from very heterogeneous approaches that demand a higher investigative attempt directed at producing scientific information and systematizing new guidelines to the involvement of the different local stakeholders (Tsung, 2013; Baloch et al., 2023).

The theoretical approaches to tourism planning coincide with the conceptualization of thinking about future development and allowing territories to be better prepared to take advantage of opportunities and face the challenges that arise, which is the reason for, in recent years, greater participation and training of stakeholders for the construction of strategic plans with emphasis on sustainability practices in the tourism sector (Pato & Duque, 2023; Baloch et al., 2023). As part of this process, this research recognizes the fundamental role of sustainable tourism indicators in policy formulation and training processes at the destination level (Gasparini & Mariotti, 2023).

Such focus is part of a scenario in which much is being debated about the positioning of sustainable tourism as the thrive for development, a factor that is being critically understood as one of the most important challenges that society is confronting; especially in developing countries (Legrand et al., 2012; Gössling et al., 2012). It is suitable to say that political, social, and economic challenges are being urgently reconsidered in tourism development; these are strongly associated with energy use, new technologies, security, and sustainability, as well as the training of human resources (Leigh et al., 2012).

At this scope, new strategic approaches applied to tourism management have been developed, both at a business and destination level (Alonso et al., 2009) because the decision-making processes require an inclusive and well-informed vision regarding the local context (Ateljevic et al., 2011). Accordingly, studies must be done, and intelligent strategies must be proposed (Bigné et al., 2000; Bellato et al., 2023) to attain the formulated goals and objectives. Therefore, participation and coordination among various stakeholders of the business sector and the community are necessary, which is consistent with the criteria of participatory planning for sustainable development based on training activities.

Therefore, improving and building integrated tourist destination management tools is necessary to re-evaluate and appreciate territorial heritage, which calls for a significant implication for all agents involved from a proactive perspective. This must be established concerning the perception and appreciation of the distinct stakeholders regarding the developing model and the desired one at different future horizons. Integrating destination management involves incorporating proper participatory strategic planning (Hauer et al., 2011). If tourism management and planning are well done, tourism can be a positive force benefitting the tourist destinations; however, if poorly managed, trained, and planned, it could become the source of significant degradation processes and negative impacts (Mason, 2008; Mehraj et al., 2024).

The relationship between tourism and sustainability, as well as the analysis from the communities' perspective toward the development model, are critical factors to the future development of this sector (Guevara & Vinicius, 2009; Reddy & Wilkes, 2012), considered one of the global development engines (Kumral & Özlem, 2011; Legrand et al., 2012). Tourism sustainability must be a model of transitioning to a new economy (Reddy & Wilkes, 2012) to increase the financial resources obtained locally, protect the natural heritage, and maintain cultural integrity (Guevara & Vinicius, 2009). For this, the destination becomes the basic unit of tourism planning (Francesc, 2004), on which sustainable indicators that allow monitoring must be determined. Various studies demonstrate the impact of grand-scale projects on different receptor spaces, evidencing their unsustainability

(Hall & Lew, 2009; Kila & Walter, 2013) and the necessity to ensure a strategic reorientation to the competitiveness and success of the tourist destinations (Edgell & Jason., 2013). Unlike the traditional strategies, the new guidelines of tourism should aim to enhance the competitiveness of local destinations by increasing the quality of the experience and innovation in tourist services (Kumral & Özlem, 2011; Ivars et al., 2013).

The process of strategic planning, conceived as an instrument of sustainable development and its potential adequacy for integrated management of tourism destinations, is a guarantee to make the interactions between the different components of the tourism chain compatible, a situation presented as one of the considerable challenges for tourism managers (Alonso et al., 2009; Chase et al., 2023).

As a theoretical reference for this research, it is considered that the singularity of coastal tourism is marked by the high landscape values, which can simultaneously become a limiting factor for the assimilation of the territory, considering the geospatial dimension is neglected, so it is essential to recognize the levels of vulnerability and required protection (Barragán, 2003; Ivars et al., 2013). Therefore, it is appropriate to identify that the production process of a tourist space in a sensitive geographical context requires peculiar attention related to the environment type that supports the development model (Hall & Lew, 2009). Consequently, a greater value should be attributed to this statement in small island systems characterized by attractions that have become a fundamental reason for demand flows oriented toward coastal destinations.

Another important finding reported in the literature is that geospatial optimization in coastal tourist areas is identified as a structuring element of the tourist space on small islands, which requires establishing the geospatial dynamics of tourist development on the coast, the geospatial organization of the tourism system, and the impacts of occupation, use, and diffusion the production process of local space induced (Mason, 2008; Alvarado, 2023; Singgalen, 2024). Such considerations must be constituted from a critical formulation of the current traditional model of tourism development based on the approaches offered by the sustainability paradigm (Hall & Lew, 2009; Leigh et al., 2012; Wailmi et al., 2024).

2. CONTEXTUAL FRAMEWORK

Cayo Las Brujas is part of the Jardines del Rey archipelago, occupying the island area of the western territory of the Camagüey group, where it is part of the Northeast Cayos de Villa Clara. It covers an area of 6.69 km², has an approximate length of 4 km, and a maximum width of 1.9 km. The surface emerged is 2.37 km², also presenting 3.98 km² of mangroves and 0.34 km² of lagoons. It is bordered to the north by the Las Brujas Channel and the Old Bahama Channel, to the east by the San Agustín Channel, to the west by the Tío Pepe Channel, and to the south by Buena Vista Bay (Yera, 2000).

Carbonate rocks predominate in the geology. The relief is predominantly flat, despite being interrupted by low rock cores toward the center and south of the key, part of which were used as a quarry for rock extraction. The climate is tropical, with a strong marine influence. Consequently, the vegetation is dominated by evergreen forests, mangroves, xeromorphic shrublands, and rocky coastal vegetation, which favors the presence of abundant fauna (Romero et al., 2015). The terrestrial landscape is exuberant, with high aesthetic and ecological values, in conditions of marked vulnerability.

The main attractions correspond to three natural beaches of marine origin with fine white sand and crystal-clear turquoise waters, called Playa la Salina, Playa la Manteca y Playa Escondida; a seabed abundant in coral formations and varied fish communities; diverse flora and fauna, with local endemic species and others exclusive to the archipelago; inland bodies of water located south of the keys, where abundant fish and crustaceans in their juvenile stage predominate; and attractions of ethnographic value related to historical events linked to navigation, maritime trade, and aboriginal settlements.

Cayo Las Brujas has six hotels and approximately 2,770 hotel rooms; they are resort-type and All-inclusive with high standards, except Hotel Villa Las Brujas, which is categorized with three stars but has a typical restaurant. Grand Aston Cayo Las Brujas Beach Resort and Spa and The One Gallery Hotel stand out among the hotels due to the quality of the accommodation and other facilities. It also has a local airport for domestic flights, a marina called Marina Gaviota, a diving center, a fuel station, a snack bar, and a small shopping and entertainment center, among other infrastructures of a high standard. All the destination management is in charge of the Gaviota Tourism Group, which is state property. The tourist model is an exclusively touristic enclave with no permanent local population communities.

Tourism in Cayo Las Brujas is integrated by a notably reduced and sensitive environmental context. Therefore, a responsible tourism system must characterize territorial management based on sustainable development indicators to harmonize economic growth with environmental protection and improve visitor satisfaction. As a local tourist resort, it must place particular emphasis on conserving the potential generated by the natural components that determine the recreational tourist vocation of the local space, which demands exceptional strategic management. The destination must be based on conceptualizing a tourism model specialized in the modality of nature, sun, and beach “plus”; therefore, the geospatial attraction that relates the mentioned tourist modalities with the main island-coastal elements must be reinforced.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Research design

The methodological design corresponds to a qualitative–quantitative, deductive, and multidisciplinary research of a diagnostic–propositional and applied type. The investigative experience was developed through a training consulting that applied a step-by-step methodology to teach tourism workers how to build a strategic plan for the destination. The strategic planning process was developed through 12 training sessions in Cayo Las Brujas. The workers and managers, with whom the content of the stages and processes of tourism planning were developed on participated in these activities. Each work session was theoretical–practical to contribute to the formation of knowledge and put it into practice through teamwork and plenary sessions to discuss and build business knowledge. Each team made the proposals corresponding to each typological business unit, and based on them, each component of the destination’s strategic business plan was integrated and validated by participants.

Therefore, for this study, it is assumed that training consulting is a combined consulting and training tool through which an innovative academic program is developed to facilitate dynamic learning oriented to solving a problem. The training aims to prepare participants so that the educational products can be applied to the composition of the strategic plan of each business unit and the business organization as a whole, which becomes the final product of the consulting.

3.2. Population and sample

The sampling process considered the four territorial units that make up the tourist destination as the total population. An intentional non-probabilistic sampling (not random) was applied because of the contribution it could make to the study. As a result, the territorial unit corresponding to Cayo Las Brujas was selected, since this was where the tourist development of the region began. The sampling unit comprised eight local managers and 16 tourism workers. In addition, interviews were conducted with 53 visitors (in situ) and 132 members of the local community (in the nearby cities of Remedios and Caibarién) who reside outside the study area since there is no permanent population in the destination but only tourist businesses. The content of the interviews focused on three questions: tourist value of the site, current state of the destination, and strategic vision for improvement.

3.3. Methods and procedures

The methodological structure of the strategic planning process of the destination was developed from the study of various participatory methodologies that have been successfully tested in practice (Maldonado, 2005; PNUMA-ORPAL, 2012; Lankford et al., 2013; Sosa, 2023). Empirical methods, such as participant observation, case studies, group work, field trips, and modeling, were selected and implemented, as well as theoretical methods for working with technical reports and bibliographic sources, in addition to statistical-mathematical and cartographic methods. As part of its implementation, different procedures, research techniques, and instruments related to searching for information from primary and secondary sources were combined through documentary review during office work.

The following research tasks were developed in this order: identification of the research problem and exploration of the national and international state of scientific knowledge on the topic; elaboration of the theoretical framework of the research; structuring and validation of the research methodology and development of methodological procedures and research tools; contextual framework for identifying natural potential and challenges for sustainability; participatory construction of the Strategic Sustainable Tourism Development Plan for Cayo Las Brujas destination and statement of conclusions and recommendations.

3.4. Data collection and analysis-interpretation

The source of qualitative and quantitative data obtained from the participants was based on the product (reports and posters) of the activity of each team that participated in the training activities, on the recordings of the debates of the plenary session, and on the validation of the final product, as well as on the data collection through an analytical survey to explain, describe, and find the best solution to the study problem, which was applied to the participants. The data obtained from visitors and the local community were integrated into the different stages of plan construction. Group techniques, such as information dissemination, public meetings, and working groups, were designed and implemented to involve interested parties. The Strengths-Weaknesses-Opportunities-Threats (SWOT) model was used (Mallick et al., 2020; Uhai et al., 2024), which allowed the data to be analyzed (Sanjaya & Astina, 2023) and strategies to be built (Fan et al., 2023) through a participatory process (Spadaro et al., 2023).

The characterization of the study area was based on the literature review, fieldwork, and interpretation of graphical and cartographical information corresponding to Cayo Las Brujas. Characterizing the context and the production process of the tourist space was based on the information acquired through fieldwork, interviews, and surveys, as well as the documentary review, among which special attention was paid to the region’s Tourism Territorial Planning Plan, prepared by the Department of Physical Planning of Villa Clara (confidential).

The applied methodology leaned on a participatory process with local technicians and specialists who gave answers to different techniques, such as individual interviews, surveys, group work, brainstorming, nominal groups, reduced listings, and cause-effect diagrams, among others. For the participatory planning process, participatory modeling workshops, training and technical assistance sessions, surveys, and discussion groups were developed, coinciding with the methodological approach that Chase et al. (2023) applied.

The logic for structuring the findings was based on the systematization of the contributions of the participant's experiences in the training sessions to the construction of strategic planning, based on which methods and techniques of motivation, generation of ideas, and creative solutions. Next, the participatory diagnosis to enhance a Sustainable Development Model was based on the integration of the contributions of each team using participatory methods and techniques, exclusion list, and integration of contributions. Finally, for the strategic projection of the destination, methods and techniques for visualization of future scenarios and compared scenarios were used.

4. FINDINGS

4.1. Contribution of the participatory experience to strategic planning of Cayo Las Brujas

The study's findings made it possible to confirm the feasibility of the sustainable development of the Cayo Las Brujas tourist destination, which should be structured into two large sequential and dependent sections: situational diagnosis and strategic development in different spatial-temporal horizons, which is consistent with the methodological approaches proposed by Osácar et al. (2005) and Carranza and Damiá (2005). As a result of the training for the strategic planning of the destination, a high level of formative efficiency was found, starting from a low level of knowledge toward changes in the perspectives of tourism workers on the local tourism development of Cayo Las Brujas, which favorably affected the presented results.

Coinciding with Uhai et al. (2024), strategic planning made it possible to develop a profound diagnosis of the destination based on the following methodological procedures: characterization of the determining indicators of the possibilities of local tourism development; internal analysis according to leadership, attractions, physical support, companies, accessibility, and location; external analysis of the market, according to its structure, the definition of competitors and environmental conditions; SWOT analysis according to strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats; situational analysis of the destination, according to the level of impact of internal variables on external ones; and establishment of the strategic problem of the destination.

The process of internal and external analysis made it possible to establish a starting position of the tourism scenario in terms of its potential and restrictions to face the threats and opportunities of the environment, allowing us to know the key competencies that the destination possesses. These findings coincide with Baloch et al. (2023) when verifying the relationship between tourism development and environmental suitability to propose a sustainable tourism framework, incorporating business and environmental interests in the maintenance of an environmental system with the moderating help of government and political interventions.

The formulation of the mission made it possible to gather information from the group's division into teams, to which the standard questions that define it were presented as a prerequisite for developing three missions. This result made it possible for the proposals to be debated in a plenary session, responding to the group members' ideas and points of view. The elaboration of the vision validated the previous conceptual preparation by the group regarding the definition of its characteristics and requirements for its formulation, which made it possible for teams to work on the development of vision proposals from an initial session, the results of which were evaluated in a plenary session, after discussing and considering the presented ideas. The strategic formulation of the destination verified the effectiveness of accepting the assumed scenarios and the strengths to be developed as a support to establish the scope of the relationship between the three key elements that allowed the configuration of the strategic triangle: market, product/destination to be developed, and competition. From this analysis, three strategic axes could be derived: the target audience referred to the market, comparative advantages, and the positioning of attractions as fundamental elements of the strategy. In this sense, we agree with Dwyer (2023) on the need to incorporate the main dimensions of well-being to develop sustainable tourism and consider local governments to prioritize initiatives and provide adequate resources and support to ensure successful implementation (Fuchs, 2023).

4.2. Strategic Diagnosis of Cayo Las Brujas to potentiate a Sustainable Development Model

Returning to the theoretical model of the investigation, the internal analysis was based on the descriptive study of the current state of the destination as a condition to evaluate its potential over the surroundings. In this regard, an integrated diagnosis of the concurrent factors over its functional structure aims to identify the strengths (strong points of this destination) and weaknesses (weak points of this destination). Responding to the destination internal analysis, the strengths and weaknesses of local tourism's internal capabilities were identified. These are presented in a balanced and hierarchically organized way, according to the importance of each from a strategic perspective based on the probability of occurrence and impact level.

Weakness	Strengths
1. High ecological fragility and situations of environmental deterioration over the key areas	1. Sandy marine beaches of outstanding natural beauty
2. Low quality and variety of tourism services (e.g., restoration, guidance, information)	2. Friendliness and good treatment by the contact staff
3. Insufficient professional training on environment and sustainable development	3. Secure and peaceful destination
4. Incomplete and poorly differentiated natural tourism products	4. Natural landscapes of high aesthetic value, with many birds and reptiles
5. Reduced potential in areas to support the tourist infrastructure and tourism support	5. Ocean floors with great attractions
6. Insufficient tourism promotion based on the environmental attractions that distinguish the supply	6. Typology and comfort of the built tourist accommodations

Considering the theoretical model of the investigation, the external analysis is based on the descriptive study that summarizes the relationship between the destination and its surroundings. In that regard, the external factors significantly influencing the destination strategy are assessed to identify the opportunities (positive factors of the surroundings that favor the development of this destination) and threats (negative factors of the surroundings that limit the development of this destination) it is exposed to. Attending to the external analysis executed, the factors with a favorable incidence over the destination, in terms of opportunities, and the negatives, in terms of threats, are indicated as extreme conditions that the surroundings impose. These are presented in a balanced and hierarchically organized way, according to the importance of each from a strategic perspective based on the probability of occurrence and impact level.

Threats	Opportunities
1. Limited affluence of citizens of the United States to Cuba	1. Pleasant warm tropical climate due to its geographical location
2. Insufficient international recognition of the local and regional space as a tourist destination	2. Close location of ports and airports that make easy accessibility
3. Distance between the destination and the residence communities of workers and suppliers	3. Incorporation of the destination to one of the seven special regions of sustainable development in Cuba
4. Location in very competitive commercial surroundings	4. Favorable levels of environmental awareness from the groups of tourists that visit the destination
5. Tendency to reduction of the natural attraction by the current regional tourism development	5. A growing concern about protecting the environment by society
6. Geographically exposed to severe meteorological phenomena (tropical cyclones and cold fronts)	6. International positioning of the Caribbean as a Sustainable Tourism Zone

After assessing the impacts of the internal variables on the external, it can be inferred that the destination is positioned in the strength–opportunity quadrant, considering that the highest total impact value is in the strategy scenario, which entails the opportunities for positioning the destination. This indicates that this is the strategy to follow by the destination, which allows potentiating offensive actions. However, following that score is the impact value corresponding to the illusion scenario, which indicates the underutilized opportunities in this destination due to identified weaknesses. This allows the generation of reorientation strategies, suggesting the need to take immediate measures on the main weaknesses to take advantage of the opportunities. Below is the high-risk scenario, evidencing the threats that make the destination more vulnerable due to its weaknesses.

Based on the SWOT diagnosis, the opportunities are related in the order that can be best harnessed to sustainable tourism development: incorporation of the destination to one of the seven special regions of sustainable development in Cuba; international positioning of the Caribbean as a Sustainable Tourism Zone; a growing concern by society to protect the environment and sustainability. Subsequently, the threats are listed in the order that they represent the most significant risk to promote the sustainable development of tourism: located in potentially very competitive commercial surroundings; insufficient international recognition of local and regional space as a tourist destination; tendency to reduce natural attractiveness due to current regional tourism development.

Taking into consideration the situational SWOT analysis, the following general strategic problem is stated: while there is insufficient professional education on the matter of environment and sustainable development, and limited tourism promotion of the environmental attractions that distinguish the supply linked to the location on the potentially very competitive environment with a little international recognition of the local and regional space as a tourist destination, it will not be able to harness the incorporation of the destination in one of the seven special regions of sustainable development in Cuba and the international positioning of the Caribbean as a Sustainable Tourism Zone, despite the touristic beaches of outstanding natural beauty and ocean floors of great splendor.

4.3. Strategic Projection of the Tourism Destination for Sustainable Development

Guided by the theoretical model of this research, the construction of the mission reflects that sun and beach tourist services are offered in an exclusive environment, a quality professional service that achieves good customer preference and satisfaction based on which harmony between architecture and geographical location is made available to the visitor in an environment of floristic and faunal values. The vision improved the projection oriented toward a leading destination specialized in sun and beach “plus”, favored by the unique integration to the exceptionality of the local space, high specialization in the international market, efficiency in the quality of services from the highest levels of customer satisfaction, professionalism of employees, high income contributed by segmentation of the non-mass market and recognition as a special region of sustainability.

The strategic formulation of the tourist destination was based on the preconceived idea of the product/destination to be developed. This aims to create a destination specialized in sun and beach “plus”, taking advantage of the island’s geographical configuration, relative isolation, and natural and cultural heritage. The basic attractions of the tourist product that should characterize the destination’s supply will be related to the virgin beaches and underwater beds in the middle of a natural environment that preserves the main landscape values and the local marine culture. This finding coincides with the perspective of Spadaro et al. (2023) in concluding the vast positive effects of participatory processes that derive from the involvement of stakeholders in terms of trust, ownership, quality of planning, innovation, and sustainability of interventions.

The market segmentation was based on studying the desired motivational and demographic variables. The first motivation for activities included related to the sea in a natural environment with a varied supply, interest in protected environments with recognition of sustainability, and desire to interact with nearby local communities with a marine identity. The second integrated young people and adults who seek distraction and knowledge about the natural and cultural marine environment; middle class, with average income; medium to high educational level; and short-term stay with up to seven days in the destination. Therefore, the target audience will be geographically represented by the Western European and North American market, with a good educational level, middle class, interested in the protected natural and cultural marine environment, with a medium spending level, represented by young people and adults.

The probable indicators of the strategic position identified are the small surface of the insular system, related to the relative geographical isolation; integrated infrastructure within the natural environment; low touristic operational costs, which lead to charge less than its competitors; closeness to natural and historical-cultural attractions of quality that guarantee diversification of the supply; and a population with a high level of culture product of the historical traditions. Differential attributes assessed as comparative advantages are unspoiled tourist beaches and marine bottoms located in one of the eight prioritized regions of tourism development in Cuba, with the uniqueness of an exclusive non-mass natural environment and value for money.

Bearing in mind the change theory, the desired tourist destination identity corresponds to a small tropical Caribbean Island with excellent tourist beaches of spectacular sand and ocean floors in the middle of a protected natural area, a few minutes away from unique historical cities rich in Cuban cultural heritage. The positioning attractions are a naturally protected environment, secure and peaceful; natural environmental integrated tourism infrastructure; history and cultural life of the marine population; reasonable pricing on sun and beach supply. The positioning disadvantages still need to be changed based on the unconsolidated identity of the destination; deficient quality in service; deficient development of the tourism support infrastructure and superstructure; and insufficient promotional tourism communication of the destination.

Attending the assumed commercial scenario, the criteria of communication for the positioning of the destination will be based on the following strategic formulation: given the progressive growth of the sun and beach tourism market interested in sustainability and the diversification of the recreational tourist offer, to exploit the natural heritage attraction of Cayo Las Brujas, harnessing the excellent coastal environment, the proximity to coastal cities, and the most reasonable prices within the regional destination.

CONCLUSION

This research concludes by highlighting the high formative and practical value of the research experience developed through training consulting, which made it possible for tourism workers to build knowledge in a participatory way to elaborate and validate the strategic plan for the sustainable development of the destination. In response to the research question, it was proven that participatory strategic planning in small island destinations is feasible through the integration of all the destination stakeholders involved, who were able to project sustainable tourism management of local development due to formative training based on the use of a step-by-step methodology that integrated the different stages and contents of the strategic business plan.

From a theoretical point of view, the validity of the conceptual model generated from the literature review, previous experiences, and review of case studies was verified. It served as a guiding basis for the training activity and practical problem-solving during the different stages of the consultancy. The designed and validated model contains a strong component of the findings and

proposals of Osácar et al. (2005) and Carranza and Damiá (2005), who have developed a methodology whose stages were valid in the present study. The implementation of this model and the methodological instruments of participatory strategic planning allowed for greater interest among the destination's tourism workers in strategic planning and subsequent operationalization to minimize negative impacts, which coincides with the findings of Fuchs (2023).

Considering the research objective, it was possible to understand the stakeholders' perspectives related to the local tourism development of Cayo Las Brujas and proactively involve them in the participatory construction and validation of the strategic planning of the island destination through the favorable impact of a training consulting. In the practical order, this experience contributed to the formation of new knowledge and planning skills, changes in attitude regarding sustainability and integration of tourism development into the local context, and more responsible behaviors related to the proposal of alternative solutions to existing traditional actions that had characterized tourism development until the moment of the intervention.

Integrated planning is a valuable scientific, technical, and management contribution for Cayo Las Brujas because it materialized a plan of sustainable development to reduce the adverse impacts of new developments, which is why this tourism management instrument attributes a significant utility value to the new developments in this region. The problems and challenges the coasts face in moving toward responsible management of small island systems are very complex. Still, it was found that the participatory strategic planning of the destination will constitute an instrument that will enhance sustainability in the medium and long term based on knowledge, which will allow for achieving a better positioning of the local destination based on the attributes of the natural and cultural identity of this site.

Among the main limitations of the research, it is recognized that the final plan was not submitted to public consultation due to restrictions in contracting this consulting work. Concurrently, the vision of the visitors was considered partially, since the tourists interviewed needed to show more knowledge about sustainability, tourism planning, and the impacts generated by tourism in this territory. Furthermore, since there was no resident local population, the interviews had to be carried out in the nearby cities of Remedios and Caibarién. In the future, it is advisable to continue this strategic planning experience in other island destinations of the archipelago and more actively incorporate the participation of the local population and government authorities.

Future lines of research should promote the use of training consulting for the construction of sustainability management instruments, considering the results obtained here, which will require a detailed study process of the application context, planning needs, and training, as well as the profile of the stakeholders and the typologies of tourism development to be promoted. This will allow the development of new experiences that validate the effectiveness of the process in correspondence with the premise assumed regarding the intense production process of island tourist spaces that requires new approaches, planning, and management alternatives as a path toward sustainability, as has been proposed by Baloch et al. (2023), Bellato, et al. (2023) and Stojanović et al. (2024).

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