

**PROGRAM FOR THE MANAGEMENT OF RECREATION-ANIMATION IN  
THE CALETONES ECOLOGICAL RESERVE IN CUBA**

**PROGRAMA PARA LA GESTIÓN DE LA RECREACIÓN-ANIMACIÓN EN LA  
RESERVA ECOLÓGICA CALETONES DE CUBA**

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**Received: October 11, 2025**

**Accepted: December 19, 2025**

**ABSTRACT**

The management of sustainable tourism in protected areas faces the challenge of reconciling environmental conservation with recreational purpose, mainly when recreation and touristic animation are not managed in an integrated manner. In this context, the study aimed to design a program for the management of recreation-animation in the Caletones ecological reserve in Cuba that contributes to its sustainable development. The study employed a mixed-methods design including theoretical revisions, reviews with key stakeholders, and surveys of 130 visitors. Specialists validated the program and an expert coefficient of 2.67 was obtained, confirming its viability and relevance. The results showed a high potential of biodiversity and a positive valuation of natural experience with insufficiencies in infrastructure, recreational offers, and specialized tourist guides as well as online promotion and accessibility. The research provides an integrative approach to recreation and as a central

management category in protected areas, outstanding for similar contexts in the Caribbean.

**KEYWORDS:** sustainable tourism; protected areas; environmental education; environmental conservation

## **RESUMEN**

La gestión del turismo sostenible en áreas protegidas enfrenta el desafío de conciliar la conservación ambiental con el uso recreativo, particularmente cuando la recreación y la animación turística no se gestionan de forma integrada. En este contexto, el estudio tuvo como objetivo diseñar un programa para la gestión de la recreación-animación en la Reserva Ecológica Caletones que contribuya a su desarrollo sostenible. Se empleó un diseño de métodos mixtos, que incluyó revisión teórica, entrevistas a actores clave y encuestas a 130 visitantes. El programa fue validado por especialistas, obteniendo un coeficiente de expertos  $K_{exp} > 2,67$ , lo que confirma su pertinencia y viabilidad. Los resultados evidencian un alto potencial de biodiversidad y una valoración positiva de la experiencia natural, junto con insuficiencias en infraestructura, oferta recreativa, guías especializados, promoción digital y accesibilidad. La investigación aporta un enfoque integrador de la recreación-animación como categoría central de gestión en áreas protegidas, relevante para contextos similares del Caribe.

**PALABRAS CLAVES:** turismo sostenible; áreas protegidas; educación ambiental; conservación ambiental

## **INTRODUCTION**

The management of sustainable tourism in protected areas is crucial for balancing environmental conservation with socioeconomic development, as it generates economic and social benefits that incentivize the protection of natural resources (OSTELEA Tourism Management School, 2021; Ubeda et al., 2024). In this framework, touristic recreation is conceived as an activity compatible with conservation, while touristic animation provides participatory and educational

experiences that strengthen the visitor's relationship with the environment and foster responsible behaviors (Moscardo, 2008; Richards, 2011). According to Vera et al. (1997), as cited in Torre (2023), tourism in protected areas has historically been and continues to be, fundamentally sustained by domestic demand; however, in recent years, the international flow to these destinations has notably increased.

Tourism based on natural landscapes and authentic cultures generates economic benefits that constitute an incentive for the protection of these spaces, although its growth implies challenges related to infrastructure, employment and services (Leung, 2019). In this regard, the right to leisure time and sustainable use of resources, recognized in Article 24 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, supports tourism as a tool for sustainable development (Vaca et al., 2023).

Since their origins, tourism and recreation have been linked to protected areas, offering learning opportunities, connections to heritage and transformative experiences that reinforce environmental awareness and a sense of belonging (Walker & Chapman, 2003).

The literature indicates that recreation in protected areas should be managed using flexible and integrative approaches, considering its socioecological nature and its contribution to environmental education, participatory governance and destination sustainability (Cervený, 2022).

Recreation-animation is assumed in this research as an essential category of sustainable tourism management in protected areas, and not merely as a set of complementary recreational activities. From this theoretical standpoint, recreation-animation is conceived as a planning instrument, an educational mediation tool and a mechanism for regulating public use, capable of articulating the visitor experience with the objectives of environmental conservation and local development. This approach recognizes its strategic function in constructing meaningful experiences, environmental education, behavioral

modification and community participation, indispensable elements for the sustainability of fragile destinations.

The Caletones Ecological Reserve, with its natural, sociocultural and recreational values, is an ideal setting for integrating recreation-animation into sustainable management. Nevertheless, research on the area is limited and concentrates on ecological, administrative and environmental education studies. Notable works include Gutiérrez et al. (2017) in botany; Mir et al. (2022) in economic management; López et al. (2019) in environmental education; and Batista, Avila, & Pupo (2019) in physical-natural analyses, none of which address touristic recreation or public use management. The literature reveals a theoretical and applied gap concerning recreation-animation as a strategic tool for sustainable tourism in Caletones, thereby limiting the valorization of its natural heritage.

Recreation in protected areas has evolved toward recreation-animation practices aimed at enriching the visitor experience, strengthening environmental education and diversifying tourist activities. These practices favor the valorization and preservation of natural and cultural resources by incorporating creative, participatory and sociocultural approaches that respond to the particularities of each territory.

In the municipality of Gibara, Holguín province, the Caletones coastal sector is located, which includes the homonymous community and the Caletones Ecological Reserve, declared a protected area of national significance in 2012 due to its high endemism and its function as a migratory corridor for birds and sea turtles. Even when there are numerous studies on the reserve, they predominantly focus on ecological, physical-environmental and territorial management aspects, without delving into recreation as an axis of sustainable tourism development, thus evidencing a research gap.

Interviews with institutional directors and participatory workshops with the community identified problems that limit the sustainable tourism development of the area, including the scarce integration of recreational activities based on natural and cultural heritage, limited community participation, deficiencies in public transportation, and insufficient infrastructure and equipment for environmental interpretation.

Added to this is the deterioration of local ecosystems and the absence of an effective strategy for their valorization, making it necessary to strengthen the management of the reserve through a recreation-animation approach that harmonizes public use with environmental conservation. The scientific problem is defined as follows: insufficiencies in the management of recreation-animation limit the touristic valorization of natural and cultural resources in the Caletones Ecological Reserve; therefore, the proposed objective is: to design a program for the management of recreation-animation in the Caletones Ecological Reserve that contributes to its sustainable development. If a program for the management of recreation-animation based on its determining factors is implemented, the touristic valorization of resources in the Caletones Ecological Reserve will be improved.

## **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

The research was conducted using an exploratory sequential mixed-methods design, suitable for the analysis of complex phenomena in protected areas, as it allows for the integration of qualitative and quantitative approaches. This design facilitated a comprehensive understanding of recreation-animation management in the Caletones Ecological Reserve, as well as the validation of results based on methodological triangulation. The study was executed in three interrelated phases between January and December 2024. In the first phase, a literature review was conducted to identify the determining factors of recreation and touristic animation in protected areas, from both the site and visitor perspectives.

This analysis enabled the construction of the theoretical reference framework, the definition of study variables and the orientation of the design of data collection instruments.

The subsequent phase focused on the empirical application of the identified factors.

Qualitatively, eight semi-structured interviews were conducted with key stakeholders selected through intentional sampling. This interview consisted of 12 open-ended questions distributed across four analytical categories: state of infrastructure and recreational offerings, environmental perception, institutional management and proposals for improvement. Participant selection was based on their direct entailment in the planning, use and conservation of the area, including both institutional bodies and social actors with empirical knowledge of the environment.

Theoretical saturation was considered achieved when, in interviews 7 and 8, no new categories related to main natural attributes, use conflicts or improvement proposals emerged. The analysis of this phase was carried out using thematic analysis, coding the data inductively with the support of two independent codifiers to ensure inter-coder reliability.

Simultaneously, the quantitative phase included the implementation of surveys. The population was estimated at 3,000 annual visitors, and Cochran's formula was used to determine an adequate sample size:  $n = \frac{z^2 \cdot p \cdot (1-p)}{e^2}$ , where  $n$  is the sample size,  $Z$  is the value corresponding to the desired confidence level = 1.96,  $p$  is the estimated proportion of the characteristic to be measured = 0.5, and  $e$  is the acceptable margin of error = 0.05. The statistical calculation determined a sample size of 384 individuals. However, due to financial resource limitations, a reduced sample of 130 individuals was chosen, which implies a substantial increase in the margin of error. Applying the finite population correction, the new estimated margin of

error for  $n=130$ ,  $N=3,000$ , and  $p=0.5$  rises to approximately  $\pm 8.4\%$ , thus affecting the precision of the estimates.

Given this limitation, a non-probabilistic quota sampling was selected. Although this type of sampling does not allow for the estimation of statistical confidence intervals nor guarantee probabilistic representativeness, it is methodologically defensible for exploratory and applied research with operational constraints, prioritizing internal representativeness within each subgroup (Hernández et al., 2014). It is therefore acknowledged that the generalization of results is limited to visitors with characteristics similar to those included in this sample.

The survey was structured using 35 items distributed across six analytical dimensions: sociodemographic characteristics, travel motivations, visit behavior, environmental awareness, perception of the environment and satisfaction with the recreational offering. For its application, a five-point Likert scale was used, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), complemented by closed multiple-choice questions. Cronbach's Alpha coefficient was employed to measure the instrument's reliability, yielding a value of 0.702, which demonstrates the survey's reliability.

Furthermore, a content validation process was carried out through the judgment of three experts in sustainability and research methodology, who reviewed the clarity and relevance of the items. As a result, five items were adjusted before final application.

Quantitative data analysis was performed using IBM SPSS Statistics 27 software (2020), applying descriptive statistics according to the nature of the variables. Subsequently, qualitative and quantitative data were integrated using sequential methodological triangulation, which served as a strategy to strengthen the internal and external validity of the study by integrating results from different information methods (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008). The theoretical methods of analysis-synthesis, inductive-deductive and systemic-structural analysis were employed, allowing for the processing of scientific literature, the interpretation

of visitor behavior and the analysis of the Caletones Ecological Reserve as an integrated system.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

Recreation in protected areas is a complex phenomenon where ecological, social, economic and cultural dimensions interact. Recent studies reveal that the decision to visit these spaces responds to a matrix of interrelated factors ranging from environmental quality to territorial management policies.

### *Identification of determining factors in the sites*

Destination perception depends on its personality, influencing visitor recommendation and return (Yang et al., 2020), while structural factors such as accessibility, transportation, water, cleanliness, safety and communications are essential for its functioning. The availability and quality of tourist services, along with intangible elements like treatment and emotions, determine tourist satisfaction (Etcheverría et al., 2014). Nature and environmental quality are the main attractions, where visible biodiversity and environmental conservation are key to recreational satisfaction (Mateos, 1971; Zhuk, 2022; Sánchez & López, 2023).

Recreational equipment, cultural offerings, gastronomy and festivities complement the tourist experience, while environmental education strengthens participation and the link with the environment (Rodríguez & Mora, 2021). Adequate delimitation and the implementation of management plans are essential for conserving the area and maintaining tourist flow, whereas institutional limitations, such as low training capacity and funding, restrict sustainable development (Tlapa et al., 2020; Bonfiglio et al., 2021).

### *Identification of determining factors in visitors*

The influx to natural protected areas depends on the interaction of individual and collective variables linked to the ecosystem, differing according to age, gender,

educational level and family structure (Osorio et al., 2017). Tourism management should be based on the evaluation of visitor attitudes, preferences and behaviors (Kaffashi et al., 2015). Demand is explained not only by economic factors but also by motivation, sociology, psychology, culture, demographics, lifestyles, leisure time, beliefs and seasonal customs (Khoshnevis & Khanalizadeh, 2017). Travel motivation is influenced by perceptions, personality and previous experiences, within a context of high expenditure and careful planning.

Sociocultural conditions, such as age, employment, profession, education and mobility, affect demand, highlighting the relationship between cultural capital and propensity to travel; likewise, unemployment, destination repetition, marital status and travel style also influence (Romero & Salazar, 2013). Free time, seasonality and economic development condition the ability to travel, while income, location, socioeconomic status and vehicle ownership are also determining factors (Domingo, 2001). Finally, tourist environmental awareness and access to digital information and shared experiences foster more informed decisions (Seeley, 2024).

#### *Application of the determining factors of recreation-animation*

Caletones, in the municipality of Gibara, Holguín, features an officially delimited Ecological Reserve with an approved management plan, thereby guaranteeing its conservation and sustainable recreational use.

#### *Characterization of site attributes*

The locality possesses diverse natural resources that make it highly attractive to visitors. It features a white sand beach that receives approximately 3,000 summer visitors between June and August; located 19 km from Gibara, it presents fine, clear sands, contrasting favorably with the beaches of Gibara. The Caletones Ecological Reserve has a coral reef of high ecological and touristic value, characterized by remarkable marine biodiversity including tropical fish, mollusks, crustaceans and hard and soft corals. This reef, one of the best-

preserved in the region, is an attraction for diving and snorkeling, in addition to serving a protective function by filtering coastal waters and reducing erosion and storm impact.

Furthermore, the Laguna Blanca-Caletones Speleolacustrine System stands out, hosting flooded caves of great scientific and touristic interest, including Cueva de las Dos Anas, Poza Negra, Poza Fría, and Cenote de la Güirita. The Tanque Azul Cavern, the most extensive in Cuba with over 2,000 meters of explored galleries, is ideal for cave diving and holds high geological value due to its ancient origin. The Caletones Ecological Reserve in Gibara is notable for its high biodiversity, with 466 plant species (405 native and 61 exotic), 66 endemics and 26 threatened species, along with vegetation formations such as sandy and rocky coasts and mangroves, halophytic and aquatic habitats that support a diverse fauna and a migratory bird corridor with emblematic species (Gutiérrez et al., 2017).

The climate is semi-arid tropical, with temperatures ranging from 24–27°C and precipitation of 800–1,000 mm. The local forestry unit carries out invasive species control, restoration and forest management. The community has basic services, rental houses, a campsite and gastronomy based on seafood products, although the touristic offering is limited. Access is restricted due to the absence of public transportation, poor road conditions and scarce vehicular traffic; there are deficiencies in drainage and beach safety, despite electrical improvements. Organized touristic activity is limited to the Marina Marlin S.A. package to Tanque Azul, offering cave diving, swimming and hiking, while the rest of the visits are informal. Commercial fishing is prohibited, and the Stereo G Festival is the only event of relevance.

In environmental education, actions are carried out by the Gibara Natural History Museum, although these are not fully utilized as learning dynamizers. The community exhibits limited environmental culture, compensated by high hospitality, while digital dissemination is practically non-existent, evidencing the need for more effective communication strategies.

### *Assessment of visitor characteristics*

Analysis using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences 27 (hereinafter SPSS) showed that the majority of tourists were women, mainly nationals, with 3.1% international. University education level predominated (57%), followed by secondary (28%) and basic (15%). 62% visited as a couple or family group and 38% individually, allowing for the design of strategies and activities adapted to different recreational and academic interests.

Most visitors are concentrated between 26 and 45 years old, indicating that young people and young adults constitute the key segment of the destination; they also show greater motivation for water activities, especially the beach, followed by lagoons and caverns. Visitors primarily value spending time with family and friends, escaping routine and relaxing, while learning, personal growth, and well-being have moderate importance for a smaller segment.

Considering visitors' connection to the destination, the majority intend to repeat their trip. Furthermore, approximately 80% have visited the reserve between three and five times, suggesting high recurrence and loyalty to the place. Visitor behavior regarding the likelihood of recommending the site shows a very clear contrast in recommendation channels.

Although visitors consistently value the place's identity and their overall satisfaction, there are critical areas requiring attention. Site cleanliness and conservation present notably lower levels and fragmented opinions. Likewise, variability in the perception of recreational activities and interpretive materials suggests that these elements produce diverse experiences that are not uniformly perceived. The way visitors inform themselves before the visit evidences that they mainly trust direct testimony from their close environment (67.1%), followed by user reviews on opinion platforms. Blogs and forums play an important role as secondary sources, while social networks are marginal for obtaining prior information.

Triangulation was implemented by articulating qualitative and quantitative findings, enabling a holistic and robust vision of recreational and touristic management in the Caletones Ecological Reserve. In the quantitative phase, normative and infrastructural determinants such as water, lighting, health, safety, communications and touristic offerings were not evaluated due to operationalization difficulties and data access, although other key factors were analyzed. The results show that destination personality and intangible elements are central to loyalty and recommendation, with hospitality acting as a «relational filter» (Prayag, 2007; Pine, 1999).

Limited infrastructure and digital dissemination generate physical and communication barriers, attracting higher-spending tourists but restricting market democratization. A gap is also observed between the real richness of biodiversity and its valuation, highlighting the importance of environmental interpretation (Buckley, 2009). Finally, cultural equipment and environmental education present moderate valuations, suggesting that participatory experiences could increase satisfaction and conservation commitment (Richards, 2011; Ballantyne, Packer & Falk, 2011).

#### *Recreation-animation management program*

A recreation-animation management program is proposed for the Caletones Ecological Reserve, aimed at diversifying activities, valorizing natural attractions and increasing visitor satisfaction, thereby contributing to sustainable development and the fulfillment of SDGs 2, 8, 11 and 13.

Methodologically, the proposal is conceived as a program because it is structured through a strategic planning process that systematically organizes objectives, strategies and actions, establishing logical relationships to guide intervention in the destination. In tourism planning, such instruments are based on rational procedures directed toward achieving objectives and articulating territorial interventions, making them operational tools for tourism development management and evaluation (Inskip, 1991).

Its evaluation was conducted by specialists with experience in sustainable tourism, environment and recreation, who assessed the program's dimensions using a five-level scale: infrastructure and accessibility, as support guaranteeing the viability, safety and quality of the recreational experience; recreational offering and touristic animation, as the central axis for transforming resources into educational and participatory experiences; environmental conservation, as a regulatory mechanism to minimize impacts and reinforce ecosystem protection; and community participation, as the basis for social legitimacy, local appropriation and long-term sustainability.

The data obtained were analyzed using the method of de la Cruz & Julbe (2015) to calculate the Kesp coefficient. The high level of consensus achieved (4.0) supports the validity of the proposal for application under the current conditions of the Caletones Ecological Reserve and to other areas with similar challenges. The execution of the program will be the responsibility of the Municipal Delegation of Caletones, together with the entities mentioned in the program.

### **Sustainable management program for the Caletones Ecological Reserve**

<b>Objectives</b>	<b>Strategies</b>	<b>Actions</b>	<b>Responsible</b>
1: Improve tourist infrastructure and accessibility by 2027.	1.1 Strengthen connectivity and sustainable transport by rehabilitating access roads and offering ecological transport to increase visitor opportunity and improve visitor experience.	Rehabilitate 100% of the Gibara-Caletones road (prioritizing critical sections).	Local government and Ministry of Transport.
		Provide 5 electric vehicles for public transport (2 daily routes).	Popular Camping and Provincial Transport Company.
		Create a network of tourist signage indicating evacuation routes, safe swimming areas and ecological points of interest	MINTUR and Community.
	1.2: Develop basic infrastructure by	Build signposted ecological trails in the cavern and	INOTU and Local Community.

	constructing service centers, improving safety, and mitigating sanitary risks to enhance visitor comfort and safety.	mangrove areas, with viewpoints and rest areas.	
		Set up tourist information points at the reserve entrance and beach, with interactive maps and educational materials.	INOTU and Local Community.
		Install ecological bathrooms and 20 recycling points and waste containers distributed in areas of highest human concentration.	Municipal Services Company and Environmental NGOs.
		Install 2 visitor centers (beach and cave entrance) with bathrooms and potable water.	Municipal Tourism Delegation.
<p>2: Increase recreational and cultural offerings (6-24 months).</p> <p>Install a game area on the beach, with recycled wood structures and interactive activities about local biodiversity.</p>	<p>2.1: Develop recreational and touristic animation activities to diversify the entertainment offering in Caletones and segment demand.</p>	Train 15 local guides in speleology, snorkeling and birdwatching.	University of Holguín and Expert Speleologists
		Organize ethnobotany workshops with field trips to identify species and promote their sustainable use.	Universities, research centers, or local experts.
		Design 3 specialized circuits: «Living Corals» (snorkeling), «Caverns of Time» (speleology), and «Migratory Birds», complemented with observation stations and identification talks.	Multidisciplinary team (biologists and guides). MINTUR.
		Equip routes with bilingual signage and safety kits (vests, first-aid kits).	MINTUR and Civil Protection.

		Install a game area on the beach, with recycled wood structures and interactive activities about local biodiversity.	MINTUR
	22: Promote cultural and sports events through the development of cultural experiences and thematic events, linking existing festivals with eco-responsible activities to attract non-traditional tourists (youth, families) and reduce seasonality.	Integrate the Stereo G Festival with marine conservation workshops and beach cleanup.	Festival Organizing Committee and Environmental Brigades.
		Organize «Nature Week» during the low season (photography contests, night hiking).	Tourism Delegation and Local Artists.
		Create a «Family Adventure» package (kayaking and ecological picnic in lagoons).	Popular Camping and Travel Agencies.
		Establish strategic alliances with the Ecotour travel agency to integrate the Ecological Reserve into excursion circuits. .	MINTUR Delegation.
3: Strengthen conservation and community participation by 2027.	3.1: Implement ecological restoration programs and recover critical ecosystems (corals, mangroves) to further enhance visitor appreciation of conservation.	Install 2 coral nurseries with support from local divers and scientists.	Center for Marine Research and Fishing Community.
		Implement a transdisciplinary system with adaptive and participatory governance and a real-time GIS.	Integral Forestry Enterprise (EFI) of Holguín.
		Reforest 5 hectares of mangrove with volunteers and schools.	Ministry of Science, Technology and Environment (CITMA). Volunteers.

		Monitor migratory birds monthly.	Environmental NGOs and Visitors.
	3.2: Empower the community in tourism management through training and formalization of local sustainable entrepreneurship to guarantee long-term sustainability and avoid degradation from overuse.	Develop training courses for local tour guides, with emphasis on environmental interpretation and safety in adventure activities.	University of Holguín
		Establish a microcredit access program aimed at financing basic infrastructure improvements (bathrooms, trails, signage, water points) in local enterprises linked to sustainable use.	Tourism Delegation.
		Create a management committee with local leaders, campsite representatives and authorities.	Municipal Government.
		Foster the production and sale of ecological handicrafts, using recycled materials or local natural resources.	Local Community.

Source: Own elaboration

## CONCLUSIONS

Recreation-animation is key to sustainability in protected areas and highlights the lack of integrative models applied in the Caribbean. The proposed strategic actions aim to improve infrastructure, diversify activities and foster community participation. Specialist assessment confirmed the relevance, feasibility and coherence of the program, highlighting its potential to strengthen management, conservation and the tourist experience.

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