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Presentation date: March, 2021

Date of acceptance: May, 2021

Publication date: July, 2021

## HANABANILLA HOTEL,

A ROLE MODEL OF ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY AND TOURISM CULTURE

### EL HOTEL HABANILLA, MODELO DE CULTURA TURÍSTICA Y SOSTENIBILIDAD MEDIOAMBIENTAL

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#### Suggested citation (APA, 7<sup>th</sup> edition)

León González, L., & González Pomo, N. (2021). Hanabanilla Hotel, a role model of environmental sustainability and tourism culture. *Revista Universidad y Sociedad*, 13(4), 116-122.

#### ABSTRACT

Having a culture of tourism and of environmental sustainability continue to be concepts that are very seldom treated in unison. However, from a vision of progress, a holistic approach to these to concepts is a decisive factor in modern times. Firstly, there are complementary interests between the different nations and their people; secondly, humans have a positive conception about travel, rest and recreation; and thirdly, the search for international rationality towards environmental preservation is an ongoing quest. Both approaches aim to contribute with a more comprehensive response for the variety of sources that offer operational solutions in the short and long term. The objective of this research is to understand the dynamics of a culture of tourism and environmental sustainability taking as reference Hanabanilla Hotel, a tourist resort located in the central region of Cuba. This research made use of data collection techniques of the qualitative methodology such as documentary analysis, observation and interview.

**Keywords:** A culture of tourism, environmental sustainability.

#### RESUMEN

Tener una cultura turística y de sostenibilidad ambiental siguen siendo conceptos que muy pocas veces se tratan al unísono. Sin embargo, desde una visión de progreso, una aproximación holística a estos conceptos es un factor decisivo en los tiempos modernos. En primer lugar, existen intereses complementarios entre las diferentes naciones y sus pueblos; en segundo lugar, los seres humanos tienen una concepción positiva sobre los viajes, el descanso y la recreación; y en tercer lugar, la búsqueda de la racionalidad internacional hacia la preservación del medio ambiente es una búsqueda constante. Ambos enfoques tienen como objetivo contribuir con una respuesta más integral para la variedad de fuentes que ofrecen soluciones operativas a corto y largo plazo. El objetivo de esta investigación es comprender la dinámica de una cultura del turismo y la sustentabilidad ambiental tomando como referencia el Hotel Hanabanilla, un centro turístico ubicado en la región central de Cuba. Esta investigación hizo uso de técnicas de recolección de datos de la metodología cualitativa tales como análisis documental, observación y entrevista.

**Palabras clave:** Cultura turística, sostenibilidad medioambiental.

## INTRODUCTION

Although travelling is probably an activity as old as humanity itself, tourism as we understand it today did not emerge until the 19th century after huge improvements in transportation were made. The appearance of the steam engine and the railroad, for instance, paved the way for the development of this ever-increasing activity until the present.

Gradually, tourism ceased to be a minor activity that only a few people could afford, to later become a mass phenomenon thanks to the appearance of the automobile and the airplane. According to the World Travel & Tourism Council, tourism and travel-related activities now provide employment opportunities for one out of every twelve people in the world. Tourist trips have multiplied from 25 million in 1950 to almost 700 million in 2000, and the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) estimates that by the year 2020 the number of tourists in the world will reach the stunning figure of 1.6 billion.

Tourism is the fastest growing economic activity of the 21st century. Undoubtedly, there has always been a temptation to make profits without taking into consideration the possible deterioration of the environment and the public property, either due to lack of a sense of right and wrong, in some instances simply because of ignorance of environmental issues, and also because of lack of awareness that it is the tourist activity what causes such deterioration. A quick look at the above figures will make it easy to understand that the enormous possibilities of development and economic growth offered by tourism have pushed many regions into an uncontrolled tourist frenzy, even at the cost of degrading their most precious resources.

Environmental damage and deterioration is the price that entire regions have had to pay for economic development derived of tourism. For many years, experts and international organizations have been warning about the negative impact that this type of unsustainable development model will have on the future of the planet and humankind. However, humanity had to be challenged with the first visible signs of collapse before actions were taken. These signs include the deterioration of the ozone layer, global warming and climate change, the depletion of fish populations in the world's oceans, the rapid shrinking of primeval forests, the severe degradation of rivers and coasts, among others.

The tourism industry encompasses a complex web of sectors and activities; it gears up economic, social and environmental aspects that as a system make it difficult to analyze.

Most of the main tourist attractions in our country are of historical, cultural or religious interest, as well as sun and beach tourism and nature tourism (Ballesteros Pelegrín, 2014; Salinas Chávez & Cámara García, 2016; Martínez, 2017; Cornejo-Ortega, et al., 2019).

According to Cardoso (2006), sustainable development is the approach that puts forth the comprehensive and inevitable existing link between the natural system and development. It is based on a continuous process of change in which the exploitation of natural resources, the management of investments for the scientific and technological progress, together with institutional change, all make it possible to satisfy present and future social demands. This concept does not refer to a stationary and harmonious state, but to a process with changing conditions.

Sustainability is approached from three main perspectives: environmental, sociocultural and economic. These reveal the existence of a support for ecologically sustainable development, by highlighting on the necessary ecological conditions to maintain human life in the future and preserve those resources that can be enjoyed by present and future generations.

Some regions in the world more than others show an elevated culture of tourism and environmental sustainability. This is the case Hanabanilla, a rural community located in the central region of Cuba, a genuine park of natural beauty that lodges a hotel in its territory which operates in total compliance with socio-natural harmony, environmental carefulness and physical as well as mental well-being for its visitors. The hotel was founded in 1975 and inaugurated with such highly committed personnel that some of the original employees are still working in it at present. This hotel, with its own distinctiveness, has reached what we deem a true culture of tourism.

The traditional interview technique was used for data collection in this research. The interviewees were split into two groups. The first group consisted of the hotel executives in charge of risk management and environmental protection in relation to the effects of climate change; these personnel have also been entrusted with the 'Life Mission' (*Tarea Vida*) by the Cuban government. The second group interviewed were hotel employees in order to analyze the interconnectedness between environmental management and a culture of tourism for sustainable development in the Hanabanilla hotel.

## DEVELOPMENT

The term **a culture of tourism** refers to the mass of knowledge and set of values acquired by both tourists and hosts at a given tourist destination and by which practice,

in combination with a series of attitudes and customs, the promotion and growth of the tourist activity is favored. Above all, it implies having the commitment and respect for the needs of both parties: tourists and hosts.

As explained in the document Breviario de cultura turística of Secretaría de Turismo of México (2013), *“a culture of tourism has its basis from the perspective of sustainable development, the latter understood as the satisfactory management of available resources (natural, material, financial and human), thus guaranteeing both complete satisfaction for the tourists and the greatest benefits for the host community.*

*Every country has its autochthonous cultural wealth, its unique attractions and diverse resources; nevertheless, what makes a country more special and respected is its people, much more so if its population is fully aware that tourism as an industry is essentially a cultural issue rather than anything else”.*

When referring to the principles of tourism culture, Calderón (2018) points out the following:

1. **Always give arriving tourists a warm and kind welcome.** The institutions that receive tourists have a duty to follow good practices and habits when welcoming tourists.
2. **Treat other people, the tourists in this case, how you would like to be treated.** Just as a certain group of tourists is received with attention and quality service, we would like to be treated in the same way.
3. **Always offer friendly and fast service or support.** As tourist hosts, it is a code of conduct to always provide immediate and quality service to the tourists.
4. **Always be willing to enroll in training and learn the latest trends of the industry.** In tourism, due to the changing and innovative nature of this industry, systematic training of its personnel should be a maxim.
5. **Know the city where the resort is located and its surroundings well.** On too many occasions you will be asked for directions or recommendations of nearby attractions: When offering services, the main thing is to know what is being sold to the clients. This will make you sound more confident and convincing when offering your own attractions.
6. **Always talk about the attractions of your area with a tinge of pride.** Tourist will quickly identify the attractions you have. Talk about them properly and be proud of your own natural and cultural resources.
7. **Take care of the parks, monuments and areas of interest in your town.** You must preserve the heritage of our city; these will be crucial elements when offering cultural tourism.

8. **Discuss with your colleagues, friends and family members that it is everyone’s job to take good care of tourists.** Whenever tourists visit us, we should plan their entire journey from their transportation to their arrival at the sites and know the people who will receive them.

9. **Do not abuse the tourist by charging more or promising the impossible.** Put yourself in the tourist’s shoes at all times.

10. **A smile will always be the best face to every business.** Give the tourists a warm welcome; it will be your business’s presentation letter and one of the reasons why tourists will come back. Most tourists do not mind paying any price as long as they are satisfied, comfortable, and above all treated with warmth and respect.

The number of visitors to protected areas has been gradually increasing over the past few years due to an evident renewed interest in nature. These areas include World Heritage Sites, Biosphere Reserves, National Parks and Natural Parks. When approaching this topic, it is necessary to highlight the significance of the combined protection by inhabitants and tourists, for, according to the authors, it will greatly contribute to improve the management of their resources benefitting both the natural spaces and the local populations. In addition, tourists’ interest in the flora and fauna can help preserve biodiversity, their appreciation of the latter will raise an awareness to mitigate climate change, which has weakened complete ecosystems and caused the disappearance of many.

According to Frómeta & Guardado (2017), climate change is a change in the average data of the climate over an extended period of time, usually involving several decades. Climate change is also thought to pose a large-scale threat to people in developing countries, especially to women and other underprivileged groups, who are the most vulnerable when faced with the need to adapt due to the adverse impacts of climate change, or when participating in building resilience in their communities and societies.

UNWTO offered two types of indicators: (a) basic sustainable tourism indicators that can be applied to all destinations (site protection, pressure, intensity of use, social impact, existence of environmental inspection procedures or official site development controls and density of use, waste treatment, planning processes, critical ecosystems, consumers’ satisfaction, local population satisfaction; and (b) destination-specific indicators to be applied to specific ecosystems or types of tourism such as coastal areas, mountainous regions, natural parks, cultural sites, traditional communities and small islands.

Rural tourism is currently undergoing a period of rapid expansion as part of an effort to diversify the rural economy

in view of the declining importance of agriculture. Some forms of rural tourism may have a lower environmental impact and are becoming increasingly popular (Melgosa, 1999).

In any case, rural tourism, without being an activity that generates huge profits, has undergone a progressive expansion in the world and in Cuba. For example, in recent years as a result of climate change, tourists are looking for environmental as well as socio-cultural and traditional aspects.

This modality of tourism has attracted lots of tourists to Hanabanilla Hotel; however, given that it is an activity in a natural environment there will always be an impact on the ecological systems located in the area where the activity takes place. Nevertheless, it should be noted that this place stands out for its care and ecological balance in relation to this type of tourism.

Nature tourism, specifically ecotourism is based on nature; but also as a tool for sustainable development that has been studied by NGOs, development experts and universities. Due to the very definition of agro-tourism, which involves the farmer himself, the main impacts are related to the loss of the farming community's own identity and the disruption of their traditional lifestyle.

Based on these definitions and in reference to the site object of study of this paper, a general consensus was reached on the basic elements of ecotourism:

- It contributes to biodiversity preservation.
- It improves the quality of life of local populations.
- It offers a learning experience of interpretation of nature.
- It entails a responsible attitude by both the tourists and the tourism industry.
- It is primarily aimed at small groups of tourists through the promotion of small businesses.
- It requires the lowest possible consumption of non-renewable resources.
- It encourages the participation of the locals by expanding their business and employment opportunities; this is especially relevant for rural communities.

Tourism, according to Melgosa (1999), can become a dynamic and important promoter of sustainable development, whose integral and dynamic effects transcend the existing accounts and indicators for measuring human development by offering variables that contribute to a better appreciation of development processes centered on the idiosyncrasies of the people themselves. In most cases, the attempts to solve this problem combine environmental

and touristic policies within the framework of a single process which endorses the bettering of infrastructures and environmental conditions, an achievable goal supported by their interconnectedness.

Inostroza (2008), approaches the topic of risk management for tourism in communities by addressing a group of elements that may bring about negative impacts for this type of tourism.

The following are the most common negative impacts of tourism on protected areas:

- The construction of tourism or communications infrastructures in the surroundings of protected areas that usually end up producing negative impacts directly or indirectly.
- Human presence causes environmental strain and changes in animal behavior.
- The introduction of foreign species endangers the delicate balance of existing habitats in the area.
- Hunting and fishing have led to the extinction of many species and cause irreparable damage to endangered habitats.

This study revealed that the negative effects of the tourist activity are barely perceptible thanks to the endeavors of workers and inhabitants of Hanabanilla settlement in neutralizing possible damages while engaging in sustainable development and sustainable tourism.

This combination of terms puts forward sustainability as an element that rests on three pillars:

- The economic pillar: based on the capacity to contribute to economic development through the creation of companies of all sizes and all levels.
- The social pillar: based on the social impact caused by the organization on all its interactants such as employees, customers, suppliers, the community and society in general.
- The environmental pillar: based on the respect and preservation of ecosystems, flora, fauna and biodiversity. It represents the complementarity between production and exploitation as pointed out by Lalangui, et al. (2017).

The staff of Hanabanilla hotel has been a role model of resort conservation for 44 years. They have implemented land use strategies to protect the integrity of the landscape, and of the ecosystems and natural and cultural processes that are manifested through it. The care and protection of the environment is Hanabanilla Hotel and Hanabanilla settlement's hallmark of distinction. The inhabitants of the area do not practice indiscriminate hunting

or fishing, and the community stands out for the care and protection of endangered species such as deer, the *jutía* (an indigenous animal to Cuba) and the *tocororo* (Cuba's national bird).

The World Tourism Organization, defines sustainable tourism as “*a model of economic development designed to improve the quality of life of the host community, to provide the visitor with a high-quality experience and to maintain the quality of the environment, on which both the host community and visitors depend*” (Organización Mundial del Turismo, 1998)

According to UNESCO, Cultural Tourism is an innovative concept, of an eminently ethical nature, which seeks to promote peace, understanding between peoples and respect for the cultural and natural heritage and the specificities of the host communities within the framework of the exchanges that occur when traveling. From this perspective, it is important that tourism be placed at the service of the well-being of populations and contribute to the preservation of their cultural and natural resources ensuring the human quality of exchanges between communities. In other words, tourism is understood as an instrument for sustainable development, intercultural dialogue and the culture of peace.

Some hotels have decided to adopt the principles of sustainable development, and have implemented the following environmental measures:

- Planting of gardens with autochthonous species, respecting the natural orography of the terrain.
- The implementation of “ecological breakfasts” pilot experience, aimed at avoiding the consumption of food in individual portions (butter, jam...), thus reducing the generation of waste.
- The implementation of strategies to save electricity (by installing energy-saving light bulbs), fuel and water, supported by posts reminding guests of the need to reduce consumption.
- The water consumed by the hotel facility is subsequently treated. The gardens are irrigated with treated water.
- The hotels have a duty to promote the gastronomy offers of the region where they are located.
- Glass containers are recyclable, recycled paper is used in the welcome products and in the ballots to evaluate quality.
- There is selective collection of cooking oil.
- Hotel establishments have a duty to evaluate the environmental satisfaction of its guests.

According to the authors, these elements are revealed in the model in question, when transcending the tourist culture and environmental sustainability to the neighborhood of Hanabanilla settlement where the hotel of the same name is located. Even if economic development per se does not guarantee sustainable development, the rest of the elements are compatible with this concept, for renewable and non-renewable resources are used responsibly. The municipal government maintains adequate control over each of these and the local population follows this care policy in a participatory manner.

The elementary school, together with the community, the Robustiano León hydroelectric plant and the agricultural production cooperative, all carry out environmental orientation and participation work to achieve sustainable tourism. Some of the actions, for instance, include *La Fiesta de la Cotorra* (The Party of the Parrot), a socio-cultural event held every year that reflects the results and goals achieved by the community in benefit of the area and environmental sustainability. The hotel is responsible for emphasizing the care of natural assets such as the use of space and landscape.

According to the authors it is important to allude to this tourist place given the efficiency of its services and the ecological wellbeing it possesses, thanks to its workers, a place where every day the sunset is of a pink or golden color, due to the union of the sun with the shadow of a lake surrounded by mountains, unique of its kind in the Cuban island and the contour of the Guamuhaya mountain massif, which in turn maintains a carefully preserved ecosystem like few places, and is privileged by a water reservoir, an area of biological diversity and recreation.

Inaugurated on July 26, 1975 by Commander in Chief Fidel Castro Ruz, Hanabanilla Hotel is located on one of the shores of the lake of the same name. It is more than 360 meters above sea level, in the Guamuhaya Massif, the main mountain belt of central Cuba, belonging to the municipality of Manicaragua, Villa Clara. The hotel is embedded in a region that is habitat for a rich flora, where the green microphyte, semideciduous, gallery forests and the vegetation on case predominate; the present fauna attracts attention for its groups of birds, reptiles and mammals.

It is accessed through a zigzagging road from the main road that connects the capital of the territory with the town of Cumanayagua, Cienfuegos. The watershed that forms Hanabanilla Dam serves important economic purposes such as water supply to the population, electricity generation, transportation for the inhabitants and the development of tourism (Izquierdo, 2010). It has an extension of

18.7 square kilometers and the main rivers of the area flow into it, such as the Hanabanilla, Guanayara, Río Negro, and Trinitario; in addition, within the area of this basin there is a high diversity of endemic species of flora and a high population of avifauna. The arborescent fern, an ancient tree, is a distinctive hallmark of the region. There are five renown trekking routes for the development of nature tourism.

Lake boat rides can be booked at the hotel. These feature sightings of farming settlements on the lake shore, the sighting of waterfalls, hiking of trekking routes, and a visit to *Río Negro* (a Cuban native-style restaurant in the mountains accessed only from the lake) from which an extraordinary view of the lake and surrounding mountains can be relished. The lake is also habitat to several species of freshwater bass, being the catch-and-release recreational fishing of these specimens, another highlight of the tour.

The concepts of a culture of tourism and of environmental sustainability are approached in this model in regards to three aspects:

1. Education defines the future of the upcoming generations; it should create necessary facilities for the existence of conditions and access to ecological and environmental education.
2. Professional training at different levels is crucial in order to procure skilled workers whose zest to work is driven by good will and not by the stereotyped greed for profit.
3. Care and respect for the natural heritage is inherent to having a culture of tourism.

This tourism model assumes the commitment to advance towards its sustainable angle, minimizing the environmental impacts of its operations and services, guaranteeing and working for the incorporation of workers, managers and host community towards noble purposes, supported by the following commitments:

1. Comply with the legislation and environmental regulations in force.
2. Promote through training, responsible environmental attitudes, as well as the implementation of good practices in the facility.
3. Raise the level of environmental management of the hotel through the implementation of the management system designed by the hotel.
4. Improve the tourism product "Hanabanilla Hotel", following an integrated approach, aimed at promoting a sustainable product within the modality of nature tourism.

5. Promote and develop the hotel's environmental policy in close alliance with its surrounding community, its suppliers and its clients.
6. Promote sustainable consumption of natural resources, energy and supplies.

The authors have personally confirmed through visits compliance with the environmental policy, for which the hotel has received several awards such as the Territorial Recognition for Environmental Care given by the CITMA of the province of Villa Clara in 2011, and the Hotel Free of Chlorofluorocarbon (CFC) award. In commemoration of its 40th anniversary, the hotel was awarded a special recognition for turning the facility into a scenario for the development of nature tourism in 2015; in 2016 it received praise again from the Territorial Division of Environment.

## CONCLUSIONS

A culture of tourism and environmental sustainability make it possible to preserve the ecological balance of any region. Hanabanilla Hotel, embedded in the central geography of Cuba, stands out as a role model of environmental sustainability and tourist culture that has been maintained for more than forty years. Its 170 employees have guaranteed complete satisfaction, both economically and ecologically, for national and international tourists.

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