

Nature tourism in Quindío (Colombia): towards governance for its development

Turismo de naturaleza en Quindío (Colombia): Hacia una gobernanza para su desarrollo

Turismo de natureza em Quindío (Colômbia): rumo à governança para seu desenvolvimento

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Received: June 23, 2025

Accepted: September 26, 2025

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.22267/rtend.262701.291>

How to cite this article: Tarapuez, E., Guzmán, B. & Parra, R. (2025). Nature tourism in Quindío (Colombia): towards governance for its development. *Tendencias*, 27(1), 178-206. <https://doi.org/10.22267/rtend.262701.291>

Abstract

Introduction: Nature tourism has emerged as a key alternative for the development in regions with significant ecological and cultural wealth, such as Quindío, Colombia, known for its coffee cultural landscape. **Objective:** To identify the challenges of nature tourism from an economic perspective, and propose governance strategies for its development. **Methodology:** A qualitative approach was used through workshops and focus groups with actors from the academic, business, government, and civil society sectors. Barriers such as insufficient physical and digital infrastructure, institutional fragmentation, and low normative appropriation were explored. **Results:** It is proposed to strengthen governance with inter-institutional coordination mechanisms, citizen participation, and multi-actor models; update territorial planning instruments; promote innovation in differentiated tourism products; and to improve the link between public, private, and community actors. **Discussion:** The rural digital divide and political-institutional fragmentation limit access to markets, coordination, and value capture, consistent with national and international evidence. **Conclusion:** The development of nature tourism in Quindío, requires participatory and comprehensive governance that integrates environmental sustainability, social cohesion, and structural investment, aligned with the cultural coffee landscape, and strengthens local capabilities with participatory monitoring.

Key words: community development; social and economic development; regional development; governance; community participation.

JEL: L83; O18; Q26; Q56; R11; Z32.

Resumen

Introducción: El turismo de naturaleza ha surgido como una alternativa clave para el desarrollo en regiones con gran riqueza ecológica y cultural, como el Quindío, Colombia, conocido por su Paisaje Cultural Cafetero. **Objetivo:** Identificar los retos del turismo de naturaleza desde la dimensión económica y proponer elementos de gobernanza para su desarrollo. **Metodología:** Se utilizó un enfoque cualitativo mediante talleres y grupos focales con actores de los ámbitos académico, empresarial, gubernamental y de la sociedad civil. Se exploraron barreras como la insuficiencia de infraestructura física y digital, la desarticulación institucional y la baja apropiación normativa. **Resultados:** Se propone fortalecer la gobernanza con mecanismos de coordinación interinstitucional, participación ciudadana y modelos multiactor; actualizar los instrumentos de planificación territorial; fomentar innovación en productos turísticos diferenciados y mejorar la vinculación entre actores públicos, privados y comunitarios. **Discusión:** La brecha digital rural y la fragmentación político-institucional limitan el acceso a los mercados, la coordinación y la captura de valor, en línea con evidencia nacional e internacional. **Conclusión:** El desarrollo del turismo de naturaleza en el Quindío, requiere gobernanza participativa e integral que articule sostenibilidad ambiental, cohesión social e inversión estructural, alineada con el Paisaje Cultural Cafetero y fortalezca capacidades locales y seguimiento participativo.

Palabras clave: desarrollo comunitario; desarrollo económico y social; desarrollo regional; gobernanza; participación comunitaria.

JEL: L83; O18; Q26; Q56; R11; Z32.

Resumo

Introdução: O turismo de natureza surgiu como uma alternativa fundamental para o desenvolvimento em regiões com grande riqueza ecológica e cultural, como Quindío, na Colômbia, conhecida pela sua Paisagem Cultural Cafeteira. **Objetivo:** Identificar os desafios do turismo de natureza na dimensão econômica e propor elementos de governança para o seu desenvolvimento. **Metodologia:** Utilizou-se uma abordagem qualitativa por meio de workshops e grupos focais com atores dos âmbitos acadêmico, empresarial, governamental e da sociedade civil. Foram exploradas barreiras como a insuficiência de infraestrutura física e digital, a desarticulação institucional e a baixa apropriação normativa. **Resultados:** Propõe-se fortalecer a governança com mecanismos de coordenação interinstitucional, participação cidadã e modelos multiactor; atualizar os instrumentos de planejamento territorial; fomentar a

inovação em produtos turísticos diferenciados e melhorar a articulação entre atores públicos, privados e comunitários. **Discussão:** A exclusão digital rural e a fragmentação político-institucional limitam o acesso aos mercados, a coordenação e a captura de valor, em linha com evidências nacionais e internacionais. **Conclusão:** O desenvolvimento do turismo de natureza em Quindío requer uma governança participativa e integral que articule a sustentabilidade ambiental, a coesão social e o investimento estrutural, alinhada com a Paisagem Cultural Cafeteira e que fortaleça as capacidades locais e o acompanhamento participativo.

Palavras-chave: desenvolvimento comunitário; desenvolvimento económico e social; desenvolvimento regional; governação; participação comunitária.

JEL: L83; O18; Q26; Q56; R11; Z32.

Introduction

In the 20th century, the productive vocation of the Colombian coffee triangle (Caldas, Risaralda, Quindío, and Norte del Valle) was primarily centered around coffee cultivation and, to a lesser extent, products like cassava, banana, and citrus fruits. This agricultural tradition earned national and international recognition as the Coffee region of Colombia. However, as a result of the crisis caused by the breakdown of the coffee pact in 1989, Quindío faced the need to seek new sources of income for coffee producers. For that reason, taking advantage of the natural conditions of the territory and the presence of a large number of coffee farms impulses the increasing offer of rural hostage by their proprietaries, which visitors were able to experiment close to the most representative characteristics of the culture of the region. Another determinant factor was the earthquake in 1999, that seriously affected the coffee region; this catastrophic event acted as a trigger for an integral reconstruction plan which radically transformed the region and strengthened its tourism appeal. The key factors for this purpose were: investment on infrastructure and services, renovation of hotel sector and other human talent formation in services of touristic technic services, international and national services, and others.

Now, tourism in Quindío has consolidated a sustained number of visitors, approximately 2 million of tourists per year, becoming a key motor of the local economy (Gobernación del Quindío, 2022). The composition of demand is mostly national, thus around

92% of visitors are Colombian, and 8% are foreigners (Cámara de Comercio de Armenia y del Quindío [Chamber of Commerce of Armenia and Quindío], 2025a). In 2024 the reported data were 2.325 business and 1.826 touristic houses (Cámara de Comercio de Armenia y del Quindío, 2025c). El Centro de Pensamiento Turístico de Colombia [Colombian Tourism Think Tank] (CPTUR, 2024) locates the competitiveness of Quindío in the 17th position over the 32 provinces, and Bogotá, with a score of 4.89 out of 10, which implies a big picture of the features to improve. It is highlighted that tourism is responsible for the 8.63% of PIB of Quindío (La República, 2025) and that 11 of its 12 municipalities are part of the coffee cultural landscape, declared a world heritage site by UNESCO in 2011, adding cultural and tourism value to the territory.

Coffee cultivation continues to play a central role in the economy of Quindío, and its identity. It is estimated that in 2024, the department produced 18 million kilograms of coffee valued at USD 71.6 million, and due to the transformation of this product, its value increased nearly USD 18.8 million, resulting in a total value of approximately USD 90.4 million, representing a 26% increase (Cámara de Comercio de Armenia y del Quindío, 2025b). It is estimated that there are around 18,000 hectares of coffee plantations in Quindío; however, the Quindío coffee growers committee has promoted the planting of new areas to ensure the sustainability of the sector, addressing the loss of cultivated area due to road expansion and crop diversification (Castillo, 2025; Crónica del Quindío, 2025).

Quindío has an agricultural area of 96,198 hectares, representing 49.8% of its total area; the main agricultural products are plantains (37.4%), coffee (25.9%), avocados (12.9%), oranges (6.4%), and bananas (5.6%). The most representative agricultural and agro-industrial exports from the department are coffee, vegetables, and preserved fruits, as well as avocados. In 2022, agriculture, livestock, hunting, forestry, and fishing contributed 22.7% of the gross value added of the department (Unidad de Planificación Rural Agropecuaria, 2024).

The exports of Quindío in 2024 amounted to 289.7 million, 9.5% less than the previous year. Coffee exports dropped by 14% while exports of avocados increased by 57.8%, and Tahiti limes by 68% (Cámara de Comercio de Armenia y del Quindío, 2025c).

Despite these figures, tourism development has been empirical and disorganized, prompting the creation of public-private collaboration processes in the early 2000s to

strengthen the sector. These efforts led to progress in defining productive strategies, with tourism, especially rural, landscape, and cultural tourism, emerging as a strategic axis. However, recent years have seen serious difficulties in consolidating these lines due to political, economic, sociocultural, technological, organizational, and environmental constraints. Nonetheless, the natural conditions of Quindío continue to position it as an attractive destination for both national and international tourists, who value its biodiversity, cultural richness, colonial architecture in some municipalities, and scenic beauty, among other aspects. Still, the lack of clear public policies, institutional fragmentation, weak leadership, and insufficient stakeholder cooperation have contributed to the progressive deterioration of natural resources and cultural identity, jeopardizing the viability of sustainable tourism development.

The COVID-19 pandemic deeply affected global tourism and slowed its development. However, this global event later presented an opportunity aligned with the trends highlighted by the World Tourism Organization (WTO), which prioritizes calm, green destinations with natural and cultural richness where visitors can have meaningful experiences. From this perspective, strengthening nature tourism in Quindío has become a fundamental challenge that requires balancing the economic, social, and environmental dimensions, with a clear focus on sustainability. Therefore, advancing toward a territorial sustainability model requires a detailed understanding of the phenomena affecting regions and determining their socioeconomic development. Only then can the potential of nature tourism be identified, threats mitigated, and effective coordination between stakeholders fostered. This will allow the formulation of concrete initiatives to be implemented in the short, medium, and long term, aimed at consolidating a more balanced, competitive, and sustainable tourism model.

Nature tourism

Nature tourism focuses on visiting and enjoying natural environments to appreciate their biodiversity, landscapes, and local cultures. This type of tourism gained significance in four key historical moments: the establishment of national parks at the end of the 19th century, the environmental movement in the 1970s, the emergence of the term ecotourism in the early 1980s, and the International Year of Ecotourism in 2002.

At the end of the 19th century, the United States established national parks such as Yellowstone (1872) and Yosemite (1890), marking the formal beginning of protected destinations for public enjoyment. Railway companies promoted these trips, linking nature

directly as a new tourism product. This initiated recreational and educational activities in wild areas (Dilsaver, 2024). Later, in the 1970s, the environmental movement gained momentum as people became more conscious of the need to conserve the environment and the negative effects of mass tourism. This movement led to the creation of specialized circuits for birdwatching, photo safaris, and hiking, catering to a population segment seeking more nature-friendly experiences, moving away from the traditional urban beach and sun tourism model.

In this context, the governance of nature tourism can be understood as the set of institutional mechanisms, both explicit (laws, management plans, management and financing instruments) and implicit (social norms, informal agreements, work networks, and cultural practices), which structure decision-making and coordinate public, private, and community actors to direct tourism activities toward the simultaneous goals of conservation and development. Governance, therefore, constitutes a regulatory framework that includes deliberation processes, incentive allocation, and accountability systems to manage tensions between public use and community actors to direct tourism activities toward the simultaneous goals of conservation and development. Governance, therefore, constitutes a regulatory framework that includes deliberation processes, incentive allocation, and accountability systems to manage tensions between public use and protection of natural capital. When these mechanisms function integrally, they facilitate clear roles (e.g., management of natural reserves, community concessions, and environmental services payment schemes) and reduce negative externalities on fragile ecosystems (Bhuiyan et al., 2023).

To achieve the harmonious development of nature tourism, governance requires adaptive capacities and formal pathways for multiscalar cooperation, such as crisis response protocols, participatory mechanisms to incorporate local knowledge, and explicit prioritization criteria that align economic incentives with conservation goals.

Contemporaneous literature shows the strategies of governance which strengthen the resilience, the frameworks that incorporate risk planning, the contingency finance and the collaboration networks, increase the recovery capacity and sustainability of the tourism sector, after extreme events. Which is important in contexts of climatic change and increasing pressures in nature areas (Zhang et al., 2024). In this way, Figure 1 shows the different sub-products, touristic activities, and complementary products of nature tourism.

Figure 1

Nature tourism and its components



Source: Ministry of Commerce, Industry, and Tourism (2012).

On the other hand, in the early 80s the term ecotourism was coined by the Mexican Architect Hector Ceballos, who used this word to describe the sustainable tourism with a low environmental impact and the generation of social and economic benefits for the communities rooted in these destinations. This definition of ecotourism gave the segment global visibility and also promoted the creation of specialized entities and specific certifications. Another significant aspect was the declaration of 2002 as the international year of ecotourism by the UN, an entity that emphasized the importance of developing new regulatory frameworks that would maximize environmental and social benefits while minimizing the negative impacts of this new type of tourism. This event allowed ecotourism to consolidate as a key strategy to promote sustainable development in third-world countries. (Weaver, 2021).

Thus, a fundamental difference arises between nature tourism and ecotourism. The former encompasses a wide variety of tourism activities that take place in natural settings, such as wilderness areas, national parks, reserves, and wetlands, among others, without necessarily involving an explicit commitment to conservation or the promotion of local communities. It focuses mainly on the recreational experience generated through contact with nature, which

includes options such as hiking, birdwatching, whale watching, camping, and more. Ecotourism, on the other hand, is a subset of nature tourism that prioritizes the conservation of the natural environment being visited; aims to generate direct socioeconomic benefits for local communities; promotes participatory and equitable management of natural resources; and incorporates an educational component where biodiversity and ecosystems are interpreted. Thus, ecotourism is nature-based, but not all nature tourism adheres to the sustainability and social responsibility principles of ecotourism. (Buckley, 2013).

Adventure tourism, however, is a form of nature tourism that involves visits to natural environments to carry out activities that require physical effort, a certain degree of risk and specific skills. It also promotes cultural immersion and direct contact between people and the environment (Mawarni et al., 2022; Ministry of Tourism, 2022). Its activities typically include hiking, rock climbing, rafting, mountain biking, paragliding, caving and diving in natural settings. These activities often take place in places of high conservation, which contributes to the generation of employment and environmental awareness of visitors, which makes this type of tourism deeply experiential, fostering discovery, while also encouraging the employment of certified local guides who conduct activities according to the principles of safety and the sustainable use of natural resources. Moreover, the practice of adventure tourism promotes low-impact infrastructures such as demarcated trails and eco-camps that favor the conservation of habitats. This form of tourism is particularly appealing to young and conscious travelers, who value the individual challenge and social and environmental responsibility associated with these touristic experiences.

Alternatively, rural tourism is a modality that is carried out in non-urban spaces, characterized by low population density, agricultural or natural landscapes, and local communities rich in traditional practices (World Tourism Organization, 2021). This type of tourism includes activities such as agrotourism (visits to farms and participation in harvests), ecotourism (hiking, birdwatching and exploration of ecosystems), cultural experiences (craft workshops, local gastronomy and peasant festivals), accommodation in rural houses or family inns, bicycle tours on rural roads and sport or recreational fishing in rivers and lagoons (Polukhina et al., 2021). In addition, it usually encompasses experiential tourism proposals, such as rural volunteer stays and field schools, which promote intercultural learning and community development.

Local, national, and international experiences.

In recent years, nature tourism has become a global trend in which significant experiences such as the observation and appreciation of nature are valued and the cultural expressions that characterize the regions are highlighted, aspects that become differentiating factors of the territories. From this perspective, natural and cultural wealth represent a real potential for socioeconomic growth and development with criteria related to sustainability to the extent that convergence is achieved among the actors involved through the generation of mechanisms of associativity, institutional leadership and political will.

On the subject, there are various investigations in different contexts at a global level. In Mexico there are several documented experiences; for example, in Jalisco, a nature tourism foresight plan was developed, based on the recognition that this economic activity had not been consolidated as a successful strategy for the region (Cornejo et al., 2019). In Veracruz, a study was carried out to recognize the enterprises, attractions, and resources of rural and nature tourism in the region of the great mountains, finding that these are in different stages of development and the participation of tourism authorities is limited, despite their enormous potential (Carrillo et al., 2021).

In Nuevo Nayarit, sustainable practices in the hotel sector have favored more responsible economic growth through the efficient management of resources, the reuse of materials, and the incorporation of renewable energies, aspects that have improved the competitiveness and profitability of the destination (Hernández et al., 2023). At the same time, the conservation of monarch butterflies, which migrate from Canada and the United States to shelter from the winter in the forests of Michoacán and the State of Mexico, was declared a World Heritage Site by UNESCO in 2008, which has generated an economy based on ecotourism and has benefited host communities through jobs in guiding activities, accommodation, beekeeping, and certified forest production (Lemelin & Jaramillo, 2020).

The Magical Towns of Mexico program is a public policy to value the cultural and natural resources of small towns and thus diversify the inland tourism offer, promote the generation of local employment and improve the competitiveness of rural destinations. Recent studies on this program indicate that, when investments in infrastructure, accessibility, complementary services and promotion strategies are integrated, localities can expand their contribution to regional tourism and create favorable indirect effects on local trade and services,

although the impact depends on the quality of implementation and the capacity of local actors to articulate tourism value chains (Pérez et al., 2024).

In Argentina, the program Authentic Towns has driven the economic development of small towns enhancing their cultural identity as a tourist attraction. This has led to improvements in employment and infrastructure, while also boosting the consumption of local products in destinations like Moisés Ville and Camarones (Albarrán & Pinassi, 2022). In northeastern Brazil, the population of Jericoacoara has upgraded the quality of its tourist services through investments in infrastructure, safety, and gastronomy, attracting international visitors with high purchasing power, which has benefited the regional economy (Anjos et al., 2017). In Holguín (Cuba), the future possibilities for rural tourism were analyzed, aiming to identify new development scenarios and improve management strategies (Díaz et al., 2020). In Ecuador, the community of Fakcha Llakta has developed a community-based tourism model that preserves ancestral knowledge, generates alternative income, and promotes environmental conservation. (Lomas & Trujillo, 2018).

In South Africa, the WOWZULU model, promoted by the United Nations Environment Program (UNEP), is a prominent sustainable community-based tourism initiative that promotes the development of destinations managed by local communities under principles of fair trade, equity and conservation. The initiative has been implemented in seven strategic regions and seeks to connect tourists with authentic experiences, while allowing them to sell artisanal products directly and strengthening the active participation of residents (UN Environment Program, 2019). WOWZULU has generated relevant economic and social impacts, such as increasing sustainable income, including women and young people in the tourism value chain, and reducing dependence on informal activities. In addition, it has strengthened capacities in management and marketing, increasing local autonomy. This approach has improved living conditions through access to education, formal employment and environmental protection, consolidating a balance between economic development, social justice and ecological sustainability.

Finally, in Sapphaya, a rural town in the province of Chai Nat (Thailand), a model of community tourism has been consolidated that integrates environmental sustainability, cultural preservation and local economic development. Through activities such as bicycle tours, river fishing and traditional cooking workshops, visitors are immersed in the daily life of the

community, which allows them to generate direct income for families and encourages the active participation of women and young people in tourism services. This model has made it possible to diversify the economy, revitalize ancestral knowledge, and protect the ecosystems of the Chao Phraya River, demonstrating how nature tourism can strengthen local governance and consolidate resilient and sustainable territories (Yang & Chuanchen, 2024).

In the national context, an analysis of tourism sustainability and competitiveness in Colombia stands out, in which it is evident that in order to be competitive in the sector, sustainability and service quality factors must be incorporated, to mention a few aspects (Serrano et al., 2018). Among other initiatives, the prospective study for the year 2032 carried out in Santa Rosa de Cabal (Risaralda) stands out, with the commitment called "An authentic destination, a successful business". In this study, the recognition, respect, valuation and care of natural and cultural resources stand out, also considering that this municipality is included in the Declaration of the Coffee Cultural Landscape of Colombia (Plata, 2013). For its part, in the department of Caquetá, an analysis of nature tourism was carried out focused on environmental education and tax benefits, identifying that this subsector is seen as a dynamic axis of the economy in the region through the generation of changes in the local development model for the improvement of the quality of life of its inhabitants (García et al., 2020). On the other hand, in Chinácota (Norte de Santander), strategies to promote sustainable tourism were identified based on public management, finding organizational, cultural, and personal deficiencies that limit its development (Leguizamón et al., 2020).

In the department of Quindío, a prospective study was carried out for the year 2020 on rural tourism, associated with the landscape and culture of the department. In this document, it was evident that Quindío should bet on strengthening associativity processes (Guzmán & Galarza, 2010). In 2022, a foresight exercise was carried out for the year 2035 on nature tourism in Quindío and it was determined that public-private management has become one of the main future managers for the development of the sector (Guzmán et al., 2022).

Despite the research carried out in the tourism sector in the department of Quindío, greater specialization and deepening in the different proposed lines is required. With regard to nature tourism, it is possible to evidence the lack of specific studies that would allow determining a clear route to achieve alignment and commitment of the actors in the realization of plans, programs and projects. Consequently, the objective of this work is to identify

challenges and challenges of nature tourism in Quindío from the economic dimension and propose governance elements for its development.

However, despite the beneficial effects on the economy and related communities, the literature also documents adverse impacts derived from these tourism practices and programs, such as pressures on housing and land prices, seasonality in employment, loss of cultural authenticity due to commodification, congestion and environmental degradation in fragile sites, in addition to social tensions between residents and new economic actors. Recent case studies in Pueblos Mágicos show, for example, that, without inclusive governance mechanisms and carrying capacity planning, the improvement in tourism indicators does not always translate into a sustained increase in the quality of life of the local population, an aspect that can even aggravate some social and environmental vulnerabilities (Peña et al., 2024).

Methodology

The research is framed within a qualitative, exploratory, and descriptive design. An empirical approach was applied, based on the focus group technic, to collect specialized perceptions and proposals from key actors in the territory.

Definition and classification of the economic aspects of interest

Before the fieldwork, the economic categories on which participants were asked to give their opinions were defined, based on the documentary review and the theoretical framework. These categories were constructed deductively from the literature and the diagnosis of nature tourism in Quindío, and were then left open to inductive insights during the analysis.

The main analytical dimensions were: a) Infrastructure and support services (roads, signage, basic services, digital connectivity, health and safety); b) Innovation and tourism supply (product differentiation, technical training, clusters and technological adoption); c) Territory and territorial brand (positioning, inter-municipal coordination, market studies); and d) Regulations and financial sustainability (knowledge and application of standards, incentives, financing mechanisms and governance). These dimensions served as guiding axes to build the semi-structured interview guide and the coding matrix used in the analysis.

Selection of participants and criteria

The selection was intentional and aimed at local stakeholders with knowledge and responsibility in tourism issues in Quindío. The inclusion criteria were: a) Belong to one of the four levels considered relevant to the governance of tourism (university, business, government and civil society); b) Verifiable professional or academic experience in activities related to tourism or territorial development (destination management, tourism enterprises, territorial planning, research, community associations, etc.); and c) Availability and informed acceptance to participate in the workshop (informed consent).

Based on previous interviews and a list of local actors, 32 people were invited, of whom 26 accepted and attended the workshop on November 14, 2024, held at the University of Quindío.

Formation and dynamics of the three focus groups

To promote intersectoral dialogue, three focus groups were formed by distributing the 26 participants so that each group was heterogeneous in institutional composition (university–business–government–civil society). The distribution was as follows: groups 1 and 2 (9 participants each) and group 3 (8 participants). The assignment logic aimed to maximize heterogeneity (different perspectives and functions) to enrich the discussion and facilitate the emergence of tensions and convergences between actors. Each group worked at a table with a moderator, a note taker to record the main contributions and another person responsible for audio recording the sessions.

Semi-structured format and guide used

A semi-structured group interview (open guide with guiding and probing questions related to the discussion topics of each table) was used to allow participants to share their experiences, needs and proposals. The format included general questions derived from the project's base document and oriented to the four defined economic dimensions. Each question included specific prompts to encourage deeper discussion and request examples or practical evidence. Moderators were instructed to ensure that all participants had the opportunity to contribute, thus preventing the dominance of a few voices.

Data collection procedure

For the recording, data were collected through audio recording (with consent), note-taking by a recorder and photographic documentation of the groups. The focus sessions lasted approximately 75 to 90 minutes with simultaneous work by the different groups; At the end a plenary session for socialization was held (30 to 40 minutes) in which the teams presented their main contributions. Regarding informed consent and ethical handling of information, before starting, participants were informed about the purpose of the study, use of data, voluntariness, anonymity and secure conservation of information; Written informed consent was obtained and recorded prior to the start of the session.

Information processing and analysis

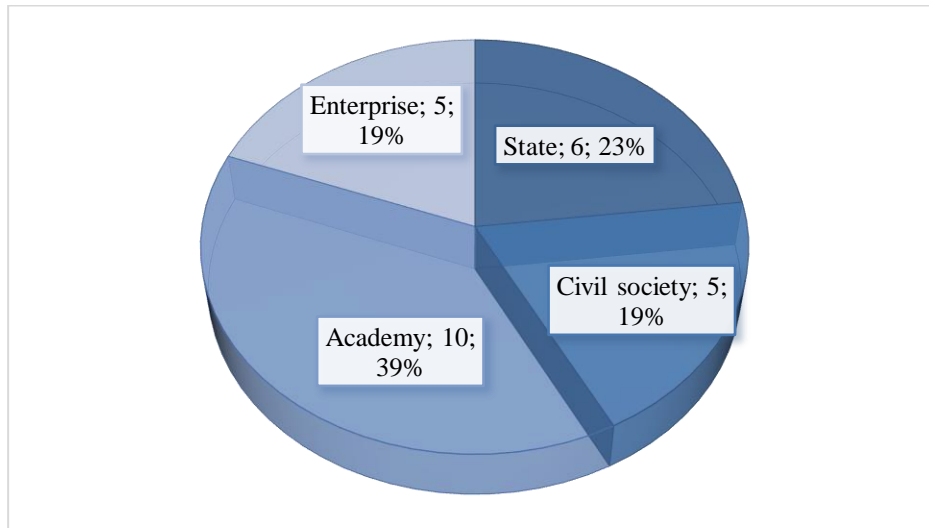
The recordings were transcribed verbatim and supplemented with field notes and visual materials. A topic analysis was applied in phases (familiarization, initial coding, theme search and review, definition and preparation of report), following recognized approaches in qualitative research. A coding matrix based on the four deductive dimensions was used. To ensure rigor and triangulation, two researchers independently coded a portion of the collected data and discussed discrepancies until consensus was reached; In addition, the information from focus groups was triangulated with the documentary review (articles, reports and regulations consulted) to validate interpretations. The systematization of the findings was structured in tables and matrices that cross-referenced dimensions, identified barriers, proposals, and responsible actors, which facilitated the development of recommendations.

Results

The formation of the focus groups involved 26 representatives of the business sector, civil society, government entities and academia. Figure 2 shows the distribution of participants by sector.

Figure 2

Distribution of participants by sectors



Source: Authors.

The contributions of the participants made it possible to identify various shortcomings and proposals regarding the variables and strategies addressed in the workshop. Regarding the economic dimension, it is important to mention aspects such as competitiveness and quality, which are defined by a favorable and clear regulatory, organizational and logistical framework; differentiation of the tourism offer, which rests on the innovation of products and services; governance, which connects the different actors around a territorial brand and sectoral policies that seek to promote the development of nature tourism in Quindío.

This section presents the most relevant findings related to the economic aspects of the research project entitled "Challenges for the development of nature tourism in Quindío with sustainability criteria". The study was developed from focus group sessions and participatory workshops that brought together actors from the tourism sector, institutional representatives, academics and local communities. Through a qualitative methodology, perceptions, needs and proposals were identified that allow understanding the economic factors that affect the development of nature tourism in the coffee-growing region. The results were grouped into four main dimensions, namely: a) tourism and support infrastructure, b) innovation and tourism offer, c) tourist territory and territorial brand, and d) applied regulations and sustainability. Each of these areas brings together common problems and proposals for action aimed at strengthening nature tourism as a regional development strategy. Table 1 presents the main findings and proposals in the aforementioned dimensions.

Table 1

Main findings and proposals by dimension

Dimension	Main findings	Proposed actions
Tourism and support infrastructure	Deficit of signage, poor condition of trails, lack of public services in rural areas, limited coverage of digital and air connectivity, and low presence of health centers in nature destinations.	Sectoral public investment, improvement of interpretation centers, implementation of green infrastructure, public-private partnerships, and tourism road planning.
Innovation and touristic offerings	Lack of business association, weak technological integration, limited differentiation of tourism products, lack of awareness of regenerative tourism and low levels of technical training.	Design of heritage routes, strengthening of tourism clusters, adoption of technologies (AI, big data) and training programs oriented to market trends.
Touristic territory and territorial brand	A fragmented identity among municipalities, political individualism, constant changes in promotional campaigns, and weak positioning of the Quindío brand.	Unification of the territorial Brand, coordination between municipalities and business associations, coherent regional campaigns, and community participation in the image strategy. Unificación de marca territorial, articulación entre municipios y gremios, campañas regionales coherentes y participación comunitaria en la estrategia de imagen.
Normatividad aplicada y sostenibilidad	Poor knowledge of NTS-TS standards, low implementation of good practices, institutional weakness in regulatory monitoring, and outdated territorial development plans.	Training regulatory updates with a sustainable approach, participatory impact monitoring, and coordination between universities, businesses, and the government.

Source: Own elaboration.

Below, are the more detailed results for the identified dimensions.

Tourism and support infrastructure

Tourism and support infrastructure are key factors for the sustainable development of nature tourism in Quindío. The experts participating in the workshop agree that a network of adequately signposted trails, appropriate road access, and strategically distributed emergency

points is required, as visitors face safety risks and travel difficulties. Additionally, the lack of interpretive signage limits understanding of the ecological and cultural value of the sites. Reducing the immersion experience in the natural landscape. In contrast it is evident that spaces with adequate infrastructure foster tourist confidence, while prolonging and improving their stay, positively impacting some indicators related to overnight stays and spending levels. In the technological realm, the digital divide in rural areas translates into a gap between supply and demand. For many local entrepreneurs, the lack of mobile internet coverage and the absence of digital booking of information platforms on site represent barriers to accessing broader markets. The implementation of mobile applications that allow geolocation of routes, consultation of weather conditions, and sharing of content in real time is seen as a low-cost, high-impact strategy capable of boosting visitor flow and optimizing the management of various tourist destinations. Table 2 describes the categories identified in the ítem on tourism and support infrastructure.

Table 2

Categories of tourism and support infrastructure

Category	Description
Physical infrastructure	Marked trails, accessible paths, emergency points, and interpretive signage.
Technological infrastructure.	Internet connectivity, mobile applications, geographic information systems, and booking platforms.
Institutional articulation.	Coordination for planning and maintenance between the Ministry of Commerce, Industry, and Tourism, the office of the governor, the mayor's offices, and the private sector.

Source: Own elaboration.

Similarly, coordination between institutions emerges as a critical component. The fragmentation of responsibilities between the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Tourism, the Quindío provincial government, municipal governments, and the academic sector has resulted in fragmented efforts that unfortunately lack synergy. The absence of a consensus-based strategic vision prevents the efficient allocation of resources and the prioritization of infrastructure projects. Therefore, it is essential to establish clear governance frameworks, with regular working groups and multi-year maintenance plans that involve all stakeholders, including small tour operators and rural communities, to ensure the sustainability and resilience of the various infrastructures.

Innovation and tourism offerings

Innovation in tourism offerings has been recognized as a key mechanism for differentiating Quindío in an increasingly diverse and competitive market. Workshop participants noted that the creation of clusters and thematic networks around birdwatching, coffee routes, and wellness circuits would promote cooperation between small and medium sized operators, optimizing costs and expanding opportunities for joint promotion. These organizational models facilitate resource management, standardization, of experiences, and accessibility to specialized market segments.

The design of comprehensive experiences, which combine elements of cultural heritage, local cuisine, and outdoor activities, addresses the growing demand for experiential tourism. The integration of craft workshops, regional product tastings, and guided tours by experts in history and ecology can create added value through a differentiation strategy that justifies higher rates and increases the perception of authenticity and value. In addition, these products open up new income sources for the local communities involved, while generating skilled employment and contributing to the preservation of regional traditions. Table 3 summarizes the areas of innovation in tourism offerings.

Table 3

Areas of innovation in tourism offerings

Axis	Description
Clusters and networks	Cooperatives and thematic alliances in birdwatching, tourism, coffee routes, and wellness tourism.
Comprehensive experiences	Programs integrating cultural heritage, local cuisine, and nature-based activities.
Training and data	Application of AI, big data, and specialized lectures to optimize product offerings.

Source: Own elaboration.

The strategic use of data and emerging technologies, including artificial intelligence, and geographic information systems, enables demand segmentation and offerings to be customized. By analyzing behavior patterns and visitor flow forecasts, operators can anticipate peaks in demand, optimize resource allocation, and design tailored promotions for different

tourist profiles. This data-driven approach is seen as the foundation for building sustainable competitive advantage in the medium and long term.

Strategic tourism territory and territorial brand

The concept of a strategic and attractive tourist destination is centered on creating brand that reflects the identity of the department of Quindío. However, despite the existence of the “Quindío Corazón de Colombia” brand, which has not been widely adopted by the various stakeholders. This lack of adoption is largely due to political strife among local leaders who seek to link the slogan of their departmental government plan with the positioning of the territorial brand.

The workshop highlighted the problem of political fragmentation among municipalities, which hinders the creation of coordinated offering and uniform communication of local identity to visitors. Additionally, the lack of international market research limits the ability to position and offer high-value products to tourist segments with significant spending power.

To address these challenges, it is proposed to conduct brand positioning studies that include perception diagnostics in key source markets, along with promotion and positioning campaigns at specialized international fairs and digital platforms. Defining a territorial narrative, based on coffee history and natural wealth, could contribute to differentiating the Quindío experience from other similar destinations. Table 4 summarizes the main challenges and actions for the Quindío territorial brand.

Table 4

Challenges and actions for the Quindío territorial brand

Aspect	Description
Challenges	Inequality in public policies, high administrative turnover, and coordination barriers.
Actions	Design of a unique brand, tax incentives, roadmap with defined deadlines and responsible parties.

Source: Own elaboration.

The implementation of a strategic roadmap with clearly defined phases, including periods of research, design, execution, and evaluation, is a mechanism that can allow responsibilities to be assigned to specific institutions within defined timeframes. This approach facilitates progress monitoring accountability, and the dynamic adaptation of actors and their actions to changes in the economic, environmental, social, and political environment.

Regulation, standardization, and sustainability of tourism offerings

Workshop participants recognized regulation and standardization as key elements for the sustainability of nature tourism in the department. They emphasized the need to disseminate sectoral technical standards and environmental protocols through training programs and accessible information portals for all stakeholders.

The establishment of proportional and transparent sanctions, accompanied by a system of continuous monitoring ensures compliance with standards and fosters the responsibility of the various stakeholders involved. The integration of environmental and social indicators in the evaluation of tourism projects facilitates the early identification of various types of impacts and the implementation of different corrective measures. Table 5 provides a summary of aspects related to regulations and sustainability.

Table 5

Regulation and sustainability

Mechanism	Description
Dissemination	Training programs, websites, and informational materials on the NTS-TS technical standard, among other topics.
Penalties	Supervision protocols and penalties for non-compliance with established standards.
Monitoring	Environmental and social indicator systems for monitoring and control.
Coordination	Permanent roundtables with academia, businesses, state authorities, and the community.

Source: Own elaboration.

Similarly, the formation of intersectoral working groups, bringing together representatives from academia, the private sector, the government, and local communities, provides a space for ongoing dialogue to update guidelines and ensure the inclusion of diverse perspectives in decision-making.

Discussion

The results related to tourism and support infrastructure highlight a significant digital divide in rural areas of Quindío, which limits the access of visitors and operators to booking and promotion platforms. Similar findings have been reported by Leguizamón et al. (2020) in the Colombian context, where lack of connectivity reduces tourist flows and income generation. In international studies, Corbos et al. (2024) show that investments in infrastructure are essential to attract and retain tourists; this study highlights how various forms of infrastructure, such as transportation, accommodation, and recreational facilities, influence both the tourist experience and local economic development. Furthermore, Lemelin and Jaramillo (2020) emphasize how heritage storytelling strategies strengthen brand image in rural environments. In Colombia, Guzmán et al. (2022) proposed the creation of a strategic roadmap with clear phases to bring together actors and products, coinciding with the need for a master branding plan.

In terms of innovation and tourism offerings, focus group participants positively valued the use of emerging technologies to design comprehensive experiences, such as augmented reality tours. Weaver (2021) emphasizes that the adoption of digital tools increases visitor satisfaction in national parks, while Buckley (2021) shows how operators who implement collaborative economy models diversify their income. Similarly, studies such as that by Andrade-Cunha et al. (2025) point out that there has been a lack of knowledge about tourism experiences and how they interrelate with the co-creation process, while emphasizing that this process has focused especially on the point of view of the tourist, leaving aside contributions from other relevant actors. For their part, Fredman et al. (2024) identify innovation as a mechanism that can be used powerfully to attract tourists with high purchasing power.

Analysis of the tourist territory and territorial brand reveals challenges of political fragmentation and difficulties in positioning Quindío as a unified destination. Yang and Chuanchen (2024) show that in China, a regional branding strategy improves destination recall, while Beevor et al. (2022) emphasize how heritage storytelling strategy strengthens brand image in rural environments. In Colombia, Guzmán et al. (2022), proposed the creation of a strategic roadmap with clear phases to bring together actors and products, coinciding with the need for a master branding plan.

Regarding the regulations applied and sustainability, participants in the focus group pointed out that the multiplicity of regulations generates confusion and delays certification processes.

Kong et al. (2024) y Khater y Faik (2025) highlight the transformative potential of tourism, through which communities can strengthen their resilience, ensuring long-term sustainability and adaptability in a changing world. These comparisons validate the proposal to establish proportional sanctions and accessible information portals.

Conclusions

Based on the results obtained, it can be concluded that the comprehensiveness of the tourism and support infrastructure in Quindío depends on a balance between investment in roads, signage, and emergency points, alongside the deployment of information technologies, and effective institutional coordination. The implementation of an integrative model that combines these three aspects is crucial to guarantee the accessibility, safety, and competitiveness of nature destinations; however, its effectiveness is conditioned by governance mechanisms that ensure multiscale cooperation, transparent resource allocation, and technical monitoring of interventions. The adoption of thematic clusters, comprehensive experiences, and robust technological solutions could position Quindío as an innovative and competitive destination. The success of these initiatives lies in public-private coordination, continuous product renewal, and existence of institutional arrangements (both formal and informal) that facilitate co-management, encourage collaborative innovation, and allow for systematic feedback from users and communities to adjust strategies in real time.

Therefore, creating a unique territorial brand and implementing a strategic roadmap are crucial steps to establishing Quindío a coherent and attractive destination. The combination of tax incentives, positioning campaigns, and project planning can ensure the development of nature tourism in line with sustainability criteria when these instruments are framed within coordinated policies and clear regulatory frameworks that define responsibilities, financing mechanisms and performance metrics.

Similarly, a clear regulatory framework combined with effective oversight and opportunities for ongoing dialogue, would guarantee the quality and sustainability of nature

tourism offerings. Governance must specifically incorporate participatory channels to link local knowledge, conflict resolution procedures, and environmental and socioeconomic monitoring systems that allow for the adaptation of regulations to emerging needs and strengthen the confidence of communities and visitors in the destination.

It can be concluded that the development of nature tourism in Quindío requires a comprehensive strategy that articulates environmental sustainability, social cohesion, and structural investment to achieve a competitive tourism offering aligned with the values of the coffee cultural landscape. For this strategy to succeed, it is essential to strengthen governance mechanisms, such as multiscale planning, clear allocation of powers, financial support instruments, and accountability platforms that enable coordination between actors.

This research is fundamental in offering an analysis of the interrelationships between the dimensions studied, namely, tourism infrastructure, innovation processes, territorial branding strategies, and regulatory frameworks in the context of nature tourism in Quindío. The work provides empirical evidence on technological gaps and the importance of co-creating high value experiences. It also emphasizes that translating this evidence into effective policies depends on the institutional capacity to govern and monitor their implementation.

In terms of practical implications, the results provide the basis for specific recommendations for the design of public policies and the establishment of public-private partnerships aimed at optimizing regional competitiveness, always within the framework of inclusive and adaptive governance arrangements. Finally, methodological limitations (the predominant use of qualitative data from focus groups) highlight the need for complementary studies using quantitative methods and time series; future research should also assess the role of governance in post-COVID-19 recovery and in monitoring indicators of sustainability and long-term profitability.

Ethical considerations

Clear information was provided on the objectives, risks, use of recordings, and rights of participants, and informed consent was obtained. Given the group nature of the study, it was emphasized that confidentiality could not be guaranteed, and rules were established to mitigate reputational risks. The team moderated the group dynamics to avoid undue pressure. The data

was anonymized, stored securely, and treated in accordance with Colombian regulations, retaining it only for as long as necessary. The thematic analysis included triangulation and independent coding, and the results were reported in aggregate form, protecting the identity of the participants.

Conflict of interest

All authors made significant contributions to the document, and declare that there is no conflict of interest related to this article.

Contribution statement of authors

Edwin Tarapuez Chamorro: Methodology, Formal Analysis, Research, writing – Original draft, Writing: Review and editing, Visualization.

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Source of funding

Article resulting from the project “Challenges for the development of nature tourism in the department of Quindío with sustainability criteria” funded by Universidad del Quindío (University of Quindío) and identified with code 1159. The authors would like to thank the university administration, Professor Urte Duis, who served as research advisor, the student researchers for their support in carrying out this study, and the research assistants who provided logistical support for the workshops held during the course of this research.

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