

Abstract

Now more than ever, the awareness of environmental issues like the consequences of climate change and biodiversity loss, has strongly increased, which has elevated the aim of protecting biodiversity hotspots to a priority. While international tourism and interest in visiting pristine natural sights are increasing, ecotourism could pose a tool fostering sustainable development integrating social, ecological and economic aspects. Ecotourism can serve as an alternative to supplement locals' livelihoods, while incentivizing to protect biodiverse landscapes needed for ecotouristic operations. However, this win-win situation is regularly questioned due to cases that fail in achieving this synergistic relationship between ecological conservation and benefits for locals.

Therefore, this study aimed at identifying drivers of socio-ecological benefits in ecotourism from a systems thinking perspective examining the influence of 7 factors (ecological impact, benefits for local people, governance & institutions, land ownership, market fluctuations, competing land uses and infrastructure) and their interactions. For that 19 semi-structured interviews with different ecotourism stakeholders within Tambopata (Peru) were conducted and qualitatively analyzed. The findings were then illustrated in a causal loop diagram and verified in 3 respondent validations.

The results indicate that in the study area illegal land uses, like for example gold mining, are a driver of negative socio-ecological outcomes that affect ecotourism. These increase when certain market fluctuations occur (increase of gold prices, pandemic stops tourism, etc.) and are accelerated with an expanding infrastructure due to the created accessibility. However, these negative impacts can be counteracted by implementing rather local than centralized governance approaches within ecotourism. By transferring responsibility to ecotouristic operators and communities to protect and manage forest areas, both conservation and benefit generation for locals are enhanced. Furthermore, inclusive management with participatory decision making and benefiting, can strengthen institutions that lead to a higher willingness to follow land management rules. Additionally, implementing motivations to conserve that go beyond economic incentives, like rule enforcement by controls or addressing norms and values can be more consistent drivers to stick to ecotourism as a livelihood rather than turning to extractive activities for instance.

The study lays out that ecotourism has great potential to increase socio-ecological benefits, but also that it depends strongly on the influence of multiple external factors, like market fluctuations or governance, which need to be addressed in multiple disciplines to truly tackle ecotourism's challenges.