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## **Tourism and environmental sustainability: Analysis of the growing interest in ecotourism in Costa Rica**

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# **TOURISM AND ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY**

**Analysis of the growing interest in ecotourism  
in Costa Rica**



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Master thesis Latin American Studies

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Leiden, February 2026

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## INTRODUCTION

Costa Rica, a country located in Central America, is widely recognised for its progressive approach to ecotourism. While the country is making substantial efforts towards sustainable development and nature preservation, Costa Rica is still considered a developing nation. Despite this fact, Miller (2012) describes Costa Rica as a leading country in ecotourism and environmental policy. Since the nineteenth century, tourist activities gained more popularity on a global level, due to the development of travel possibilities and advanced infrastructure (Miller, 2012). Air travel created many opportunities for easy and fast travel, thereby contributing to increased tourist activity in more remote regions. As the tourism sector expanded, tourist activities increasingly became wasteful and environmentally harmful, creating a need for more sustainable forms of tourism and contributing to the growing popularity of ecotourism. Ecotourism mostly started to emerge in the form of advanced sustainable and eco-friendly activities, which would replace activities that were associated with mass tourism. In many ways, mass tourism created negative impacts for the environment, as well as the local community in a country. The local population is significantly affected by government decisions and tourism regulations. For this reason, various countries aspire to introduce more eco-friendly forms of tourism, which are less threatening to the natural habitats and ecosystems of the country.

While ecotourism offers compelling and significant opportunities, many scholars express concern about its associated challenges and consequences. Miller (2016) acknowledges the problems that ecotourism may produce, and he argues that the ecotourism industry needs to be fully engaged in sustainable practices, to be successful as an eco-friendly version within the tourism sector. The care for sustainability and protection of the environment has immensely increased throughout the past century. Although the interest for environmental protection has expanded, tourism is still seen as an important sector within the nation's economy. The World Tourism Organization defines ecotourism as a form of tourism that considers all aspects of the current and future economic, environmental, and social impacts, as well as acknowledges all the needs of visitors, the industry, and the environment (UNWTO, as cited in Miller, 2016). In other words, ecotourism or sustainable tourism encourages an economic sector, which is focused on hosting visitors from other places, while also implementing more ecological aspects, which will protect the natural environment, as well as the national population.

Costa Rica possesses a promising political and social environment for the development of sustainable tourism and was able to take the next step towards ecotourism, due to a stable economy and political structure, even as a well-educated population, and a good tourist infrastructure (Miller, 2016). In addition, Costa Rica is making significant efforts to implement governmental and environmental regulations aimed at preventing practices that harm the natural environment (Sánchez, 2018).

Despite the willingness of the country's government to implement more ecotourism activities, rather than activities that are related to mass tourism, this approach shifted direction once the recession hit in 2008. This period changed the way that the government evaluated small ecotourism businesses and stimulated the interest in traditional large-scale forms of tourism, such as the build of large resorts and cruise ship excursions (Miller, 2016). These policy changes did not only enhance mass tourism, but also hindered the development of sustainable tourism and ethnic-tourism, which Xie (2010) describes as a form of tourism that is based on providing tourists with an authentic and meaningful experience while travelling. In addition to governmental policy changes regarding ecotourism, various businesses and corporations implemented an illegitimate form of ecotourism, based on dishonesty and fraudulent sustainability measures. This deceptive version is seen as a form of greenwashing, which was based on a misleading business plan pretending to enhance sustainability measures, while in fact not adhering to any genuine regulations. Greenwashing refers to the practice, whereby individuals or businesses pretend to be eco-friendly and follow the rules of sustainable development, while in fact not aligning with the principles of sustainability. The practice of greenwashing therefore refers to the misleading of positive and eco-friendly promotions, while allowing poor environmental performance (Delmas & Burbano, 2011, in Bowen, 2014).

The growth of ecotourism strongly aligns with the needs of tourists, meaning that exclusively tourists with an interest in sustainability visit Costa Rica for the sustainable and eco-friendly activities. Yet, Miller (2016) argues that the negative changes within the ecotourism policies in Costa Rica over the past decades have resulted in fewer ecotourists, and more tourists who visit the country for the sun and the beaches, as well as tourists who visit Costa Rica on a cruise. One of the biggest challenges within ecotourism development was the increase of large-scale resorts on the Pacific coast after the recession in 2008-2009, which changed the sustainability factor of the tourism sector in Costa Rica and set ecotourism development on another path (Miller, 2016). The prospects of ecotourism have resulted in a newfound interest by foreign investors in the untapped market of Costa Rica (Jackson, 2012, in Abel, 2012). Costa Rica as a new and upcoming market for ecotourism has become of great interest for many foreign companies, who seek to invest in the Costa Rican market.

This research will investigate the development of ecotourism in Costa Rica, while identifying the implications generated by the emergence of greenwashing. The central question that guides and structures this research is the following: How did ecotourism emerge in Costa Rica and what impact does it have on the development of the country's tourism sector? The central hypothesis is stated as follows: It is hypothesised that Costa Rica's established sustainable image, originating from conservation efforts in the 1970s, has positively influenced the tourism sector, but also increases the likelihood of greenwashing among tourism companies. Along with the central research question and hypothesis, the following sub-questions will be guiding the research:

1. To what extent do Costa Rican tourism companies contribute to the creation and the development of ecotourism?
2. What effect does Costa Rica's green image have on greenwashing in the tourism sector?
3. To what extent are tourists in Costa Rica involved with ecotourism development?

The following hypotheses are stated:

1. It is hypothesised that tourism companies in Costa Rica that show greater engagement with ecotourism and sustainability initiatives are more likely to contribute resources to ecotourism development projects.
2. It is hypothesised that tourism companies in Costa Rica are more likely to engage in greenwashing when they perceive the country's sustainable policies and environmentally attractive image as opportunities to enhance their own reputation.
3. It is hypothesised that tourists visiting Costa Rica are more likely to participate in ecotourism activities as the country's ecotourism sector expands.

Within the study, the impacts of ecotourism on the environment and the population will be considered, and therefore the research focuses on the topics of sustainability, tourism, and development. The research is aimed at providing an understanding of the development of Costa Rica's ecotourism sector. In doing so, the consequences of ecotourism development for national well-being, ecosystems, and the environment, the economy, and local populations will be analysed.

This thesis aims to acquire an understanding of the effects of ecotourism development in Costa Rica, and the effects that this development has on the increase of greenwashing within sustainable businesses and is driven by a personal interest in environmental conservation and the additional impacts on the well-being of both the local community and the natural ecosystems. Therefore, the main objective is centred around the actual contribution of tourist businesses and the government on the development of ecotourism within Costa Rica. While ecotourism is widely celebrated and studied in Costa Rica, the authenticity of genuine eco-companies and sustainability claims is often still misunderstood. Considering this, the thesis aims to address a gap in the academic literature by examining the direct positive impacts and flaws of ecotourism development on the well-being of Costa Rica's tourism sector, the environment, and the population, while also exploring the potential consequences of greenwashing and the risks posed by misleading and untruthful ecological claims. This goal will be realised by examining tourists' opinions and experiences with greenwashing and identifying whether their views have an influence on the way that ecotourism development is perceived and understood. The research is reported in three chapters, whereby the first chapter, *Ecotourism from a Theoretical Perspective*, will focus on the theoretical perspective of ecotourism and will describe the state of the art of the topic. In this chapter, the views and opinions of various academic scholars will be examined. The second chapter, *Costa Rica and the Birth of Ecotourism*, is centred around the description of the topic of ecotourism

and will embrace topics such as greenwashing, sustainability, and environmental implications. The third chapter, *Ecotourism and Greenwashing in Analytical Perspective*, is an analytical chapter, which will analyse the conducted interviews and surveys.

For this master thesis, both data retrieved from the fieldwork and secondary source materials are used. The theoretical framework draws on secondary works by Woo et al. (2022), Sánchez (2018), Honey (2008), and Jones & Spadafora (2017), to write the theoretical and descriptive content of the thesis. Moreover, an online article from the Roosevelt Institute for American Studies archive in Middelburg has been consulted for additional information on nature preservation in the Monteverde Cloud Forest. A significant section of this thesis will be based on findings from self-conducted field research. This research has been conducted in different areas within Costa Rica; however, most of the information has been collected from areas that are genuinely recognised for their approach to ecotourism. The major part of this research has been conducted in the Pacific coastal region on the west side of Costa Rica. These areas include tourist havens, such as Monteverde and Manuel Antonio National Park. A smaller part of the research has been conducted on the east coast of Costa Rica in the city of Puerto Viejo de Talamanca. For this research, tourists from various nationalities have been asked to give their opinions on the development of ecotourism in Costa Rica by means of a survey. In addition, semi-structured interviews have been conducted with experts on the topic of sustainable development and ecotourism in the country. This master thesis will take on a socio-political approach, in combination to a historical and developmental approach. These approaches have been carefully selected to focus on economic growth, social and rural development, as well as the origins and influences of ecotourism. The collected data is distributed throughout this thesis and can be considered both quantitative and qualitative, due to the employment of surveys based on numbers and ratings, and the data will therefore be assessed according to a mixed-methods approach.

Special thanks are given to my supervisor dr. Pablo Isla Monsalve for his guidance and expert opinions during this process. Furthermore, I would like to thank all the expert interviewees and respondents, who have made my research possible.

# CHAPTER 1

## ECOTOURISM FROM A THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE

### 1.1 Ecotourism within the framework of environmental sustainability

Ecotourism, as a central concept, encompasses a wide variety of definitions and can be approached from many different perspectives. Throughout this chapter, the term will be approached from an environmental perspective, meaning that the aspects of environmental sustainability will be considered the key focus.

#### 1.1.1 The development of touristification

Over the past few decades, tourism practices and tourism destinations have seen exponential growth all around the world (Smeral, 2003). This rise in tourism can have many negative effects on the residents of the country. A tourist's perspective of a country can be quite different from the perspective that a resident might have. Stocker (2013) argues that tourist's perspectives can be very misleading, in contrast to the perspectives of the residents. In popular tourism destinations, many changes are made to align with the interests of the tourists. This does imply that the natural environment is affected, and the bold and unrestrained landscapes are no longer completely untouched. This type of tourism development is also known as the process of touristification. The term *touristification* explains the process, in which natural areas, as well as inhabited areas, are altered due to tourism activities (Ojeda & Kieffer, 2020). According to Stocker (2013), tourism has consequences for the behaviour of the residents as well, and in some cases, visitors become a standard part of the inhabitants' way of living. This phenomenon is also known as the demonstration effect. Mathieson and Wall (1982) describe the demonstration effect as a concept, whereby "hosts try to copy the behaviour and spending patterns of tourists" (in Fisher, 2004: 429). The demonstration effect is most frequently seen in the consumption patterns of the locals, who try to copy the consumption patterns of the tourists (De Kadt, 1979, in Fisher, 2004). While the local community is affected by tourism, the local community simultaneously also influences tourism by shaping the sector to their benefit (Stocker, 2013). Woo et al. (2022) describe the process of touristification as a growing concern about the increasing number of tourists and the developing tourism projects in major tourist destinations. The term is a mixture of the two words *touristify* and *gentrification* and describes both processes. According to Glass (1964), gentrification signifies the alteration of the social character of a district or region, whereby the original working-class people are displaced (in Lees et al., 2013). The term *gentrification* therefore entails the "replacement of an existing population by a gentry" (Lees et al., 2013: 4-5). The term *touristify* describes the process of turning an area into a

tourism destination, by making the destination more appealing for tourists (Kim et al., 2021).

Besides harmful influences on the environment and natural areas in a country, touristification can also have adverse effects on the well-being of the residents. Both cities and natural areas can become very overcrowded due to the process of touristification. In addition, the costs of rent and property values can rise (Woo et al., 2022). The processes of touristification and the formation of social capacity are intricately linked together, in the way that the residents of a tourism area do no longer want extra tourists, due to the destruction of the natural areas and the overcrowding of cities (Woo et al., 2022). The consequences of touristification can show certain implications for the further development of a country. The study by Liang and Bao (2015) shows that the process of tourism gentrification and touristification can reshape the economic, social, and cultural elements of a country or tourist region (in Woo et al., 2022). Tourism is often promoted to stimulate the economy; however, Webster and Ivanov (2014) argue that the residents do not benefit much from tourism development, due to economic flaws that might offset tourism earnings. This will automatically decrease the economic benefits for the local community.

Overall, tourism development and the process of touristification are often described in a different manner. While tourism development can still offer some opportunities for economic and political growth in a country, the process of touristification often implies the negative consequences of tourism, which are occasionally aligned with environmental destruction and overcrowding. As Liang and Bao (2015) have discussed in their research, the expansion of tourism gentrification mostly has consequences on an economic, cultural, and social level (in Woo et al., 2022). Cultural and social implications can result in negative views and dissatisfaction of the residents towards tourism development. Within tourism development, noise pollution, waste disposal, and environmental destruction all play a significant role in the dissatisfaction of residents (Woo et al., 2022). While negative side effects of tourism development can influence residential dissatisfaction with the growth of tourism in their country, there is “no significant relation between the impact of economic touristification and the satisfaction of residents with economic life and their support for tourism development” (Woo et al., 2022: 74). The level of residential satisfaction concerning tourism aligns with the support that residents show towards tourism development, and besides, residents are more likely to protest tourism development once this dissatisfaction with the development grows. As a result, a greater need for sustainable tourism is arising in countries that are hugely affected by negative forms of tourism development (Woo et al., 2022).

### **1.1.2 The negative impact of touristification on ecotourism development**

Ecotourism is seen as a new and more sustainable form of tourism, which focuses on “nature conservation, community development, and education and learning” (Fennel, 2014: *Abstract*). Ecotourism places the natural and cultural resources at the forefront of

development, instead of as an afterthought, which is the case with mass tourism (Fennel, 2014). The process of touristification, which is often associated with mass tourism, can have many negative impacts on the development of ecotourism, due to the lack of attention for nature preservation and sustainability. However, the alternative version of tourism can never fully replace mass tourism and should therefore try to reform the negative aspects of touristification (Cohen, 1987, in Fennel, 2014). Mass tourism remains popular, due to the general benefits for the country's economy, and the fact that many tourists enjoy being a part of mass tourism (Butler, 1990, in Fennel, 2014).

Despite the difficulty to fully replace mass tourism, the increase of touristification is still seen as a great threat to the development of ecotourism. The term *ecotourism* was defined by Ceballos-Lascuráin in the early 1980s (Thompson, 1995, in Fennel, 2014). He defined the term as "travelling to relatively undisturbed or uncontaminated natural areas with the specific objective of studying, admiring, and enjoying the scenery and its wild plants and animals, as well as any existing cultural manifestations (both past and present) found in these areas" (Boo, 1990, in Fennel, 2014: 9). Early scholars already identified the problems that mass tourism could cause, and they saw the need for a more sustainable version of tourism. Consequently, mass tourism is frequently criticised by scholars, as well as by the inhabitants of popular tourism destinations. Mass tourism is known to dominate the entire tourism sector within a region, and most of the time mass tourism does not guarantee a higher income rate for the tourism destination (Fennel, 2014).

Touristification has both negative impacts for the local community, as well as for the general development of ecotourism and the environment. The process of touristification can lead to the disintegration or displacement of communities, which results in the feeling of disruption of the daily lives of the local community (Cocola-Gant, 2023). Furthermore, the disintegration of material resources within a tourism area can result in frustrations and loss of place amongst the residents of the area (Cocola-Gant, 2023). Besides the displacement of communities, touristification also impacts the amounts of noise pollution and the building of new tourism establishments, such as hotels and restaurants, which is detrimental to the environment. Both gentrification and touristification can be seen as major actors in noise pollution, unsafety, and general waste pollution of an area (Del Romero Renau, 2018). In this case, gentrification and touristification are similar terms, and can be identified as the "transformation of a working-class or middle-class neighbourhood into a relatively affluent and exclusive enclave marked by proliferation of corporate entertainment and tourism venues" (Gotham, 2005, in Del Romero Renau, 2018: 13). On the long term, both gentrification and touristification have negative impacts on the environment.

### **1.1.3 Growing demand for a more sustainable tourism policy**

In the beginning of the twenty-first century, tourism was seen as the world's leading industry (WTO, 2007, in Wearing & Neil, 2009). Many countries value tourism, due to the major developments within the industry, and therefore, the tourism sector holds a prominent position in advancing development strategies (Wearing & Neil, 2009). Despite

the stimulation that tourism can bring to the economy, many countries began to question the environmental implications. Consequently, the need and the realisation for a more sustainable form of tourism started to grow. In a brief period, the attention for ecotourism started to spread amongst various communities, local governments, and international environmental organisations (Wearing & Neil, 2009). Active protection of the environment and the natural surroundings is part of the responsibilities of the tourism destination (Chafe, 2005, in Wearing & Neil, 2009). In addition, ecotourism is viewed as a source to promote scientific research and nature conservation, as well as the creating of benefits for the local communities and the promoting of development and sensible tourism in poor countries (Honey, 2008). The United Nations designated the year 2002 as 'The Year of Ecotourism,' due to the tourism industry embracing ecotourism in various nations, and even in many developing countries (Wearing & Neil, 2009).

The ideas for a more sustainable form of tourism already arose in the late 1960s and early 1970s, when environmental concern started to grow, due to the inappropriate use of natural resources within the tourism sector (Nelson, 1994, in Fennel, 2014). Ecotourism is not just a recreational trend, but this form of sustainable tourism can be seen as a shift in the way that tourists interact with nature (Chafe, 2005, 2007, in Wearing & Neil, 2009). Aspects of sustainable tourism include the reduction of fossil fuels, the reduction of emissions from public transportation, and the reduction of water spillage (Robinson et al., 2020). Sustainable tourism is an alternative form of mass tourism that is known in many tourism destinations. Ecotourism encompasses more than just the care for the environment and the community (Ioannides et al., 2001, in Wearing & Neil, 2009). Ecotourism includes both the desire to preserve nature, as well as the enjoyment of nature, and therefore the term is based on the merging of these two dimensions (Valentine, 1993, in Wearing & Neil, 2009). With the rise of sustainable tourism, many countries also viewed opportunities for free trade, privatisation, and governmental deregulation (Honey, 2008). Furthermore, ecotourism development was an exciting change of pace for developing countries, in which economic development and environmental protection could lead to economic growth within these countries (Honey, 2008).

Besides environmental concern, ecotourism is also based on the spreading of knowledge and awareness of environmental sustainability. Both the local community and the tourists must understand the need for environmental preservation. Ecotourism opportunities will be lost if the biodiversity and the physical appearance of a destination are significantly altered. Therefore, the planning for ecotourism is based on resource limitations (Wearing & Neil, 2009). According to The World Tourism Organization (WTO) (2004), the premises of sustainable tourism should be based on three factors: the preservation of the natural heritage and biodiversity by making optimal use of the environmental recourses; the respecting of the socio-cultural authenticity of the host communities; and the ensuring of viable, long-term economic operations, whereby socio-economic benefits are provided and evenly distributed to all the stakeholders, in order to reduce poverty in the area (in Wearing & Neil, 2009). To fully achieve a sense of ecotourism, all the involved stakeholders should participate. The achievement of this

sustainable tourism is an ongoing process, which requires the constant monitoring of impacts, and preventive measures should be introduced whenever necessary. In addition, ecotourism should maintain a prominent level of tourist satisfaction, and sustainable tourism practices should be promoted to tourists along the way (WTO, 2004, in Wearing & Neil, 2009).

## **1.2 Tourism, ecotourism, and ethnic-tourism: what is the difference?**

Various kinds of tourism exist within the overall larger tourism sector. While some tourists visit a destination to discover and enjoy the pure nature and the tourist activities, other tourists are more interested in getting to know a new culture, heritage or ethnic community. This form of tourism is better known as ethnic-tourism (Mukatova et al., 2022).<sup>1</sup> According to Xie (2010), authenticity within the tourism sector can be a powerful marketing tool since many tourists seek meaningful and authentic experiences while travelling. Ethnic-tourism attracts visitors who enjoy authentic experiences, in addition to the showcasing of ethnic distinctiveness (Urry, 2002, in Xie, 2010). While ethnic-tourism is based on the authentic cultural experience in a region, this form of tourism, just like any other kind of tourism, is focused on generating income for the ethnic communities within the tourism destination (Xie, 2010). Ethnic-tourism is often associated with cultural tourism since both forms are focused on the showcasing of authentic and Indigenous customs. Nevertheless, cultural tourism is more focused on the intertwining of cultural and natural resources (Xie, 2010). Ethnic-tourism shows the 'primitive other,' while cultural tourism is more used for the high arts in the developed nations (Cole, 2006, in Xie, 2010).

While an important side effect of tourism is the stimulation of the economy, and the generation of income for the local community, not all forms of tourism have the same main goal. An important aspect of tourism is leisure and recreation. However, at the same time, the industry is also based on various experiences and expectations (Robinson et al., 2020). The various forms of tourism offer different possibilities. Ecotourism, for example, is concerned with the preservation of the natural environment (Fennel, 2014). Likewise, ethnic tourists are mostly interested in the cultural customs and the unique ethnicity of an ethnic population (Mukatova et al., 2022). According to Xie (2010), ethnic-tourism refers to tourism activities, in which the ethnic community is directly or indirectly involved, and, in most cases, the ethnic culture is offered as the centre of the attraction within the tourism activity (Xie, 2010). Nonetheless, ethnic-tourism does not always have to be centred around an ethnic culture. In some cases, a form of tourism can also be identified as ethnic, once the owner of a hotel or tourism business belongs to an ethnic community (Notzke, 2004, in Xie, 2010). In this case, ethnic-tourism might be harder to separate from more standard forms of tourism.

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<sup>1</sup> For example, many tourists travel to Bolivia for the untouched ethnic cultures, and the unspoiled natural landscapes and ethnic images have also been used to promote holidays in Bolivia (Xie, 2010).

Three diverse kinds of ethnic-tourism exist: ethnic-controlled businesses that do not feature any ethnic activities; tourist activities that feature ethnic culture but are not controlled by ethnic people; and ethnic-controlled businesses that are centred around ethnicity (Xie, 2010). The last form of ethnic-tourism is also known as cultural ethnic-tourism, in which the focus lies on native culture. This form of ethnic-tourism has a direct impact on ethnic communities (Xie, 2010). Ethnic-tourism involves four crucial elements: the habitat, the heritage, the history, and the marketable handcrafts (Smith, 1989, in Xie, 2010). These elements are unique for ethnic-tourism. Therefore, this type of tourism is easier to distinguish from other kinds of tourism. Within ecotourism, the care for the local community and the preservation of their culture is also a crucial element (Wearing & Neil, 2009). However, the preservation of ethnic identity and culture is more recognisable within ethno-tourism. In addition, the main objectives of ethno-tourism differ more from the main objectives of mass tourism or beach resort tourism, in which the main elements are sun, sea, sand, and sex (Smith, 1989, in Xie, 2010).

Despite the unique elements of all the several types of tourism, all these forms have one major element in common. All three types of tourism are susceptible to change, due to “global modernity” and “tourism mobility” that modified culture and heritage (Sheller & Urry, 2004, in Xie, 2010: 9). Ethnic culture continues to change within the environment that it exists in, due to the tourism and economic impacts, as well as the globalisation of knowledge (Xie, 2010). In a way, the changes within the tourism sector can have an impact on the way that ethnic-tourism is portrayed in an area. Similarly, globalisation, culture changes, and knowledge can also have major consequences for the development of other types of tourism, including ecotourism.

### **1.2.1 The impact of ethnic-tourism on the development of the tourism industry**

Changes within the tourism sector can be impactful for the development of ethnic-tourism. Likewise, ethnic-tourism can also have consequences for the development of the tourism industry. Tourism development can have implications for the construction and transformation of identities within the increasingly globalised world, in which there is a growing interest in cultural and ethnic-tourism (Picard & Wood, 1997, in Borges de Lima & King, 2017). Ethnic communities are transmitting their cultures and beliefs onto the tourism industry, in order to relate to the developments within this sector (Campos et al., 2014, in Borges de Lima & King, 2017).

Tourism is often considered to be an experience, which is based on people’s own interests and goals. Robinson et al. (2020) argue that one of the aspects of tourism includes the heterogeneity of tourism, which suggests that every experience within tourism is different, and is based upon the tourists and the provided facilities, as well as the customers’ previous experiences and expectations. Therefore, one can assume that tourism is an extended term, which covers many distinct aspects and subjective experiences. Medlik and Middleton (1973) define tourism as an umbrella term, which covers a tourist’s whole experience, from the time the tourist leaves home to the time this

same tourist returns home, describing the tourist experience as a sum of many different components (in Robinson et al., 2020).

Due to the rise in ethnic-tourism, more opportunities for ethnic identity, cultural expressions, and interactions with local communities are made possible within the tourism sector. In the past this might have seemed unusual to tourists (Mukatova et al., 2022). According to these authors, the development of ethnic-tourism also involves the cooperation between tourists and residents in organizing specific ethnic related activities. Ethnic-tourism, therefore, requires a certain amount of cooperation and input from the tourists, which might not have been necessary within certain kinds of mass tourism. Since ethnic-tourism is based on ethnic and authentic cultures, there is a significant importance in preserving these cultures. Ethnic-tourism, just like ecotourism, therefore, impacts the tourism industry by stimulating the need for more sustainable tourism practices. Verner & Solo (2009) illustrate that ethnic and Indigenous Peoples within Latin-America have their own self-managed tourism programme, which is based on sustainability, to preserve their community, culture, and traditions. In doing so, ethnic-tourism can result in impactful alterations within the tourism industry.

### **1.3 The rise of greenwashing to build on a green image**

While the tourism industry changes to a more modernised and sustainable industry, there are many businesses that take advantage of this developing industry. The current society faces many humanely inflicted environmental challenges, which resulted in the establishment of sustainable and environmentally friendly measures. According to Miller (2017), the world and environment are changing in a way that can be very disastrous. For this reason, many industries are adapting and they are taking on more eco-friendly policies. This is also the case for the tourism industry, which is implementing more sustainability measures, due to the developing ecotourism sector. To achieve success within this changing industry, there is a growing need for tourism businesses to implement more sustainable strategies. Nonetheless, many of these so-called sustainable enterprises are not adhering to the eco-friendly measures. Deceitful forms of ecotourism can have major harmful impacts for the environment (Miller, 2017). Greenwashing is a concept for the misleading of consumers about a company's environmental actions and policies, and the environmental advantages of a product. The term greenwashing is derived from the words 'green' and 'brainwashing' (Mitchell & Ramey, 2011, in Bernini & La Rosa, 2024). The misleading of these actions often combines positive sustainability promotions with poor environmental actions and performance (Delmas & Burbano, 2011, in Bowen, 2014).

Miller (2017) discusses the idea of culture being amongst the main causes of greenwashing. Cultural institutions inflict harm to the environment by promoting themselves as good environmental and sustainable corporations. Many of these deceitful environmental companies continue to use harmful sources and they generate a lot of pollution, while promoting themselves as eco-friendly within the sustainable culture.

These actions result in serious forms of greenwashing (Miller, 2017). Culture, as one of the significant causes of greenwashing can lead to a dual problem. According to Miller (2017), cultural institutions leave their own ecological mark within society, while also providing symbolic cover for other polluters. Corporations were recommended that they must cease the rise in greenwashing (Chan & Sukhdev, 2012, in Miller, 2017). Despite this consultation, greenwashing continues to be a problem to this day.

Over the past few decades, more technologies and programmes have made it possible to reassure stakeholders about the green and environmental policies of a business (Bowen, 2014). This technical shift resulted in an increase in greenwashing, as businesses could more easily fake environmental responsibility using these technologies. By enhancing greenwashing, companies promote and communicate positive environmental information, which is not matched with the actual environmental policies (Bowen, 2014). According to Bowen (2014), more tools need to be designed to distinguish the actual eco-friendly businesses from the socially wasteful corporations.

Greenwashing by itself can be very harmful for the environment, due to the reluctance of multiple corporations to further sustainable development. In fact, greenwashing corporations can be more damaging to the environment, due to the implementation of wasteful resources and their neglect to promote sustainable forms of tourism. However, being identified as a sustainable corporation does not always signify promising environmental change. Bowen (2014) argues that corporate environmentalism is unfavourable for society when green solutions and sustainability policies do not have any actual impact on the confronting of environmental issues and damages. Within corporate environmentalism there are several ways to gain positive social evaluations within a corporation. Various eco-labels, pollution control technologies, and measurement and reporting systems can stimulate positive environmental outcomes (Bowen, 2014). According to Bowen (2014); however, these environmental solutions are merely symbolic, and therefore they are often addressed as misleading or even wasteful. To reduce these kinds of problems, performance-based eco-labels have been embraced to measure policy effectivity. These performance-based eco-labels implement strong and measurable standards that apply to each company and additionally they reduce the likelihood of symbolic corporate environmentalism, although not eliminating these symbolic effects completely (Bowen, 2014). By implementing legitimate eco-labels, genuine eco-friendly companies can be distinguished from greenwashing companies. Nonetheless, performance-based eco-labels are not completely flawless, and they occasionally provoke problems for the development of green solutions (Bowen, 2014).

### **1.3.1 The increasing degree of greenwashing in a changing modern world**

Despite the increase in sustainability awareness, dishonesty within the ecotourism sector has become more evident. Within ecotourism development there is a clear relationship between greenwashing and consumer awareness, and many tourists comprehend that consumerism is not very ecological responsible, but they nonetheless like to believe that ethical consumerism does exist (Williams, 2024). While plenty tourists are aware that

greenwashing exists, they occasionally still choose to buy a less eco-friendly product or take advantage of an unsustainable service. Companies can therefore easily exploit the ignorance and the gullibility of the consumers. In addition, greenwashing can be achieved by promoting or advertising an environmentally conscious product, whilst ignoring the amounts of waste pollution that the company generates (Bircsak et al., 2016). In doing so, companies not only benefit from the ignorance of consumers, but they try to conceal the truth by promoting sustainable actions. The ease of greenwashing has resulted in a rising threat of greenwashing being harmful for green innovation and green marketing (Dangelico & Vocalelli, 2017, in Williams, 2024). In addition, the greenwashing trend has failed to recognise the most important aspects of ecotourism (Rozzi et al., 2010). Greenwashing using misleading labels can decrease the consumer's trust in green products (Nyilasy et al., 2014, in Bircsak et al., 2016).

Williams (2024) makes a distinction between soft forms of greenwashing and hard forms of greenwashing. Many forms of greenwashing are therefore identified alongside a specific scale, which measures the intensity of greenwashing within a company. Soft forms of greenwashing include the showing of nature-based images to advertise sustainability, or the highlighting of good environmental behaviour, while playing down bad practices (Parguel et al., 2015, in Williams, 2024). Likewise, there are forms of hard greenwashing that include illegal deception and fraudulent behaviour (Siano et al., 2017, in Williams, 2024). Greenwashing can therefore vary from false advertisement to obscuring the truth about harmful actions (Bircsak et al., 2016). Greenwashing always occurs in the eye of the beholder (Seele & Gatti, 2017, in Williams, 2024). Moreover, sustainability advertising is based on individual choices (Gunderson, 2014, in Williams, 2024). Due to these individual choices within sustainability practices, individualisation has become a key aspect of greenwashing (Williams, 2024).

While various levels of greenwashing exist, distinguishing good companies from immoral companies is still challenging. It is therefore particularly challenging to identify the intensity of greenwashing within a company, which can result in misleading outcomes for consumers on the genuine ecological intentions and practices of a company (Jones, 2019, in Williams, 2024). Greenwashing attempts also mislead the consumer on the environmental impacts of the activities (Bircsak et al., 2016). In addition, greenwashing could invalidate significant efforts towards achieving eco-friendly certifications (Bircsak et al., 2016). These problems raise many critical questions about stricter governance and ways to address and prevent greenwashing (Williams, 2024). Since greenwashing can be very unreliable and unpredictable there is a greater need for strong governmental regulations on greenwashing and sustainability policies. According to Williams (2024), the European Union, for example, has already implemented a new law (the Directive on Green Claims) to hold companies responsible for their own policies, and to require them to justify all environmental claims and actions. This law should indicate the authenticity of company's sustainability policies. In doing so, consumers will be encouraged to make better individual decisions, which can help them actively perform within our growing sustainable society (European Commission, 2023, in Williams, 2024).

## **CHAPTER 2**

# **COSTA RICA AND THE BIRTH OF ECOTOURISM**

### **2.1 The context of ecotourism within Costa Rica**

Costa Rica stands out as a leader in the field of ecotourism. In the 1980s, Costa Rica already had an admirable environmental ethic, which helped to shape various policies, and sustainability decisions within the country (Miller, 2012). Since these initial actions, Costa Rica has proceeded in the direction of ecotourism and sustainable development. Throughout this chapter, Costa Rica's nature preservation and ecotourism development will be discussed, alongside the socio-environmental implications that have struck the country, since the rise of greenwashing.

#### **2.1.1 Costa Rica, at the forefront of sustainable tourism**

Costa Rica, a country filled with many beaches and volcanoes, is well visited by foreign tourists. Since 1975, Costa Rica has had an exponential growth in the tourism sector. According to Zamora and Obando (2001), around 1 million tourists have visited the country since the turn of the twenty-first century. In addition, the amount of ecotourists has also increased immensely. A big amount of these ecotourists visit from the United States of America. According to Colla (2012), most US ecotourists range between the ages of 35 to 54, and most of them are physically active and well educated. Many of these ecotourists, therefore, share a certain interest in learning about diverse cultures and nature (Colla, 2012). Most ecotourists either fall into the category of a dual income family without any children or a couple whose children are already fully grown (Honey, in Colla, 2012). Even so, ecotourism is slowly starting to gain interest amongst young professional women and families who are travelling with multiple generations (Colla, 2012). Costa Rica still has many untouched natural areas that hold an extensive biodiversity. However, many ecotourists also travel to Costa Rica to visit the beach, observe flora and fauna, zipline, snorkel and raft, as well as the visiting of national parks (Instituto Costarricense de Turismo (ICT), 2005, in Honey, 2008).

During the 1970s, Costa Rica became very advanced in creating a more eco-friendly and sustainable form of tourism. Jones and Spadafora (2017) argue that Costa Rica stood at the forefront of ecotourism during the last three decades of the twentieth century. Costa Rica was a convenient location for the initial rise of ecotourism, due to the country's political stability, in contrast to its neighbouring countries, where military dictatorship was a big part of the nation's basic structure (Keller et al., 2013). Ecotourism developments were visible in many aspects of the Costa Rican tourism sector. According to Honey (2008), the number of ecotourism-based accommodations had increased from 300

establishments in 1990 to 2,500 establishments in 2007. In addition, 61 hotels were certified by Costa Rica's CST in 2007.

**Figure 1:** Location of Four Main Ecotourism Locations in Costa Rica



**Source:** Location of the four case study areas. Adapted from Koens, J.F., Dieperink, C. & Miranda, M. (2009). Used under CC-BY-NC license (non-commercial academic use).

While the necessity for an eco-friendly tourism sector might be evident, its implementation is not always assured in every country. In the case of Costa Rica, however, many favourable conditions facilitated the construction of the ecotourism sector. Costa Rica is home to 4 to 5 percent of the world's biodiversity, which increased the need for nature and land preservation (Jones & Spadafora, 2017). According to Sánchez (2018), about 25 percent of the natural areas within Costa Rica is considered to fall under the protected areas. Due to the wide variety in nature and the many protected areas within the country, many Costa Ricans began to recognise the importance of environmentalism. These conditions have helped Costa Rica to develop a more sustainable form of tourism throughout the second half of the twentieth century. As of today, Costa Rica has a few desired locations, where ecotourists are drawn to. Amongst these locations are Monteverde, Manuel Antonio, and Tortuguero (Koens et al., 2009) (see Figure 1). According to Yoon (2001), the Monteverde Cloud Forest is a beloved tourist location for ecotourists, although the protected area is at risk of losing its natural beauty and conservation, due to the large amounts of deforestation. According to Honey (2008), Corcovado National Park is also a significant area, in which ecotourism is quickly developing. Likewise, the Guanacaste Conservation Area has become a centre of innovation for conservation research (Honey, 2008). The Arenal National Park received 27,209 national tourists and 92,592 foreign tourists in 2019. In addition, the Caño Negro National Wildlife Refuge had an amount of 7,286 national tourists in 2019 and 12,025 foreign tourists (ICT, in Carvache-Franco et al., 2021). In the same study of tourists visiting

the Caño Negro National Wildlife Refuge and the Arenal National Park in 2019, most ecotourists originated from the continents of North America and Europe (Carvache-Franco et al., 2021).

**Table 1:** Origins of Tourists Visiting Arenal National Park and Caño Negro National Wildlife Refuge in 2019

Origin	%
North America	32.3
Europe	36.8
South America	4.5
Asia	3.9
Other	22.6

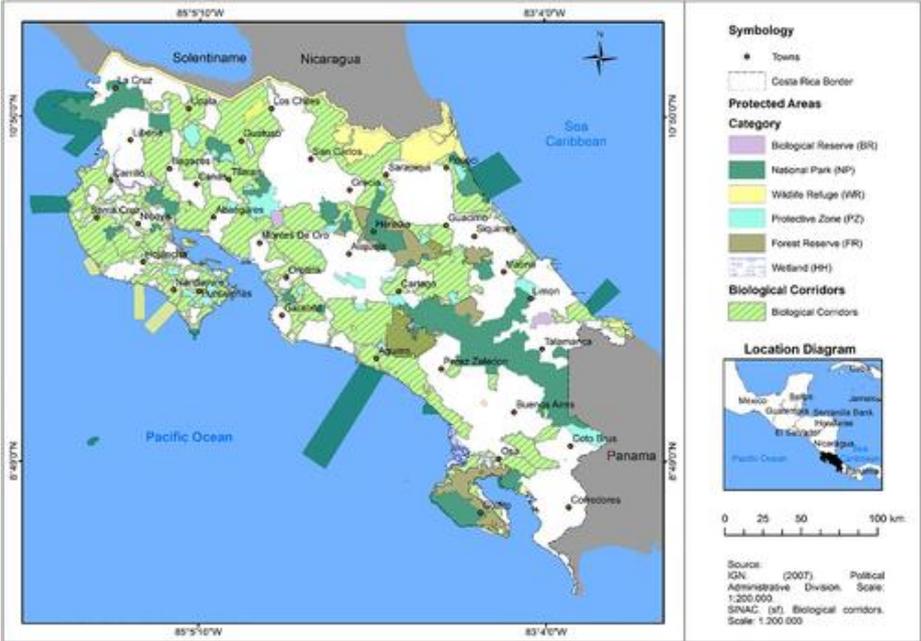
**Source:** Adapted from Carvache-Franco et al. (2021). Used under CC BY 4.0 license.

Besides many favourable conditions, Costa Rica also endured a lot of deforestation, due to the development of infrastructure and mass tourism. According to Jones and Spadafora (2017), Costa Rica lost 2.5 million hectares of forest between 1940 and 1980. By the 1980s, Costa Rica experienced one of the largest deforestation rates within all Latin America, which resulted in an environmental crisis and a higher need for environmental and nature development (Sánchez, 2018). The effects of deforestation and global warming were also visible in the Monteverde Cloud Forest, despite the many efforts to preserve the nature in the area. The effects were most significantly visible within the changes in the ecosystems, and there was a noticeable decrease in the variety of the fauna in the region, resulting in the disappearance of Monteverde’s golden toad (Yoon, 2001). Eventually, the enormous amounts of deforestations resulted in a change in the national public policies, and the creation of protected national parks within the country (Sánchez, 2018).

The concept of ecotourism had many different names and definitions when the approach first emerged into the world. Miller (2012) identifies the prior descriptions of ecotourism as adventure tourism, geo-tourism, and pro-poor tourism. Despite the many different names, the definitions of the concepts are remarkably similar, and they all relate to the terms “sustainable”, “responsible”, and “green” (Miller, 2012: 3). (Eco)tourism exists in two different forms: hard tourism and soft tourism. Hard tourism includes activities that are much more challenging, such as scuba diving, caving, and rock climbing, whereas soft tourism usually includes less challenging activities, such as hiking and camping (Colla, 2012). One of the most relevant and most recognisable reasons for the development of ecotourism was related to the increase in nature destruction. Nonetheless, Bhatt and Liyakhat (2008) argue that one of the main reasons for the development of ecotourism emerged from the many destructions that mass tourism caused all around the world (in Miller, 2012). In the case of Costa Rica, the interest in sustainable development rose from the substandard impacts that both mass tourism and deforestation had on the country’s nature and biodiversity. During the 1980s, Costa Rica developed the National Parks System, which created possibilities for nature preservation and wildlife refuges (see

Figure 2). In addition, the government implemented different environmental laws, which would prevent nature destructive practices (Sánchez, 2018).

**Figure 2:** Protected Areas and Ecological Corridors in Costa Rica



**Source:** Protected areas and ecological corridors, Costa Rica. Adapted from Beita, C.M., Murillo, L.F.S. & Alvarado, L.D.A. (2021). Used under CC BY 4.0 license.

The rise of ecotourism had many positive consequences. While nature preservation and sustainability were amongst the most important outcomes of ecotourism development, an improved and enhanced economy was also at the forefront of positive outcomes. Horton (2009) argues that Costa Ricans who are employed or own businesses in the Puerto Jiménez area see an overall positive effect of ecotourism on economic development. Amongst the biggest economic improvements of ecotourism are the new employment opportunities within the ecotourism sector. According to Horton (2009), ecotourism was able to offer income-generating possibilities for the residents in the Osa Peninsula. Scheyvens (1999), even goes as far as arguing that small-scale ecotourism offers increased possibilities and opportunities for the local community to get more control over the area (in Horton, 2009). Despite the generation of new work-related opportunities and the shift in power, the implementation of ecotourism does not always secure these positive outcomes.

**2.1.1 Innovative government sustainability measures**

When the interest in ecotourism increased from the 1960s onwards, many companies and private institutions implemented sustainability measures and laws to decrease environmental destruction. Initially, significant strategies included reforestation programmes and the protection of natural areas. In addition, certain laws were

constructed, to reform the sustainability standards within the tourism sector, such as the eco-friendly protocols in hotels and resorts (Sánchez, 2018). Within the Costa Rican government, ecotourism is considered a crucial aspect. In 1998, the National System of Conservation Areas (SINAC) transpired to construct conservation strategies and to encourage sustainable development and the management of the natural resources in Costa Rica (SINAC, 2017a, in Sánchez, 2018). SINAC is responsible for forestry, the protection of the natural areas and biodiversity, and the conservation of the water systems in Costa Rica (Sánchez, 2018). Various institutions and private sectors are responsible for the establishment and the performance of SINAC. The execution of the organisation is managed by the cooperation of the state, local public entities, and the private sector (Sánchez, 2018). An important part of ecotourism development focuses on the educational aspect of sustainability. While the focus of SINAC is the preservation of the biodiversity and the natural resources, the government also constructed nonprofit organisations that aim to spread awareness and knowledge amongst people in Costa Rica. An example of a nonprofit organisation, which is based on the spreading of knowledge and awareness is the Organisation for Tropical Studies (OTS) (Sánchez, 2018). This organisation was established in 1963, during the initial stages of ecotourism development. OTS has reached the interest from universities and learning centres from all around the world, and the organisation aspires to strengthen education and research into tropical biology (Sánchez, 2018).

The protection of national parks is considered a significant factor in increasing awareness of ecotourism development (Keller et al., 2013). The establishment of the national park system took place in 1977, and this was considered one of the first stepping stones to nature preservation. The system was aimed at decreasing deforestation rates that had immensely increased during the years leading up to the establishment of the national park system (Keller et al., 2013). Not long after the establishment of this system, the Ministry for Environment and Energy introduced a new strategy that was designed to reconstruct numerous sectors within Costa Rica, including the tourism sector (Quesada Mateo, 1990, in Keller et al., 2013). This strategy, better known as the Conservation Strategy for Sustainable Development, laid the first groundwork for the promotion of other policies to develop sustainable tourism. This conservation strategy was intricately linked to the strategy of the national park system, and this cooperation, amongst the implementation of other sustainability policies, paved the way for contemporary ecotourism measures. In addition, institutions, such as the Costa Rican Institute of Tourism (ICT) have facilitated ecotourism development, by promoting the country's ecological worth to the rest of the world (Courvisanos & Jain, 2006).

In 1994, the first initiatives for the Certification for Sustainable Tourism (CST) were introduced by ICT officials and this certificate was meant to offer inspections on how hotels performed in the field of waste management, water consumption, and the effects on the flora, fauna, and the local community (Jones & Spadafora, 2017). The CST considers three important points to which a hotel or ecotourism accommodation is measured: environmental actions, economic actions, and social actions (Honey, 2008). The checklist contains 153 performance questions, which can be answered by either yes or no, and they

are categorised in four distinct categories: hotel facilities, guest services, physical-biological environment, and socioeconomic environment (Honey, 2008). Depending on the score, hotels can receive up to five 'green' leaves, which indicate the sustainability performance of a hotel (Honey, 2008). This certification system is just one of the systems that Costa Rica employs to distinguish the eco-friendly businesses from the ecological destructive businesses. Today, Costa Rica has a carefully constructed set of policies, according to the National Plan for Sustainable Tourism, and the tourism sector works with certification tools to stimulate ecotourism (Keller et al., 2013).

### **2.1.2 Towards a sustainable future and the creation of a green image**

Costa Rica is ahead of many other world nations in the field of sustainable development. The country is renowned for its active role in promoting organic farming and for the measures that are taken against climate change (Valenciano-Salazar et al., 2022). Costa Rica is striving to become a carbon neutral country in 2050 (United Nations Environment Programme, 2019, in Valenciano-Salazar et al., 2022). While Costa Rica is an important nation within the ecotourism development, the country has been working on its green image for many decades. In 1992, Costa Rica received an international prize for its recognisable green image (Isla, 2015). The greening of Costa Rica was a prolonged process, which indicated the implementation of all kinds of novel resources, such as new labourers and new experts (Isla, 2015). Throughout this process of sustainable development, Costa Rica obtained support from multiple organisations and countries, under which the United States. The United States Agency for International Development (USAID) helped Costa Rica to preserve its nature, and to transform the natural areas into conservation areas. This type of conservation area is defined as "a designated domain where private and public activities are interrelated in order to manage and conserve the area's nature for capital accumulation" (Isla, 2015: 5).

In 1989, the Sistema Nacional de Areas de Conservación (SINAC)<sup>2</sup> was introduced in Costa Rica to manage and preserve wildlife, private lands, and human settlements. This management was supervised by the Ministry of the Environment and Energy (MINAE), who actively worked together with the SINAC (Isla, 2015). Costa Rica coordinated various important agencies and national policies to support and improve nature preservation. This coordination was increased during the mid-1980s, when the Ministry of Environment was able to coordinate many of these agencies (Silva, 2002). The development of ecotourism and the emergence of nature reserves in Costa Rica have enabled "ecological modernisation" (Silva, 2002: 148). Besides ecotourism development and nature conservation, Costa Rica is also making good efforts in regard to low emission zones and the creation of renewable energy. One of Costa Rica's goals was to achieve almost a 100 percent renewable energy by 2015 (Irazábal, 2018).

One of the biggest green improvements is the ecotourism development within Costa Rica and since the expansion of the protected natural areas and the establishment

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<sup>2</sup> National System of Conservation Areas.

of the protected national parks in the 1970s and the 1980s, Costa Rica has been seen as the “world leader” in ecotourism (Miller, 2012, in Irazábal, 2018: 887). Throughout the decades of ecological development, significant companies, organisations, and entrepreneurial start-ups co-created this ecotourism development. These organisations offered eco-friendly tours, provided resource-efficient accommodations, and operated private reserves (Jones & Spadafora, 2017). Alongside eco-friendly measures within the tourism sector, Costa Rica also approved the Forestry Law, which preserved the national forests. This law was closely intertwined with ecotourism and envisioned natural conservation, eco-friendly tourism, research, and controlled extraction of wood and other natural resources (Jones & Spadafora, 2017). Despite great sustainability and eco-friendly measures, Costa Rica encountered multiple challenges, about ecotourism development and the maintaining of a green image.

### **2.1.3 The impact of ecotourism on local people and wildlife in Costa Rica**

Although Costa Rica is steadily advancing to promote ecotourism and sustainability, the country is facing certain challenges related to the general impacts of ecotourism on the local community and the wildlife. According to Broadbent et al. (2012), Costa Rica faces both challenges and opportunities in its efforts to conserve biodiversity. In contrast to mass tourism, sustainable tourism has a lot of potential for the conservation of natural areas. However, many conservation strategies differ immensely between areas that are often visited by tourists and areas that are left untouched (Broadbent et al., 2012). Ecotourism destinations are often characterised by fragile ecosystems and endangered flora and fauna (Jacobson & López, 1994). Due to sustainability measures, the original aspects of a natural area can be changed. These changes in land management are inter-related with alterations in the social and economic dynamics of the residents (Almeyda Zambrano et al., 2010b, in Broadbent et al., 2012). Besides impacts on the local community and the wildlife, the development of ecotourism and nature preservation also had magnificent consequences for the major amounts of deforestation that occurred in Costa Rica. In the area around Manuel Antonio National Park, natural areas increased from 90% to 98% between 1985 and 2008 (Broadbent et al., 2012).

Ecotourism was perceived to have many socio-economic benefits. However, ecotourism also resulted in the increase of product and land prices. Nonetheless, ecotourism development could result in economic benefits for people who already were active within the tourism sector (Broadbent et al., 2012). According to Horton (2009), Costa Ricans who are directly employed within the ecotourism sector, or residents who indirectly benefit from ecotourism, believe this sector to have a positive impact on the economy within the ecotourism destinations. In addition, small-scale ecotourism can result in better opportunities and chances for local power and control for the local community (Scheyvens, 1999, in Horton, 2009). However, the development of ecotourism does not always guarantee this shift in power. In some cases, North Americans and Europeans hold the economic power within the ecotourism destinations, which means that the local community does not per se benefit from ecotourism. This is the case on the

Osa Peninsula, due to the enormous amounts of preserved land that is controlled by North Americans and Europeans (Cobrudes, 1997, in Horton, 2009). Likewise, Rock (1996) discusses that improvements within the local household economy does not always link to better awareness for nature preservation (in Broadbent et al., 2012). In contrast, occasionally household economic improvements can lead to environmental degradation. This problem portrays one of the examples of the impacts of ecotourism, which suggests that ecotourism development does not guarantee unconditional positive developments. Both the residents and the tourists can interact with ecotourism in diverse ways, which means that both the benefits and negative impacts can be experienced by people in ecotourism areas (Miller et al., 2023). The development of ecotourism within Costa Rica did result in certain changes within the ways that gender roles were portrayed. Women began to take on more active roles within the opening of businesses within the ecotourism sector (Horton, 2009). In addition, the rise of ecotourism was seen as a contributor to the development of medical services, environmental education, and other community projects (Horton, 2009).

In contrast to mass tourism, ecotourism aspires to protect the nature and the wildlife, while still being able to offer stimulating activities for tourists. Ecotourism has provided opportunities for collective mobilisation to address environmental issues (Horton, 2009). On the Osa Peninsula, many ecolodges try to keep the nearby nature mostly untouched, and they provide solar panel energy and eco-friendly waste control measures (Lapa Rios, 2002, in Horton, 2009). Nevertheless, ecotourism does not only result in positive impacts for the nature, and according to Broadbent et al. (2012), local communities still actively practice hunting activities within the protected areas, and actions of deforestation disrupt the natural habitats of the animals. In addition, ecotourists can potentially be even more harmful to the environment and the wildlife than regular tourists, because they actively approach wildlife and do not leave them in their natural habitat (Jacobson & López, 1994).<sup>3</sup>

## **2.2 Costa Rica, an attractive place for optimistic companies**

With the rise of ecotourism, many companies and small businesses began to perceive Costa Rica as an opportunistic country to settle. The rise of innovative ideas for conservation, biodiversity and environmentalism interested tourists, as well as entrepreneurs (Jones & Spadafora, 2016). Small entrepreneurial start-ups engaged in the facilitating of tours, accommodations, and private reserves (Jones & Spadafora, 2016). During the early days of ecotourism development, several American companies proved themselves to be useful in the educating of conservationists and the protecting of the natural areas and the biodiversity. Amongst these institutions was the Inter-American

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<sup>3</sup> A good example of this nature disruption due to ecotourism can be found in Manuel Antonio National Park, where overcrowdings, waste pollution, and the damaging of plants and animals is still a great concern (Honey, 1999; *Tico Times*, 1999b, in Horton, 2009).

Institute of Agricultural Sciences (CATIE), which was already established in Costa Rica (Jones & Spadafora, 2016). Both the Tropical Science Centre (TSC) and the Organisation for Tropical Studies (OTS), as North American founded organisations, played major roles within ecotourism development in Costa Rica (Evans, 1999; Fournier 1991, in Jones & Spadafora, 2016). Most of the early businesses that settled in Costa Rica and played a role in the development of ecotourism during the 1970s were businesses that were initiated by either Americans or Costa Ricans. Many companies were able to grow due to the rise of environmental awareness (Jones & Spadafora, 2016).

Besides foreign institutions participating in ecotourism development, the country also knows many foreigners and foreign institutions that settle in Costa Rica to benefit from the booming economy, due to ecotourism. According to Horton (2009), foreigners settle in Costa Rica to make big investments and to conduct tourism projects, which would result in them receiving all the profits. In the 1980s, the visitor amounts from the United States and Europe began to grow, which also resulted in a shift in foreign investments. According to Honey (2008), US investment in the Costa Rican tourism sector started to increase throughout the 1980s, due to the help of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), the World Bank, and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). However, not all companies are attracted to Costa Rica exclusively for the profits. According to Jones & Spadafora (2016), many early entrepreneurs were drawn to Costa Rica for the easy-going and simple lifestyle that the country offered, which allowed the entrepreneurs to start businesses that would entitle them to share their own values. Many of these entrepreneurs were interested in engaging with environmental development. As ecotourism gained more popularity, many big and profit-based international companies committed to investing in the sector. These foreign investments make it more challenging for the local communities to benefit from this specific part of ecotourism development (Braun et al., 2015). In addition, Costa Rica is challenged by the arrival of many of these elite foreign investors, due to the need to generate foreign exchange and comply with the terms of trade that are prioritised by the foreigners (Braun et al., 2015). As the ecotourism sector grows, the interest amongst big multinational companies grows as well. National, as well as foreign investment was used as a promoting technique to stimulate national development (Braun et al., 2015). Many multinationals, therefore, take the opportunity to expand within developing countries to access biodiverse tropics and to build lucrative foreign markets (Braun et al., 2015).

While many big companies seek to invest and expand within the Costa Rican ecotourism market, they still must align with the governmental ecotourism protocol. Nonetheless, these companies do not always obey by these sustainability measures, which can lead to forms of greenwashing within the company. According to Braun et al. (2015), this greenwashing can blur the distinctions between ecotourism and mass tourism. Moreover, the settlement of big corporal companies within the ecotourism market in Costa Rica can have many negative impacts on the actual development of the sector. Many profits made within the ecotourism sector are accumulated by corporate developers, which means that less profit goes to the local community. Additionally, when companies adhere more to the practices of mass tourism, instead of ecotourism, the land and resources can get

reorganised more towards the interests of foreign elites, rather than to the interests of the local community (Braun et al., 2015). From an opportunistic perspective, some local areas try to limit the interests of foreign capital, by prioritising the interests of the locals (Honey, 2008, in Braun et al., 2015).

### **2.2.1 The emergence of false sustainability**

Despite ecotourism having many positive prospects, the development causes certain concerns. Unfortunately, ecotourism can also result in less desirable outcomes, and simultaneously, greenwashing practices can result in the image of false sustainability, due to the blurring of the differences between mass tourism and ecotourism (Braun et al., 2015). Many of the sustainable strategies introduced were only partially effective. Likewise, the Costa Rican Institute of Tourism (ICT), which was supposed to protect the national parks never fully moved beyond the initial studies (Evans, 1999, in Jones & Spadafora, 2017). The ICT was therefore vastly criticised, due to the significant role that the Institute plays within the ecotourism development in Costa Rica. One of the major setbacks of the ICT was the fact that the Institute approved large and environmentally destructive developments, such as the build of major resorts. The ICT was therefore criticised for the lack of interest in stimulating green initiatives (Honey, 2008, in Jones & Spadafora, 2017).

The emergence of sustainability measures and ecotourism within Costa Rica is expected to result in ecological modernisation. However, this is not fully the case. Silva (2002) argues that the development of ecotourism is not fully assisting the minimisation of waste pollution. While Costa Rica is striving towards the preservation of the natural areas, the problem of the massive amounts of waste pollution has yet to be addressed. Likewise, there is a lot of criticism on the national park system in Costa Rica. This system is poorly funded, and threatened by encroachment (Brockett & Gottfried, 2002, in Broadbent et al., 2012). Moreover, the development of ecotourism can result in patterns of stratification and exclusion, even in the areas in which foreign companies have not yet taken over the ecotourism sector (Horton, 2009). Furthermore, ecotourism development has many other drawbacks, and according to Koens et al. (2009), ecotourism can also result in biodiversity loss, growing dependency, inflation, growing crime rates, and degradation of the local culture. Many of these changes can be quite contradictory, since ecotourism is meant to minimise most of these problems. Since not all the consequences of ecotourism are desirable, many residents both engage and resist the new developments within the sector (Horton, 2009).

The creation of a green image for Costa Rica has both positive and negative impacts. Most of all, many aspects of ecotourism result in the preservation of the natural areas, as well as the minimisation of the destructive impacts of mass tourism. Nonetheless, this green image has enabled many businesses, with no regard for sustainability, to expand upon this promising image (Jones & Spadafora, 2016). This phenomenon resulted in an uneven overview of the actual intentions of many businesses, which could lead to misleading and unfair judgments on the operations of businesses with good intentions

(Jones & Spadafora, 2016). This process has many inconvenient impacts on the development of ecotourism because an expansion of the well-intended businesses is beneficial for Costa Rica (Jones & Spadafora, 2016). Without the development of eco-businesses, the ecotourism sector would not be able to expand any further.

### **2.3 The decreasing margin between ecotourism and greenwashing in Costa Rica, from a quantitative perspective**

With an increase in the amount of ecotourists that visit Costa Rica, the general interest in nature preservation has decreased within certain aspects, such as the interest in the well-being of the local community (Rozzi et al., 2010). This decrease occurred due to the confusion between two diverse types of tourism. An important aspect of ecotourism includes the cooperation with the local community, while many tourists think that tourism can be considered 'eco' once nature and adventure tourism are implemented by big hotel chains (Rozzi et al., 2010). This confusion can pose a big threat to sustainability. While many hotel chains do offer nature related activities, they do not always abide by the governmental rules of ecotourism. These misperceptions lead to greenwashing activities, whereby the tourism company misleads the customer about the environmental impacts of the service or product. In addition, multinational tourism companies, such as hotel chains and airlines, started to overshadow ecotourism-based companies (Rozzi et al., 2010). According to Bircsak et al. (2016), ecotourism businesses worry that greenwashing companies will completely overshadow their honest environmental claims. Overall, these illegitimate ecotourism policies have major impacts on the way that the margin between ecotourism and greenwashing is perceived. Schultis (2018) argues that greenwashing is a major problem within the ecotourism industry in Costa Rica, but nevertheless, the outrage that is provoked by greenwashing companies ensures other ecotourism businesses to stay honest about their policies.

Even though Costa Rica's reputation as the leading country in ecotourism increased, the government decided to both pursue policies that supported ecotourism projects, as well as the building of large corporal hotels (Honey, 2008). In 1987, the ICT, which was already criticised for its lack of support for ecotourism development, started a campaign to attract more foreign investment in luxury tourism resorts (Honey, 2008). From the 1990s onward, many big hotels and resorts started to emerge throughout the country. Tourism loans were handed to the United States, as well as to Costa Rican investors to support developments within the mass tourism sector (Honey, 2008). Since 1990, most of the big hotels in San José have been acquired by international companies, such as Marriott and Best Western (Honey, 2008). By the early 1990s, 80 percent of the properties at the beach had already been acquired by foreigners (Honey, 2008, in Rozzi et al., 2010). Environmentally destructive measures are occasionally taken during the

building of these large hotels and resorts.<sup>4</sup> Due to these destructive measures, the margin between ecotourism and greenwashing has decreased, because the controversy damaged the image of hotel owners and the government within their sustainability actions (Honey, 2008). Despite the developments within the ecotourism sector, the general number of tourists increased by the decade. The only exception was in 1986, when the amounts of foreign tourists had decreased by 111 thousand, in contrast to 1982 (see table 2 *infra*). Besides tourists, the amounts of hotel and resort rooms also massively increased throughout the years. Between 1985 and 1995, the number of hotel rooms had grown from 4,866 rooms to 12,000 rooms. In 2005, the amount had even increased to 16,696 registered rooms (Waters, 1994; Instituto Costarricense de Turismo (ICT), 2005, in Honey, 2008). Both the increase in regular tourists and the increase in hotel rooms did not have a positive influence on the tackling of greenwashing practices within Costa Rica.

**Table 2:** Amounts of Tourists Visiting Costa Rica Over the Years

Year	International tourist arrivals per thousands
1976	299
1982	372
1986	261
1990	435
1995	792
2000	1,088
2005	1,659

**Source:** Adapted from ICT, *Anuario Estadístico*, 1998, 2000, 2005, in Honey (2008).

Although large resorts continue to be constructed, governmental approval is not guaranteed. Environmental activists and members of the local community have tried to oppose the construction of these big tourism chains. These oppositions have stimulated multiple debates on the continuation of mega tourism projects (Honey, 2008). A significant problem in Costa Rica concerns the slow certification rate, whereby Costa Rican businesses are certified for their environmental policies. According to Bircsak et al. (2016), Costa Rican companies receive a slower certification rate than businesses in other ecotourism developing countries. Certifications with clear standards portray the authenticity of a company, while greenwashed companies lose the trust of their customers (Honey, 2002, in Bircsak et al., 2016). Despite the emergence of large resorts and greenwashing, which complicate the green image of Costa Rica’s tourism businesses, a considerable number of resorts have adopted some environmental reforms (Honey, 2008).

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<sup>4</sup> For example, during the construction of Hotel Tambor coastal regulations were ignored, and the homes of the original residents were burned, when they refused to be bought out (Honey, 2008).

### 2.3.1 The dangers of greenwashing for the development of a sustainable Costa Rica

With the rise of ecotourism, greenwashing practices also increased within Costa Rica. While greenwashing by itself can have negative impacts on the environment, the phenomenon can have undesirable impacts on the long-term development of sustainability in Costa Rica as well. Greenwashing can be a major concern in achieving authentic environmental certifications. With the rise in greenwashing, the legitimacy of authentic environmental policies and certifications can go unnoticed. Bircsak et al. (2016) argue that greenwashing can lead to mistrust or the creation of a poor image for legitimate environmental strategies. This is problematic for companies that aim to enhance more eco-friendly policies, because they might lose their position on the market (Furlow, 2010, in Bircsak et al., 2016). In addition, greenwashing can result in scepticism about ecotourism developments in general (Nyilasy et al., 2013, in Bircsak et al., 2016).

Despite the developing ecotourism sector in Costa Rica, many major tourism resorts have been built over the past couple of decades. While some resorts try to implement eco-friendly measures, other resorts are involved in environmental controversies (Honey, 2008). Symptoms of greenwashing cannot exclusively be found within the company policies, but rather greenwashing practices have already taken place during the construction of the resort. The local community is frequently bought out during the construction of new resorts and hotels. Sometimes this does not happen voluntarily, and results in the destruction of nature.<sup>5</sup> Nature preservation is compromised during the construction of mass tourism resorts, which on the long-term has major consequences for the further development of sustainability and ecotourism in Costa Rica.

Greenwashing does not only implicate ecotourism development, but this process can have major impacts on a socioeconomic level, as well as a psychological level, which can result in failed financial performance or failed marketing strategies (Bernini & La Rosa, 2024). According to Bernini and La Rosa (2024), transparency is crucial in creating economic value. Overall, greenwashing strategies can result in major setbacks for ecotourism development in Costa Rica, due to the lack of transparency and misperceptions resulting in a lack of trust amongst consumers. Stronger regulations and effective legal enforcement are crucial to distinguish the greenwashing companies from the eco-friendly businesses (De Simone et al., 2021, in Bernini & La Rosa, 2024).

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<sup>5</sup> Residents refused to be bought out during the construction of Hotel Tambor, which resulted in their houses being burned out. Later, the local community lost in their attempts to require environmental restitution (Honey, 2008).

## **CHAPTER 3**

# **ECOTOURISM AND GREENWASHING IN ANALYTICAL PERSPECTIVE**

### **3.1 Methodology and research approach**

Considering the growing significance of sustainable development, the development of ecotourism in Costa Rica is closely observed. Nonetheless, much remains unknown about the sector's progress and its potential impacts and implications. This lack of familiarity with the subject can lead to distinct interpretations among scholars regarding changes in the tourism sector, resulting in contradictory perspectives. This chapter will function as a primary source analysis, based on the views of (eco)tourists and experts within the Costa Rican tourism sector. In addition, tourist's individual opinions and experiences will be considered, in relation to the vastly developing ecotourism sector within Costa Rica. The first paragraph will dive into the methodology and will discuss the extensive resources that were used to conduct this descriptive mixed-methods study. Finally, the remainder of the chapter will be guided by a primary source analysis, based on data from the fieldwork, as well as a SWOT analysis.

#### **3.1.1 Methodology**

This section outlines the research strategies and the methodology employed to investigate ecotourism development and the rise of greenwashing in Costa Rica. The chapter discusses the chosen approach, dives into the specific research structures and forms of analysis and specifies the approach to data analysis. Both qualitative and quantitative forms of research were used, to get a better sense of tourist's individual experiences and governmental legislations, as mentioned by experts in the field of ecotourism. The interviews are exclusively based on qualitative forms of research, since the study explores personal perceptions and experiences, as well as individual opinions. In addition, surveys have been distributed amongst tourists in (eco)tourism destinations. These destinations included natural areas, such as national parks and nature reserves, as well as hotels, resorts, and ecotourism accommodations. The surveys adopt quantitative forms of research, resembling tourist's ratings on ecotourism measures and the presence of greenwashing regulations. Due to the adoption of a mixed-methods approach, the research fits within different study categories, such as exploratory and correlational forms of research. In addition, the research also fits within the parameters of a specific case study. Substantially, the interviews provide a clear overview of expert's opinions on governmental legislations on sustainability and greenwashing, which helps explore the growing forms of ecotourism development. Correspondingly, the statistics of the tourist

ratings create interesting correlations between the various variables presented in the surveys, resembling strict forms of a quantitative research approach.

**Figure 3:** Regions in Costa Rica



**Source:** Adapted from *Costa Rica regions map for use on Wikivoyage, English version*, by P. Fitzgerald (2008).

Research was conducted in five different regions: San José (San José Province), Puerto Viejo de Talamanca (Limón), Monteverde (Puntarenas), Uvita de Osa (Puntarenas), and La Fortuna (Alajuela) and the period in which it was conducted was approximately 2 weeks (July 11-25, 2024). Figure 3 indicates a map of Costa Rica, visualising some of the country’s most significant tourism regions that were visited during the stay. In addition to on-site research, a selection of interviews was conducted online via email, using a concise question-and-answer format. Participants studied in this research include both experts (knowledgeable employees working in the tourism sector and employees at (non)governmental institutions) as well as tourists. The choice of tourists who were studied was completely arbitrary and tourists originated from the United States, the United Kingdom, The Netherlands, Italy, Switzerland, Belgium, Austria, Mexico, Panama, and Costa Rica (see Appendix 5). Most of the tourists were approached in ecotourism accommodations, but a considerable number of tourists was also approached in national parks, such as Manuel Antonio National Park, Monteverde Cloud Forest Reserve and Selvatura Adventure Park. Although the sampling method was arbitrary, most tourists were approached in places that are considered tourist destinations. All tourists had different experiences with ecotourism and their profile differed per location. In total, 30 surveys were filled out (see Appendix 1). In the surveys, tourists were asked to rate multiple variables, including the efficiency of Costa Rica’s governmental actions, the sustainability measures of hotels and national parks, and the presence of greenwashing

practices. The interviews included relevant criteria, such as sustainable governmental actions, visible elements of greenwashing, personal sustainability measures, and environmental impacts of ecotourism and greenwashing. Furthermore, employees within the tourism sector were asked about the measures they had taken to promote sustainability and whether they intended to introduce further strategies in their respective establishments. The people interviewed were all employed within the tourism sector, and they worked in national parks, tourism accommodations, or (non)governmental institutions, such as the Costa Rican Institute of Tourism (ICT) and the Dutch Embassy in San José.

The interviews followed a structured format, although some questions were slightly adapted to suit the specific characteristics of each company; and each interview lasted 10 to 30 minutes, depending on the knowledge of the interviewee and the time available (see Appendix 2). Experts ranged from employees at governmental institutions to receptionists in hotels or resorts, and therefore, their expertise on the subject matter varied significantly. The time taken to complete surveys, however, was merely 10 minutes. In addition, the diverse levels of expertise on the topic of ecotourism in Costa Rica was significantly less noticeable amongst survey takers than amongst interviewees. Regardless, some surveys were completed more thoroughly than others, and all surveys provided relevant insights in the personal perspectives on ecotourism and the tourist's previous experiences within the field of ecotourism development and their encounters with greenwashing.

The quantitative data obtained from the surveys will be analysed using structured tables and graphs to provide a clear overview of how tourists rated various ecotourism practices. The selection for tables and graphs was made, due to their ability to provide a clear and comprehensible overview of the data. The data taken from the interviews will be analysed by means of a SWOT analysis and the data will be tested on its validity through the use of triangulation. This analysis will be useful to obtain a better understanding of expert's affiliation with ecotourism development, and more importantly; this schematic overview can provide clear and concise results. In addition, the interviews remain anonymous throughout the analysis, although the expert's professions are usually mentioned. Equivalently, tourist surveys are conducted anonymously in an analogous manner. No confidential or sensitive information was requested in either the interviews or the surveys. The chapter will continue with the interview analysis and will then proceed with an analysis of the survey data and the SWOT analysis.

### **3.2 The profile and ecotourism affiliation of the interview respondents**

From July 11, 2024, to July 25, 2024, semi-structured interviews were conducted with experts in Costa Rica. These interviews took place in the capital city of San José (San José Province), Puerto Viejo de Talamanca (Limón), Monteverde (Puntarenas), Uvita de Osa (Puntarenas), and La Fortuna (Alajuela). In total, 12 experts were interviewed, including 5 hotel/resort employees, 4 employees in national parks or nature reserves, 1 employee

at a travel agency, and 2 employees at governmental institutions. Not every interviewed person had the same personal relation to ecotourism. 1 of the interviews was conducted by email using a structured question-and-answer format. Solely 2 interviews were recorded, and from the other interviews notes were taken, and these notes were later documented in own words (see Appendix 3 for a list of the conducted interviews). Interviews were conducted in both English and Spanish, and in some cases a mixture of the two languages was used. In Table 3 *infra*, a schematic overview can be found on the job description of the experts and their personal/professional relation to ecotourism development:

**Table 3:** The Job Description and Ecotourism Affiliation of the Interviewees

Interviewee	Job Description	Ecotourism Affiliation
Interviewee 1	Hotel Manager	Ecotourism Hotel
Interviewee 2	Hotel Employee	Several eco-friendly measures taken in this hotel
Interviewee 3	Hotel Restaurant Employee	Several eco-friendly measures taken in this hotel
Interviewee 4	National Park Guide	Park recognised for ecotourism approach
Interviewee 5	Hotel Employee	Ecotourism Hotel
Interviewee 6	Cloud Forest Reserve Employee	Park recognised for ecotourism approach
Interviewee 7	Hotel Employee	Several eco-friendly measures taken in this hotel
Interviewee 8	Adventure Park Employee	Park recognised for ecotourism approach
Interviewee 9	Travel Agency Employee	No recognisable affiliation with ecotourism, although most travel agencies in Monteverde are sustainable
Interviewee 10	Animal Sanctuary Employee	Park recognised for ecotourism approach
Interviewee 11	Employee at Governmental Institution	Recognisable affiliation with ecotourism
Interviewee 12	Employee at the Dutch Embassy in San José	Recognisable affiliation with ecotourism

**Source:** own elaboration based on data collected through interviews (2024).

As shown in Table 3, all experts were affiliated with ecotourism in some capacity, although their levels of expertise on the subject varied. The employees at the governmental institutions were more experienced in the field of ecotourism, and they possessed a greater knowledge about greenwashing; but nonetheless, several national park employees were able to deliver similar amounts of significant information about greenwashing. Overall, experts employed at businesses that were fully recognised for their role in ecotourism development were more knowledgeable on governmental ecotourism legislations and the increasing rise of greenwashing practices, than employees at businesses that were not specifically recognised for their sustainability approach.

Therefore, some interviews were more valuable for this specific research than others. Nevertheless, interviews with less informed experts provided useful insights into awareness levels within the tourism sector concerning sustainable and ecotourism development.

### **3.2.1 Qualitative research results and analysis**

The 12 different interviews have provided interesting results, which can be analysed through the examination of various variables that have been derived from the interview questions. These variables are closely aligned to the variables that are distinctive in the sub-questions; however, they are slightly more extensive. The most prominent and relevant research elements include: sustainability initiatives and governmental actions; the presence of greenwashing; environmental impacts; and individual sustainability methods. The table in Appendix 4 shows the extent of experts' opinions on governmental regulations, environmental impacts, and the judgment on greenwashing practices.

As shown in the table in Appendix 4, many experts agree that there are indications of greenwashing in Costa Rica, although some express greater certainty regarding its negative impacts than others. According to the employee at the ICT (Interviewee 11, personal communication, July 24, 2024), there are definite signs of greenwashing in most countries, however, the situation in Costa Rica is slightly different. According to that same expert, the national parks are not always as sustainable as they claim to be, which results in forms of greenwashing. The level of greenwashing is visible in the type of activities that a park offers. Selvatura Adventure Park in Monteverde, for example, offers zip-line tours to tourists; however, these tours are not completely eco-friendly. The employee at Monteverde Cloud Forest Reserve (Interviewee 6, personal communication, July 18, 2024) confirms the idea that national parks in Costa Rica are not genuinely eco-friendly and he explains that there are still too many tourists in Manuel Antonio National Park all at once, resulting in overcrowdings and overall bad impacts for the environment. In addition, an employee at the Dutch Embassy in San José (Interviewee 12, personal communication, September 19, 2024) expands upon the ideas of greenwashing being harmful for the environment. According to him:

Of course, there are many genuine efforts in sustainability, however it is all too common for companies to make unverified sustainability claims. One example that comes to my mind is domestic banks that self-proclaim leaders in sustainability and green finance. However, they do not seem to me to be particularly transparent and do very little to contribute to financial education in a country where people are highly indebted due to bad financial habits. Rather, they promote more consumer credit, offer green loans at very high interest rates for SMEs, and finance questionable activities. Some of them are even involved in corruption allegations (Interviewee 12, personal communication, September 19, 2024).

Nevertheless, many experts were unable to deliver any information on the increasing rate of greenwashing in Costa Rica. In addition, an employee at Selvatura Adventure Park

(Interviewee 8, personal communication, July 21, 2024) believes that there are no signs of greenwashing in the city of Monteverde, because companies hold a certificate of sustainable awareness, and therefore most of these companies are upfront about their eco-policies.

The opinions on governmental regulations and environmental impacts were a little more nuanced, indicating that not all experts agreed that the government was taking sufficient measures to promote ecotourism and overall sustainability. Many interviewees confirmed that the government does implement several sustainability measures, but often lacks to execute regular check-ups. According to Interviewee 8 (Personal communication, July 21, 2024), the government does distribute certain sustainability certificates to separate the eco-friendly companies from the more wasteful companies. Moreover, the opinions on the environmental impacts of ecotourism are similarly controversial. Ecotourism is much more eco-friendly than regular tourism; yet even this form of tourism holds challenging aspects, such as the process of gentrification amongst the local communities (Interviewee 12, personal communication, September 19, 2024) and the domestication of wildlife within national parks (Interviewee 5, personal communication, July 17, 2024) (Interviewee 8, personal communication, July 21, 2024). Yet, ecotourism also provides insightful opportunities for the spreading of knowledge amongst both locals and tourists (Interviewee 7, personal communication, July 20, 2024).

The final relevant dimension for this analysis involves the sustainability practices adopted by individual companies. Table 4 *infra* presents a structured overview identifying the individual sustainability measures implemented by each company in which the experts are employed.

**Table 4:** Sustainability Actions Conducted in the Companies Where the Experts Work

Interviewee	Company’s sustainability actions
Interviewee 1 (Manager Sonora Jungle & Yoga Retreat)	Filtered water; collected water for laundry; recycling of rubbish; solar panels and lamps; growing of own fruits and vegetables; usage of local and eco-friendly products; cleaning products from Blue Tech; no bleach in pool water; water saving systems; vegan and vegetarian products; local and eco-friendly tours.
Interviewee 2 (Employee at Cristal Ballena Boutique Hotel & Spa)	Use of energy efficient bulbs and air conditioners; solar panels for water heating; minimisation of laundry; own water source; biodegradable products for cleaning; recycling of plastic and other waste; locally grown produce and organic salt; employees organise and participate in community clean-ups on the beaches of the national park; cooperation with local environmentalist NGO’s; donating of money and material to activities in the local community; supporting of eco-friendly projects.
Interviewee 3 (Waiter at Cristal Ballena Boutique Hotel & Spa)	See interviewee 2.
Interviewee 4 (Guide at Manuel Antonio National Park)	No food and plastic packaging allowed in the national park; no touching of the animals; wild animals are not allowed to be kept as pets.

Interviewee 5 (Employee at Hacienda Barú Lodge)	Elimination of the use of plastic; recycling of waste; usage of solar panels to create own energy; usage of a drinking well to create own drinking water; trying not to change the natural elements of the area; no use of cement within the trails in the area; research centre for the sharing of information on ecotourism with locals; the possibility to give environmental education; cooperation with eco-companies to preserve nature.
Interviewee 6 (Employee at Monteverde Cloud Forest Reserve)	Tourist money is spent on park improvements; minimisation of tourists entering the park trails at once; recycling of waste; organisation of conservation projects to help the community; ban on paper maps and single-use plastic.
Interviewee 7 (Employee at Sunset Vista Lodge)	Recycling; usage of cleaning products that do not contain harmful chemicals; no use of A/C.
Interviewee 8 (Employee Selvatura Adventure Park)	Collecting and reusing of water; solar lights; energy reduction; recycling of waste; preservation of nature; veterinarian check-ups for the animals.
Interviewee 9 (Employee Travel Agency Monteverde)	The promoting of eco-friendly and sustainable activities
Interviewee 10 (Employee Natuwa Wildlife Sanctuary)	Rescuing of animals and nurturing them back to health; preserving the natural areas.
Interviewee 11 (Employee Instituto Costarricense de Turismo (ICT))	Organisation of sustainable programmes; distribution of certifications to sustainable companies; clean water and energy.
Interviewee 12 (employee Dutch Embassy in San José)	Reduction of carbon footprint; promoting of climate action; certified carbon neutral embassy; cooperation with local programmes to reduce fuel, energy, and water consumption; recycling; education of staff; seeking of carbon neutrality; organising eco-friendly activities.

**Source:** own elaboration based on data collected through interviews (2024).

As evident from Table 4, all companies in which the experts are employed have implemented specific measures related to sustainability and ecotourism. In most cases, the companies support environmental policies by recycling waste, avoiding the use of harmful chemicals, and ensuring the welfare of animals. Other sustainability actions include the use of locally grown and organic products and the cooperation with eco-friendly companies to spread awareness and teach the local community about sustainability.

In the introduction, three different sub-questions were asked. The first research question —to what extent do Costa Rican tourism companies contribute to the creation and development of ecotourism— can be answered after analysing the information gathered from the interviews. All interviewees were asked about the sustainability measures implemented by their respective companies, and while each company adopts some form of sustainable practice, the extent of implementation varies. The most common measures included recycling, the collecting of (rain)water, the using of organic and more

eco-friendly products, and ensuring the welfare of wild animals. More distinctive approaches to ecotourism included the sharing of knowledge about ecotourism approaches and the expanding of access to sustainability education. In addition, companies are promoting eco-friendly tourism activities and climate actions. The initial hypothesis was stated as follows: It is hypothesised that tourism companies in Costa Rica that show greater engagement with ecotourism and sustainability initiatives are more likely to contribute resources to ecotourism development projects. After having conducted the research, this hypothesis can be deemed valid. All companies investigated in this qualitative study are taking measures to maintain sustainability; however, companies that are more engaged with ecotourism make significantly greater efforts to be as sustainable as possible, while others implement only the minimum required to support ecotourism.

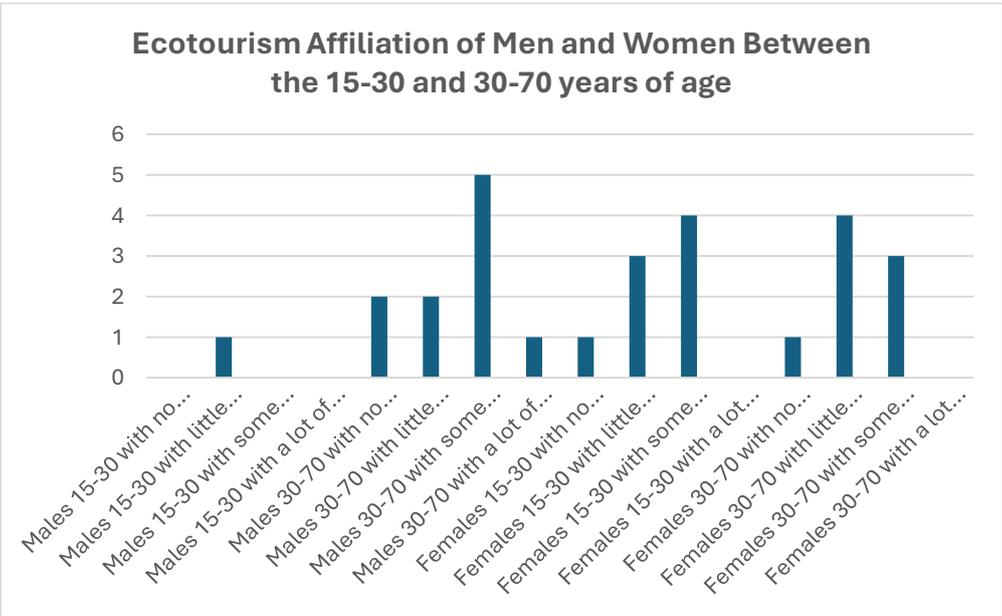
The second research question —what effect Costa Rica’s green image has on greenwashing in the tourism sector— can be answered after analysing experts’ opinions. The initial hypothesis was stated as follows: It is hypothesised that tourism companies in Costa Rica are more likely to engage in greenwashing when they perceive the country’s sustainable policies and environmentally attractive image as opportunities to enhance their own reputation. This hypothesis can also be considered mostly valid. According to most interviewees, greenwashing is a legitimate concern. According to the manager at Sonora Jungle & Yoga Retreat (Interviewee 1, personal communication, July 13, 2024), the increase in greenwashing practices is related to the rise of corruption in Costa Rica. Moreover, many plantations are not upfront about their sustainability policies. Several interviewees also noted that greenwashing is more likely to occur in San José compared with other locations in Costa Rica. However, greenwashing can also happen in national parks when these parks are not upfront about overcrowdings and the domestication of animals. Nonetheless, many interviewees agreed that Costa Rica is making significant efforts to address greenwashing; however, according to Interviewee 12 (Personal communication, September 19, 2024), it is quite common for companies to make “unverified sustainability claims,” but the authorities are unable to control these problems. Therefore, the question asked above can be answered by noting that many employees in the tourism sector perceive greenwashing as a threat to the further development of ecotourism. The developing green image of the country has resulted in companies not always being transparent about their environmental policies and therefore wanting to take advantage of this growing sustainability image. Nevertheless, many interviewees agree that Costa Rica as a whole, along with numerous companies, is actively making efforts to promote sustainability through its policies. The level of greenwashing varies by region and is often difficult to detect. Consequently, the initial hypothesis is partially valid since the appeal of Costa Rica’s sustainability image motivates certain companies to exploit it for their own benefit. However, this hypothesis cannot be fully supported due to the limited number of interviewees. As a result, the hypothesis can only be considered valid, purely for the extent and the outlines of this research.

### 3.3 Survey-Based Analysis of Tourists’ Observations and Experiences

Many of the variable outcomes of the tourists’ surveys are significant in constructing a representative analysis. Tourists were asked to provide their opinions on a range of topics, including their reasons for choosing ecotourism and their views on potential improvements within the sector. In addition, the tourists were asked to rate important topics regarding the consequences of ecotourism, the variety of ecotourism offerings, the amounts of greenwashing, and the governmental regulations. Several of these components correspond to those addressed to the experts during the interviews. Moreover, tourists were asked to provide input on their personal affiliation with ecotourism and the level to which they consider themselves to be ecologically responsible. While multiple variables are measured, data, such as personal affiliation, reasons for choosing ecotourism, views on governmental and local ecotourism actions, and their views on greenwashing are considered most relevant for this specific mixed-methods research analysis. The collected data will be displayed in coherent tables and graphs, and the outcomes will be checked on their validity through a structured SWOT analysis. The table in Appendix 5 displays tourists’ affiliation with ecotourism, and their willingness to spend more money on eco-friendly activities. Additionally, the table portrays the reason for choosing eco-friendly forms of tourism and their opinions on how to improve eco-friendly corporations.

The data from the table in Appendix 5 can be reconstructed in graphs and charts. Chart 1 *infra* illustrates the types of ecotourism affiliation among men and women aged 15–30, compared with those aged 30–70.

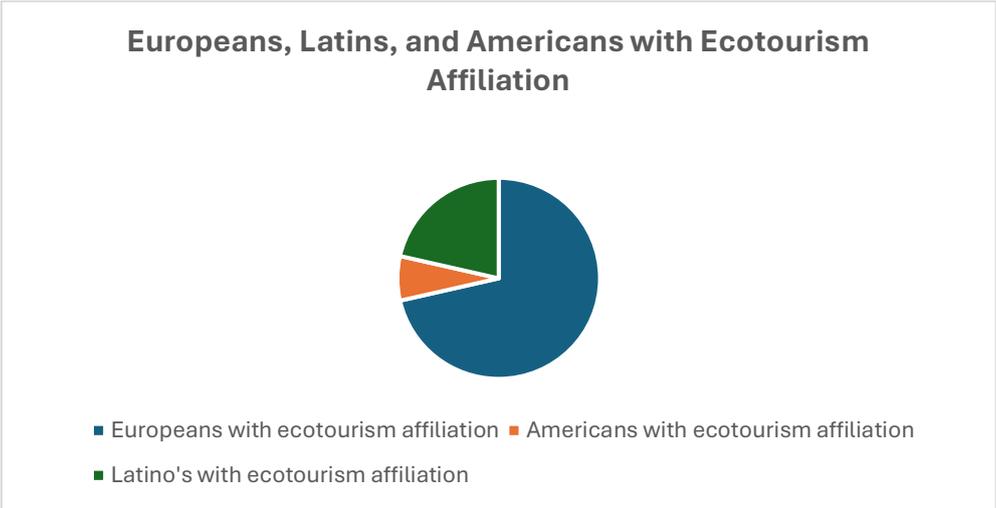
**Chart 1:** Male and Female Affiliation with Ecotourism per Age



**Source:** own elaboration based on data collected through surveys (2024).

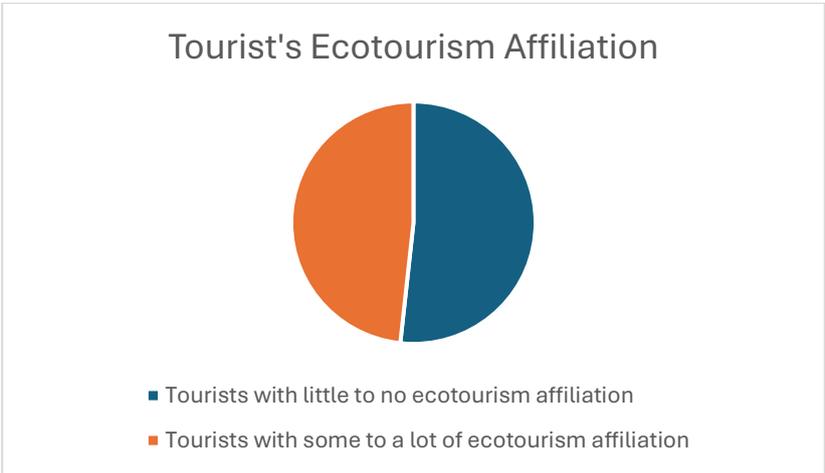
Chart 1 suggests that male tourists between the 30 and 70 years of age have the most affiliation with ecotourism. This statistic is followed by women between the 15 and 30 years of age that have the most affiliation with ecotourism. In total, 19 Europeans, 7 Latins, and 4 visitors from the United States were asked what their affiliation is with ecotourism. Of the 19 Europeans, 10 responded that they have at least some affiliations with ecotourism. Of the 7 Latins, 3 responded to have some affiliation with ecotourism, and of the 4 Americans, only 1 mentioned to have a certain affiliation with ecotourism.

**Chart 2: Europeans, Latins, and Americans with Ecotourism Affiliation**



**Source:** own elaboration based on data collected through surveys (2024).

**Chart 3: Tourists' Ecotourism Affiliation**



**Source:** own elaboration based on data collected through surveys (2024).

The final sub-question —to what extent are tourists in Costa Rica involved with ecotourism development— can be answered after analysing the information collected from the surveys. Chart 3 suggests that almost 50 percent of the tourists surveyed have a certain connection to ecotourism. Furthermore, 52.6% of Europeans have a relation to ecotourism, and 42.9% of Latins have affiliation with ecotourism. For the American

respondents, this percentage is solely 25%. The initial hypothesis was stated as follows: It is hypothesised that tourists visiting Costa Rica are more likely to participate in ecotourism activities as the country’s ecotourism sector expands. This hypothesis is not completely valid. Roughly measured, only 50% of tourists can say to have a certain affiliation with ecotourism. Nonetheless, numerous tourists are willing to spend more money on sustainable forms of tourism, and many of them believe that significant changes can be made to stimulate and advance ecotourism.

**3.3.1 SWOT analysis**

Based on the data collected from the interviews and surveys, a SWOT analysis can be conducted to determine the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats related to ecotourism in Costa Rica. Since ecotourism is still evolving, its development includes certain weaknesses and shortcomings; however, it also possesses significant strengths that offer distinctive and promising opportunities for the future. Finally, the potential threats that may restrict the future development of ecotourism are identified. A SWOT analysis will be conducted by means of the following table:

**Table 5: SWOT Analysis**

<b>Strengths</b>	<b>Weaknesses</b>
<b>Opportunities</b>	<b>Threats</b>

**Source:** Table created by the author.

Ecotourism development in Costa Rica holds many favourable conditions and therefore offers a range of promising opportunities. The conducted research reveals important findings regarding the expansion of the ecotourism sector. The 12 interviews all display eco-friendly efforts to enhance the evolution of ecotourism. Therefore, the most significant strengths of ecotourism include the initiatives and efforts undertaken by tourism companies and organisations. These actions include the recycling of waste, the collecting of rainwater, the usage of organic foods and materials, and the care for the animals. As evident from Table 4, many tourism organisations are actively working to incorporate sustainability practices into their company. A distinction can be drawn between genuinely sustainable enterprises and those that merely implement the minimum required measures. For example, Interviewee 1 (Personal communication, July 13, 2024) mentioned the retreat’s efforts to grow their own fruits and vegetables and exclusively use eco-friendly products and solar generated energy. However, Interviewee 7 (Personal communication, July 20, 2024) mentioned the implementation of barely the required sustainability measures, such as recycling and a ban of the use of the A/C (see Table 4). Nevertheless, every interviewee mentioned the adoption of at least some environmentally friendly practices, highlighting the progress and strengths of ecotourism development.

Despite the promising creation of a supportive environment, ecotourism is far from perfect in Costa Rica, and therefore still holds many weaknesses. Such weaknesses include poorly executed governmental check-ups and continued less eco-friendly activities (see Appendix 4). Additionally, survey responses indicated that many tourism accommodations continue to rely heavily on single-use shower gel or food containers and make inefficient use of recyclable materials. Moreover, hotels frequently wash bed linens more often than necessary (see Appendix 5).

Considering ecotourism is still in a developing stage, eco-friendly tourism has many opportunities for a better and more sustainable future. For instance, plenty of business owners and employees are willing to dedicate more effort to achieving sustainability. In addition, Costa Rica holds the only Dutch embassy in the world that is certified carbon neutral (see Appendix 6), which offers many optimistic opportunities for future sustainability actions.

Besides opportunities, ecotourism development is also threatened by the existence of greenwashing, which not only suppresses sustainable development, but creates hazardous situations, in which companies that indulge to greenwashing will be harder to distinguish from genuine eco-friendly establishments. The government should therefore execute more check-ups, to control the amount of greenwashing in companies. Lack of transparency regarding sustainability policies increasingly heightens the risk of greenwashing. Additionally, ecotourism can impose inevitable threats for the local community and for general environmental improvement, in the way that the life of Indigenous Peoples can be deteriorated due to ecotourism development and wild animals still get domesticated and enter urbanised areas (see Appendix 4).

Table 6, *infra*, presents the most prominent strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats, reflecting current perspectives on ecotourism development from both experts in the field and visiting tourists.

**Table 6: SWOT Analysis Based on Identified Elements**

<b>Strengths</b>	<b>Weaknesses</b>
Recycling of waste; collecting of rainwater; usage of organic foods and materials; use of solar energy; care for animals.	Poorly executed governmental check-ups; continued less eco-friendly activities; too often inefficient use of recyclable materials
<b>Opportunities</b>	<b>Threats</b>
Plenty of business owners and employees are willing to dedicate more effort to achieving sustainability; carbon neutral Dutch Embassy	Greenwashing; gentrification of Indigenous Peoples and domestication of wild animals.

**Source:** Table created by the author.

By combining various approaches, including interviews and surveys, this study employed significant triangulation strategies to strengthen the credibility of the results of this research. The interviews provided important expert perspectives on ecotourism business approaches and strategies, and the surveys offered interesting new insights on tourists' opinions on governmental regulations and the sustainability of ecotourism activities. While experts' and tourists' opinions often overlapped, their perspectives revealed valuable distinctions, as tourists experienced ecotourism from an outsider's perspective, offering more neutral and unique insights that were not influenced by governmental or professional biases. Additionally, personal experiences as a tourist in Costa Rica provided insights that mostly aligned with the views of the respondents. These impressions were shaped by the country's clean and green natural environment, its promising sustainability efforts, but also certain questionable eco-friendly practices, which raised concerns about the presence of greenwashing. By combining different approaches, the research expanded upon multiple insights and cross-validation, allowing data analysis and concluding statements to reflect on varying viewpoints and perspectives, resulting in conclusions not exclusively being drawn from single viewpoints. Overall, ecotourism presents both opportunities and challenges; nevertheless, the country remains a leading nation in the field of sustainable development, demonstrating significant potential to advance nature conservation.

## CONCLUSION

This thesis set out to examine the development of ecotourism in Costa Rica, paying close attention to the influence of greenwashing and evaluating its direct impacts and implications on the tourism sector and the environment. In doing so, the research was centred around environmental approaches and governmental legislations that shaped Costa Rica's ecotourism sector, aiming to get a better understanding of the way that ecotourism development influenced the well-being of the natural ecosystems, the local population, and the general state of the tourism sector, while also investigating the role and experiences of tourists visiting the country. Two types of research enabled the writing of this thesis. The first half of the thesis was based on academic research, focusing on the various views and perspectives of academic scholars, while the second part focused on personal field research, allowing current data to shift the focus to original and authentic perspectives on ecotourism development and tourists' perceptions on environmental conservation and greenwashing practices. The central research idea explored the origin of ecotourism in Costa Rica, as well as the associated environmental impacts, and was defined by the following research question: How did ecotourism emerge in Costa Rica and what impact does it have on the development of the country's tourism sector? The following hypothesis accompanied the central research question: It is hypothesised that Costa Rica's established sustainable image, originating from conservation efforts in the 1970s, has positively influenced the tourism sector, but also increases the likelihood of greenwashing among tourism companies. The study focused on three key aspects of ecotourism: the role of tourism companies in promoting ecotourism, the impact of Costa Rica's green image on greenwashing, and the participation of tourists in ecotourism development.

The theoretical framework of the thesis provided relevant scholarly views on the opportunities, challenges, and implications of ecotourism development. While this development is often perceived as environmentally and economically desirable, peer-reviewed sources illustrated how ecotourism development also has many less favourable aspects, which can massively impact the local community and the environment. Both secondary literature and interviewees from the field research acknowledged that one of the biggest implications of ecotourism relates to the side effect of greenwashing, which obscures the distinction between ecotourism and mass tourism (Braun et al., 2015). Even though the phenomenon of greenwashing is well-known within the tourism community, local consumers do still not always prioritise genuine eco-claims, and besides, the authorities are not able to actively control the issue (Interviewee 12, personal communication, September 19, 2024). Furthermore, Bircsak et al. (2016) argued that businesses with genuine eco-claims are afraid of getting overshadowed by greenwashing practices. This statement is supported by Interviewee 12 (Personal communication, September 19, 2024), who acknowledged that only companies linked to global value chains are required to adhere to stricter sustainability regulations, which can result in the

overshadowing of other genuine eco-companies. Nevertheless, Schultis (2018) argued that the presence of greenwashing practices only ensures genuine eco-companies to stay upfront about their policies. This aspect was neither supported nor contradicted by any of the interviewed experts, although many interviewees did acknowledge the considerable amounts of greenwashing practices within the tourism sector, despite the rise of eco-friendly companies and regulations. Nonetheless, Interviewee 8 (Personal communication, July 21, 2024) did mention that important ecotourism destinations, such as Monteverde, are upfront about their eco-claims, because any dishonesty could result in a decline of visiting tourists.

Besides the threat of greenwashing practices overshadowing legitimate eco-claims, the development is also weakened by poor governmental check-ups. Furthermore, the emergence of greenwashing companies causes profits to be accumulated by corporate developers, rather than the local and national community. Besides greenwashing implications, ecotourism can result in increasing land and property prices, and according to Jacobson & López (1994), ecotourists do not necessarily improve the overcrowdings and domestications of wild animals in national parks. Interviewee 6 (Personal communication, July 18, 2024) contradicts this statement by pointing out that not every national park or nature area is still driven by overcrowdings and argues that their company personally tries to regulate the amounts of visitors entering the park at the same time. Furthermore, Interviewee 4 (Personal communication, July 16, 2024) acknowledged their regulations on the domestication of animals and stated that the touching of wild animals is not allowed within the national park. Despite these claims, the overall impacts of ecotourism on overcrowdings and animal domestications are challenging to analyse, due to a limited number of resources.

Despite the acknowledged implications of ecotourism development, this eco-friendly form of tourism also offers many advantages and continues to be regarded as an advanced approach within the field of sustainable tourism. With growing national awareness of sustainability, the reduction of environmentally harmful practices, and the establishment of conservation areas, environmental institutions, and sustainable certification systems, Costa Rica has embraced a strong and promising green image. In contrast to other countries, Costa Rica has already managed to conserve and protect 25% of its natural areas (Sánchez, 2018). For ecotourism to be achieved effectively, the premises should be based on the preservation of the biodiversity, the optimisation of the natural resources, the respecting of the authenticity of the local communities, and the ensuring of long-term economic operations (WTO, 2004, in Wearing & Neil, 2009). In the case of Costa Rica, the government is making strong efforts to achieve most of these conditions and plenty of tourism establishments are likewise committed to improve their business policies. According to Lapa Rios (2002), numerous eco-friendly companies and accommodations are working diligently to conserve nearby nature and exclusively implement solar energy and eco-friendly waste control measures (in Horton, 2009). This claim is supported by evidence as provided by numerous interviewees, who mentioned the use of solar energy and the implementation of environmentally responsible waste control strategies, as well as the use of clean water and organic products. Yet, many of the

research participants who were surveyed reported a noticeable lack of eco-friendly measures in many of the tourism destinations. This absence was frequently perceptible within the limited options to recycle waste in certain tourist establishments, as well as a shortfall in the supply of reusable and eco-friendly plastic containers.

Both scholarly and peer-reviewed works provided significant insights in the historical background of ecotourism development and greenwashing processes. Yet, the expert interviews and tourist surveys offered significant new perspectives on the genuine and contemporary situation in the country. While most interviewees explained their personal relationship and experience with ecotourism, the tourists offered genuine opinions on the development of the tourism sector. The field research was meant to obtain new insights that would either contradict or support the peer-reviewed claims. Upon concluding the fieldwork, the results demonstrate significant overlap with secondary literature works. The research data aligns with Jones & Spadafora (2017), reinforcing data that supports their statement that many Costa Rican organisations and tourism companies contribute to ecotourism development by supplying tourists with eco-friendly tours and sustainable measures within their companies. A substantial majority of the interviewed experts acknowledged great environmental efforts undertaken by their employers. Yet, the field research also offers contradictory insights on the way that governmental regulations are enforced and therefore the opinions on the efficiency of these regulations are more nuanced. Many scholars indicated a set of strong and efficient governmental regulations in ensuring sustainable development and corporate transparency. Among these regulations are the spreading of awareness to the population, as indicated by Sánchez (2018) as well as the implementation of certification tools to stimulate ecotourism development. According to Keller et al. (2013), Costa Rica already has carefully constructed set of policies and a well-functioning certification system to indicate the level of sustainable awareness within a company. While these claims are valid, results from the field research indicate a certain level of dissatisfaction with the way that the government handles ecotourism development, and the opinions on the efficiency of governmental regulations were divided. According to Interviewee 1 (Personal communication, July 13, 2024), 7 (Personal communication, July 20, 2024) and 8 (Personal communication, July 21, 2024), the government strives to implement as many eco-friendly policies as possible but lacks true perseverance to do regular check-ups. Additionally, numerous survey respondents indicated that the government implements sufficient sustainability measures, but could take more actions, regarding persistence, control and regular check-ups.

The findings of this study challenge the general assumption that ecotourism only has positive impacts on environmental conservation. While there is no denying that ecotourism is better for nature conservation and sustainable development than mass tourism, there is no guarantee that this type of tourism does not carry its own implications. On the contrary, ecotourism does have many challenging aspects, which are dangerous and threatening to the environment in their own way. As indicated by the field research, as well as the peer-reviewed research, the most threatening aspect of ecotourism development lies within the increasing rate of greenwashing practices within

illegitimate eco-friendly companies. For this reason, the field research indicates significant concern for the way that governmental regulations are implemented, assessed, and carried out, and therefore challenges the existing literature stating that governmental regulations are strong and effective in confronting illegitimate claims. Nonetheless, Interviewee 12 (Personal communication, September 19, 2024) argued that effective control over greenwashing would result in a sustainable society, and therefore, there is a great importance in the government gaining more control over the amounts of greenwashing, to create a more eco-friendly society.

While the approach towards the conducted field research offered interesting insights, the research by itself had many limitations, which should be acknowledged. Due to the brief period during which the field research was conducted and the limited sample size of the respondents, the scope and credibility of the research has been compromised. While the research was conducted in various locations in Costa Rica and offered diverse responses, the credibility and execution of the research still have its limitations. Additionally, not every expert and survey respondent had a good understanding of the effects of ecotourism development and not everyone was willing or able to respond in sufficient manner. Therefore, the research is based on the answers and responses that were made available to the author, compromising the possible validity and authenticity of the research. Further key details address the limitations, about thoroughness and potential bias of the research, and indicate that while many (secondary) sources have been conducted and multiple research approaches have been employed, important and contradicting information and data might have been overlooked, resulting in incompleteness or invalidity of this specific research data. Additionally, the scarcity of accessed primary source materials in this research has compromised the validity of the results.

While this research offers valuable and compelling insights into the prospects and implications of ecotourism development within Costa Rica, the study is limited by its focus on just the impacts of ecotourism development on the Costa Rican tourism sector, the environment, and the local population. To achieve a full understanding of the impacts of ecotourism development on the well-being and progressiveness of the country, a more extended and bigger scope should be used to identify the effects on other aspects of Costa Rican society as well. For future studies, it would therefore be interesting and relevant to research the effects of ecotourism development on economic progression, political (in)stability or social participation within Costa Rica. Future research should therefore consider different sample sizes, international comparisons, and a structured and cohesive analysis of political and economic legislations to extend upon the findings that were presented within this mixed-methods study.

In conclusion, the data demonstrated in this research indicate an important shift in the way that Costa Rican citizens and tourists perceive ecotourism development. While the opinions are mixed, significant responses demonstrated insufficient governmental input in regular check-ups and regulations. While many respondents acknowledged the efforts made by the government, the actual implementation and execution of governmental regulations is not always as effective as intended, which makes

greenwashing challenging to control. Nonetheless, both interviewees and scholars recognised governmental efforts to be superior to other country's environmental regulations. Beyond answering the central research question, the sub-question —what effect does Costa Rica's green image have on greenwashing in the tourism sector— cohesively illustrated how the tourism sector evolved, due to the negative aspects of ecotourism development, and how Costa Rica's green image motivated illegitimate eco-companies to exploit it for their personal benefit, and thereby threatening the image of the country's tourism sector being perceived as sustainable. When returning to the central research question —how did ecotourism emerge in Costa Rica and what impact does it have on the development of the country's tourism sector— it is essential to consider both the positive and negative dimensions of ecotourism development. The four components examined in the SWOT analysis provide a strong framework for illustrating the transformations and challenges that are connected to the sector. While it can be concluded that the emergence of ecotourism has significantly improved sustainability practices and environmental transformation, the rise of greenwashing and misleading eco-claims has posed serious challenges to the sector's continued development, creating uncertainty and highlighting the need for clearer governmental regulation and control. The initial research hypothesis can therefore be deemed correct, indicating considerable progress within the tourism sector since the rise of ecotourism, while simultaneously also posing difficult challenges, regarding greenwashing.

Overall, the developments brought about by ecotourism have proven to be both progressive and challenging for Costa Rica's tourism sector, creating a dynamic environment characterised by continuous transformations and new opportunities for a more sustainable, modern, and appealing tourism sector.

# APPENDICES

## APPENDIX 1:

### TOURIST SURVEY

<b>Survey of tourists' opinion on the ecotourism sector in Costa Rica</b>											
Nº form:				Date:				1. Age:			
2. Gender	Female				3. Nationality						
	Male				4. Country of residence						
	Other				5. Type of ecotourism site						
6. If you work, what specific activity do you perform?											
7. Next, you will read a series of sentences related to diverse topics. Rate each statement according to your degree of agreement or disagreement [1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = neither agree nor disagree, 4 = agree, 5 = strongly agree].											
7.1 Costa Rica offers an authentic variety of activities regarding ecotourism							1	2	3	4	5
7.2 Costa Rica has an important international reputation as a green destination							1	2	3	4	5
7.3 Costa Rica takes urgent measures against mass tourism							1	2	3	4	5
7.4 Costa Rica should take measures against mass tourism in the future							1	2	3	4	5
7.5 There is a lot of greenwashing in the Costa Rican tourism sector							1	2	3	4	5
7.6 Costa Rica's ecotourism sector needs greater government regulation							1	2	3	4	5
Rate the following questions according to your own opinions and experience on ecotourism [1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = neither agree nor disagree, 4 = agree, 5 = strongly agree].											
8. You have deliberately chosen an environmentally friendly and sustainable destination							1	2	3	4	5
9. It is especially important for you to spend your vacations in a sustainable accommodation							1	2	3	4	5
10. The hotel/resort you are staying in can be considered truly environmentally friendly							1	2	3	4	5
11. You are willing to spend more money on a more sustainable vacation							1	2	3	4	5
12. In your opinion, what could be improved in terms of sustainability?											
a. The ability to separate waste						b. ban single-use plastic shampoo and shower gel containers					
c. Drinking water recharge station						d. Less frequent washing of bed linen and towels during a person's stay					
e. Use of recyclable materials in the hotel's rooms and lobby						f. More sustainable breakfast (think of low food waste or organic food)					
g. Other, ....						h. No need to change anything					
13. Have you previously participated in experiences related to ecotourism?											
Never		Rarely		Sometimes		Often		Always			
14. Do you share or recommend your eco-tourism experiences?											
Never		Rarely		Sometimes		Often		Always			
15. Besides sustainability, why else do you choose eco-tourism?											

Price		Exclusivity		Privacy		Peace and quiet		Health	
16. In your opinion, to what extent does ecotourism have a positive impact on the climate?									
Very few		Some		Enough		A lot		Too much	

## APPENDIX 2:

### INTERVIEWS WITH EXPERTS

<b>Questions regarding overall sustainability in Costa Rica</b>
1. In your opinion, what characterises an environmentally friendly company?
2. To what extent do you think sufficient attention is paid to sustainability in Costa Rica?
3. To what extent do you think touristification will affect the development of ecotourism in Costa Rica?
4. To what extent do you think it matters to the economy whether a company is environmentally friendly or not?
5. Costa Rica is well known for its progressive approach to ecotourism. To what extent do you agree with this?
6. What is your opinion on the impact that ecotourism has or may have on the local population and wildlife in Costa Rica?
7. What is your opinion on the negative aspects that ecotourism can bring, for example, the increase in tourists and companies that claim to be sustainable because they want to take advantage of Costa Rica's green image?
8. Do you think there is a lot of greenwashing in Costa Rica? Why/why not?
9. Do you think the likelihood of greenwashing increases as society becomes more sustainable?
<b>Specific questions about sustainability in the company where the respondent works</b>
10. Would you consider the company you work for to be an environmentally friendly company? Why/why not?
11. What additional measures is the company taking to remain sustainable?
12. In your opinion, do you think the government has a lot of control over the development of sustainability in the company?
13. What conditions must a company meet to be labelled an eco-company?
14. What is your experience of competition in the ecotourism sector?
15. Do you have any ideas of your own about how the company you work for could be even more sustainable?

## APPENDIX 3:

### LIST OF INTERVIEWS CONDUCTED

Interviewed	Affiliation or role	Topics covered	Place and date	Time
Interviewee 1 (anonymous)	Manager at Sonora Jungle & Yoga Retreat	Ecotourism development; governmental regulations; environmental impacts; company's measures and regulations; greenwashing; ecotourism competition	Puerto Viejo de Talamanca, July 13, 2024	13:45
Interviewee 2 (anonymous)	Employee at Cristal Ballena Boutique Hotel & Spa	Ecotourism development; governmental regulations; hotel policy	Costa Ballena, July 15, 2024	14:16
Interviewee 3 (anonymous)	Waiter at Cristal Ballena Boutique Hotel & Spa	Ecotourism development; governmental regulations; hotel policy	Costa Ballena, July 15, 2024	20:32
Interviewee 4 (anonymous)	Park guide at Manuel Antonio National Park	Ecotourism development; governmental regulations; environmental impacts; park policy; ecotourism competition	Quepos, July 16, 2024	14:45
Interviewee 5 (anonymous)	Employee Hacienda Barú Lodge	Ecotourism development; governmental regulations; environmental impacts; hotel and park policy; greenwashing, ecotourism competition	Dominical, July 17, 2024	13:20
Interviewee 6 (anonymous)	Employee Monteverde Cloud Forest Reserve	Ecotourism development; governmental regulations; environmental impacts; park policy; ecotourism competition	Monteverde, July 18, 2024	14:34
Interviewee 7 (anonymous)	Employee Sunset Vista Lodge Monteverde	Ecotourism development; governmental regulations; environmental impacts; company's measures and regulations; greenwashing; ecotourism competition	Monteverde, July 20, 2024	10:00
Interviewee 8 (anonymous)	Employee Selvatura Adventure Park	Ecotourism development; governmental regulations; environmental impacts; company's measures and regulations; greenwashing; ecotourism competition	Monteverde, July 21, 2024	11:17
Interviewee 9 (anonymous)	Employee Travel Agency Monteverde	Ecotourism development; governmental regulations; environmental impacts; ecotourism competition	Monteverde, July 21, 2024	15:45

Interviewee 10 (anonymous)	Employee Natuwa Animal Sanctuary	Ecotourism development; park policy; competition	Aranjuez, July 22, 2024	16:24
Interviewee 11 (anonymous)	Employee ICT	Ecotourism development; governmental regulations; environmental impacts; company's measures and regulations; greenwashing; ecotourism competition	San José, July 24, 2024	17:15
Interviewee 12 (anonymous)	Employee Dutch Embassy in San José	Ecotourism development; governmental regulations; environmental impacts; company's measures and regulations; greenwashing; ecotourism competition	Online, September 19, 2024	00:47

## APPENDIX 4:

### EXPERTS' OPINIONS ON GOVERNMENTAL REGULATIONS, ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACTS AND GREENWASHING PRACTICES

Interviewee	Opinions on Governmental Regulations	Opinions on Environmental impacts	Judgement on Greenwashing Practices
Interviewee 1 (Manager Sonora Jungle & Yoga Retreat)	The government produces promising ideas, but lacks perseverance, regarding regular check-ups	The local life of Indigenous Peoples in Costa Rica can be deteriorated, due to the rise of ecotourism. More focus should be put on the cooperation with Indigenous and local communities, instead of changing their roots.	There is a lot of greenwashing, due to corruption. Many plantations also greenwash by claiming they are sustainable when the opposite is true. However, there is still time to stop greenwashing.
Interviewee 2 (Employee at Cristal Ballena Boutique Hotel & Spa)	-	-	-
Interviewee 3 (Waiter at Cristal Ballena Boutique Hotel & Spa)	-	-	-
Interviewee 4 (Guide at Manuel Antonio National Park)	The government has set standard sustainability laws, which has helped national parks be more sustainable. In addition, the government has increased sustainable awareness amongst students.	Ecotourism does not have too many bad impacts on the environment, and at the moment there are not any better solutions. Ecotourism is already better than regular tourism.	-
Interviewee 5 (Employee at Hacienda Barú Lodge)	The government maintains a system to measure the level of sustainability within a company, by means of a leave system, which rates the company on their eco-friendly methods. Every	Ecotourism mostly has an adverse impact on the animals, more than on the flora. Flora can more easily be left alone, while animals get easier	Greenwashing is especially a problem in San José, where companies damage the environment by pretending to be sustainable.

	year, certain requirements must be met to be considered an eco-business.	domesticated due to tourism.	
Interviewee 6 (Employee at Monteverde Cloud Forest Reserve)	The government implemented various legislations to which the park should obey.	Wildlife can still be disturbed by ecotourists once a region overcrowds. However, the Monteverde Cloud Forest Reserve maintains specific rules about the amount of people that can enter the park at once.	Greenwashing depends on the region in Costa Rica, but quite often eco-friendly parks are still too crowded, which results in negative impacts for the environment. In this case, parks are not upfront about their sustainability policy.
Interviewee 7 (Employee at Sunset Vista Lodge)	There are a few governmental regulations to which hotels should obey; however, the government barely does check-ups. Many companies have own initiatives to take on more sustainability measures, and this is not purely due to the government.	Ecotourism can be good for the local community because they can learn from the tourists. However, tourism in general has an adverse impact on the environment, due to mass tourism and destruction of nature. However, tourism also brings in money, which can be spend on the preservation of the environment.	There is some form of greenwashing within Costa Rica, because not all companies are upfront about the products they sell. However, greenwashing happens more often in San José and is less common in places like Monteverde.
Interviewee 8 (Employee Selvatura Adventure Park)	The government supplies certificates to companies that are sustainable, but rarely ever does check-ups after that. The government does check whether animals are taken safe care of and whether they need veterinarian care. The government also needs to approve tourism activities that might not be completely eco-friendly.	The impacts of touristification and ecotourism are minimal, although many animals do still get domesticated. In addition, left behind rubbish is also unbelievably bad for the environment.	In Monteverde there is not much greenwashing. Many companies have the blue flag for sustainability. Most companies are upfront about their policies. If the park is not green, tourists might not come.
Interviewee 9 (Employee Travel Agency Monteverde)	There are enough governmental regulations, although not every company obeys to these laws.	Tourism does in general not have a good impact on the environment. However, ecotourism is less bad for the environment. The best	-

		way is obviously to just leave the nature alone. Tourism will therefore never be perfect, but the sector can be made less destructive and mores sustainable.	
Interviewee 10 (Employee Natuwa Wildlife Sanctuary)	No knowledge on governmental regulations, however Natuwa Wildlife Sanctuary has taken own initiative to save the animals.	Tourism can have an adverse impact on the environment. However, there are a lot of tourists that care about the wildlife as well and they want to preserve it.	There might be some greenwashing in Costa Rica.
Interviewee 11 (Employee Instituto Costarricense de Turismo (ICT))	-	The impacts of ecotourism are good for nature preservation. When green initiatives are taken, everyone can benefit from them. The ICT is even cooperating with big hotel chains, like Marriott, to promote sustainability.	In a lot of places there are definite signs of greenwashing; however, in Costa Rica this might be less. Often national parks are not always as sustainable as they claim to be. Activities, such as a zip-line, are not considered sustainable.
Interviewee 12 (employee Dutch Embassy in San José)	The government is striving to implement multiple sustainable measures within the different sectors in society.	A negative aspect of ecotourism is the gentrification of the population. The growth of the tourism and construction sector in Costa Rica have generated an inflation of real estate prices that affected the local population of the country. Besides, (eco)tourism has led to more wild animals entering urbanised areas.	There are many genuine efforts to achieve sustainable development; however, there are still too many unverified sustainability claims. While there is evidence of greenwashing practices, the local consumers do not always respond to this and the authorities are not always able to effectively control these problems. Only companies that are linked to global value chains are required to adhere to stricter sustainability regulations, such as companies exporting to the European Union under the Green Deal.

Source: own elaboration based on data collected through interviews (2024).

## APPENDIX 5:

### TOURISTS' AFFILIATION WITH ECOTOURISM AND PERSONAL OPINIONS AND CHOICES BASED ON THE SURVEYS

Survey #	Gender	Age	Nationality	Job	Ecotourism Affiliation	Willingness to spend more money on ecotourism activities	Reason for choosing ecotourism	Opinions on ecotourism improvement
1	Male	40	Italian	Manager	Has some affiliation with ecotourism	Very willing	Peace and quiet	Better system to separate waste; less frequent washing of bed linen in hotels
2	Female	42	Italian	Teacher	Has some affiliation with ecotourism	Very willing	Peace and quiet	Better system to separate waste; more drinking water recharge stations; the banning of single-use shower gel containers
3	Male	32	Costa Rican	Commercial	Has a lot of affiliation with ecotourism	Very willing	Exclusivity; privacy; peace and quiet; health	Better system to separate waste; more drinking water recharge stations; more use of recyclable materials; the banning of single-use shower gel containers
4	Male	32	Costa Rican	Architect	Has some affiliation with ecotourism	Mostly willing	Privacy; Peace and quiet; health	Better system to separate waste; more drinking water recharge stations; more use of recyclable materials; the banning

								of single-use shower gel containers; more sustainable breakfast
5	Male	50	Costa Rican	Automatic doors company owner	Has little affiliation with ecotourism	Mostly willing	Price; peace and quiet; health	Better system to separate waste; more drinking water recharge stations; the banning of single-use shower gel containers; less frequent washing of bed linen in hotels; more use of rainwater
6	Female	35	Costa Rican	-	Has little affiliation with ecotourism	Mostly willing	Peace and quiet	More use of recyclable materials
7	Female	26	Costa Rican	-	Has some affiliation with ecotourism	Somewhat willing	Exclusivity	Better system to separate waste
8	-	29	Panamanian	Nurse	Has no affiliation with ecotourism	Barely willing	Peace and quiet	Better system to separate waste; more drinking water recharge stations; less frequent washing of bed linen in hotels
9	Male	54	North American	Sales	Has some affiliation with ecotourism	Somewhat willing	Peace and quiet; health	-
10	Male	20	North American	Student	-	Somewhat willing	Privacy; peace and quiet; health	Better system to separate waste; more drinking water recharge stations; more use of recyclable materials; the banning of single-use shower gel containers
11	Female	18	North American	Student/ tennis instructor	Has little affiliation with ecotourism	Mostly willing	Price	The banning of single-use shower gel containers
12	Female	53	North American	Travel agent	Has little affiliation with ecotourism	Barely willing	Health	The banning of single-use shower gel containers

13	Female	26	Swiss	Student	Has some affiliation with ecotourism	Somewhat willing	Health	Better system to separate waste; more drinking water recharge stations; more use of recyclable materials; the banning of single-use shower gel containers; more sustainable breakfast
14	Male	65	Swiss	Medical doctor	Has no affiliation with ecotourism	Very willing	-	Better system to separate waste; more drinking water recharge stations; more use of recyclable materials; the banning of single-use shower gel containers; less frequent washing of bed linen in hotels
15	Female	22	British	Travel agent	Has no affiliation with ecotourism	Very willing	Price; peace and quiet	Better system to separate waste; more drinking water recharge stations; more use of recyclable materials; the banning of single-use shower gel containers; less frequent washing of bed linen in hotels; more sustainable breakfast
16	Female	41	British	Travel agent	Has some affiliation with ecotourism	Somewhat willing	Exclusivity	Better system to separate waste; the banning of single-use shower gel containers
17	Female	49	Swiss	Movement	Has little affiliation with ecotourism	Somewhat willing	Peace and quiet	Better system to separate waste; more drinking water recharge stations; more use of recyclable materials; the banning of single-use shower gel containers
18	Female	13	Swiss	-	Has little affiliation with ecotourism	Somewhat willing	Peace and quiet	Better system to separate waste; more drinking water recharge stations; the banning of single-use shower gel containers

19	Female	51	Belgian	Secretary	Has no affiliation with ecotourism	Somewhat willing	Health	The banning of single-use shower gel containers; less frequent washing of bed linen in hotels
20	Male	54	Belgian	Representative	Has no affiliation with ecotourism	Somewhat willing	Health	The banning of single-use shower gel containers; less frequent washing of bed linen in hotels
21	Female	17	Swiss	Student	Has some affiliation with ecotourism	Mostly willing	Peace and quiet	Better system to separate waste; more use of recyclable materials
22	Female	16	Swiss	Student	Has some affiliation with ecotourism	Somewhat willing	Peace and quiet	Better system to separate waste; more use of recyclable materials
23	Male	53	Swiss	CEO	Has some affiliation with ecotourism	Mostly willing	Peace and quiet	Better system to separate waste; more use of recyclable materials
24	Female	50	Swiss	HR manager	Has some affiliation with ecotourism	Mostly willing	Peace and quiet	Better system to separate waste; more drinking water recharge stations; more use of recyclable materials; less frequent washing of bed linen in hotels
25	Male	31	Belgian	IT consultant	Has little affiliation with ecotourism	Very willing	Peace and quiet; health	More drinking water recharge stations; less frequent washing of bed linen in hotels; more sustainable breakfast
26	Female	-	Dutch	Medical scientist	Has some affiliation with ecotourism	Mostly willing	Peace and quiet; health	More drinking water recharge stations
27	Male	45	Belgian	Teacher	Has some affiliation with ecotourism	Barely willing (it is already so expensive,	Peace and quiet	Better system to separate waste; more drinking water recharge stations; the banning of single-use shower gel containers; the banning of plastic straws

						otherwise more willing)		
28	Female	48	Mexican	Manager logistics operations	Has little affiliation with ecotourism	Somewhat willing	Health	Better system to separate waste; more drinking water recharge stations; more use of recyclable materials; the banning of single-use shower gel containers
29	Male	26	British	Finance product management	Has little affiliation with ecotourism	Very willing	Health	More use of recyclable materials; less frequent washing of bed linen in hotels
30	Female	17	Austrian	Student	Has little affiliation with ecotourism	Somewhat willing	Privacy; peace and quiet; health	Better system to separate waste; more use of recyclable materials; the banning of single-use shower gel containers; more sustainable breakfast; use of water filters

**Source:** own elaboration based on data collected through surveys (2024).

## APPENDIX 6:

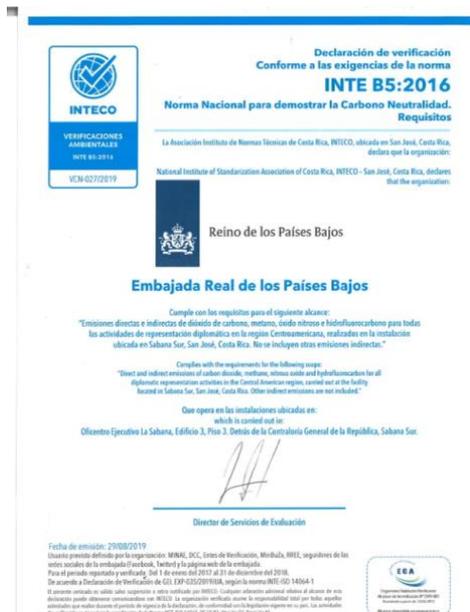
# CERTIFICATES OBTAINED BY THE DUTCH EMBASSY IN SAN JOSÉ

**Picture 1:** Certificate of Carbon Neutrality Issued by the Ministry of Environment of Costa Rica



**Source:** Adapted from an interview with an employee of the Dutch Embassy in San José (Anonymous, 2024).

**Picture 2:** Certificate of Compliance to Demonstrate Carbon Neutrality



**Source:** Adapted from an interview with an employee of the Dutch Embassy in San José (Anonymous, 2024).

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