

## 4.3 Communitarian ecotourism: An idea full of nature (Colombia)

Developing communitarian ecotourism in the Parques Nacionales Naturales de Colombia (PNN) (National Natural Parks of Colombia) is a valuable tool for social assessment and recognition of the benefits of nature; and becoming one of the most significant inputs to consolidate BioTrade. It is a process of commercial innovation based on natural and cultural assets that has adapted itself in a dynamic way to the global market's demands, which are growing significantly.



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### Introduction

BioTrade includes cultural identity and natural diversity as fundamental elements of sustainable development and the conservation of the natural and cultural heritage in Colombia. More universally, positioning environmental businesses in the sustainable economy depends on societies' production and consumption patterns, and the appreciation and recognition of the benefits that people derive from nature.

For the past 20 years, the growth of nature-based tourism in the global market has increased (UNWTO, 2010) and enhanced the essential role of local communities in the conservation of natural resources (Kiper, 2013). This article shows the experience of a group of entrepreneurs inspired by communitarian ecotourism who have successfully positioned themselves as one of the most recognized biodiversity conservation programmes in Colombia (PNN, 2015).

in the world. This privileged position forces the government to formulate policies defining the country's land use and productive development. These policies recognize the importance of biodiversity to consolidate peace and development scenarios.

Given the exceptional conditions of Colombian nature and culture, each PNN is unique in terms of geography, biology and culture. It is a perfect scenario for the contemplation and enjoyment of ecotourism activities.<sup>17</sup> Colombia receives 4.2 million foreign visitors per year, of which only 10 per cent visit a PNN (PROCOLOMBIA, 2016). Over the past decade, the Colombian tourism sector has experienced a 12.7 per cent growth, becoming the second highest income-generating activity in the country, after minerals and oil exports (Revista Dinero, 2015). Nature-based tourism maintains a positive behaviour in comparison to other sectors, as for instance, PNN visits registered a 6 per cent growth in 2015 (Figure 4.2). This represents approximately one million foreign and national visitors. Likewise, the number of visitors grew by 11.7 per cent in the first quarter of 2016 (PNN, 2016c).

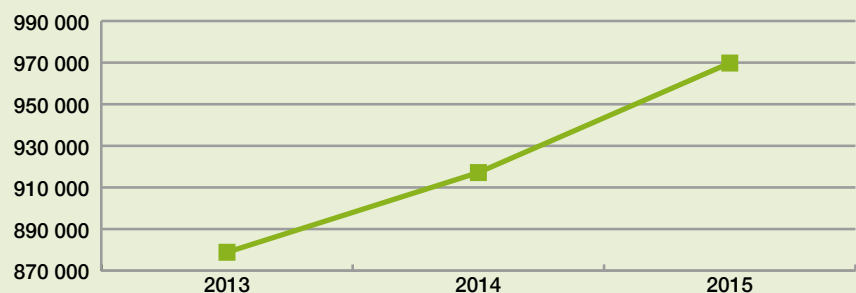
### Colombia – a destination for peace and nature

Colombia stands out as one of the 10 countries with the highest biodiversity



“Ecotourism is a major sector with great potential for Colombia. More effort is needed to enhance its development and openness to international markets in a sustainable manner...”

Figure 4.2 Visitor numbers to National Natural Parks in Colombia (2013–2015)



Source: PNN, 2015.

## The real significance of communitarian ecotourism

The opportunities to create value through the tangible and intangible attributes of nature are infinite. Diversity is considered the principal attraction of many destinations chosen by travellers wishing to experience local culture and nature (e.g. annually 6.4 million European travellers are interested in communitarian ecotourism (UNWTO, 2016). The UN World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) points out that tourism is a social, cultural and economic phenomenon that requires a long chain of production; making tourism one of the most inclusive economic activities at the global level.

Differing from conventional tourism, communitarian ecotourism enlarges the social scope, claiming the role that local communities play in the conservation of the heritage (Comité Interinstitucional de Ecoturismo, 2007). In Colombia, the Communitarian Ecotourism Programme in National Parks (CEPNN) started as a conservation strategy over a decade ago with seven parks in the Andean, Caribbean and Pacific regions (Figure 4.3).<sup>18</sup> Each CEPNN must:

- Improve or maintain the conservation status of the PNN
- Promote the social valorization of nature
- Generate benefits that improve the local communities' quality of life (Bio-comercio Colombia, 2014).

Since 2008, 10 communitarian ecotourism initiatives (CEIs) have been implemented; each includes a contract for the provision of communitarian ecotourism services and actions. Within the CEPNN and with the support of the GEF-CAF-UNEP Andean BioTrade Project "Facilitation of financing for biodiversity-based businesses and support for market development activities in the Andean region" (Biocomercio Colombia, 2014) each CEI enhanced their knowledge and skills to develop BioTrade businesses, implement sustainability principles and criteria (e.g. BioTrade) and good ecotourism practices. Additionally, they diversified their economic activities by developing products and value chains associated with ecotourism such as handicrafts. A knowledge sharing scenario was created among them, which enhanced their skills related to commercial and promotional strategies and the implementation of business

PNN Utría, humpback whale

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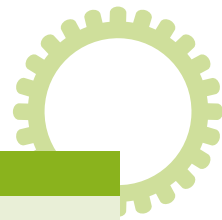


Figure 4.3 National Natural Parks in Colombia



- Ecotourism chains of value
- Handicrafts chains of value

Source: PNN website: [www.parquesnacionales.gov.co](http://www.parquesnacionales.gov.co).



plans, aiming to enrich their capacity to develop nature-based tourism companies.

By the end of 2014, the number of visitors to the six CEIs increased by 4.6 per cent from 2013 to 2014 generating US\$313 000 in sales, and with 95–97 per cent visitor satisfaction registered for the past three years (figures 4.4 and 4.5) (PNN, 2016c). Similarly, four of the six CEIs increased their revenues by almost 54 per cent. Under the CEPNN, 80 per cent of the CEIs promoted their initiative to domestic and international markets by raising awareness and implementing promotion and commercialization activities, including using new technologies and social media (Twitter, Facebook and Instagram).<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, the number of PNN has increased to 11 located in seven departments (Figure 4.3).

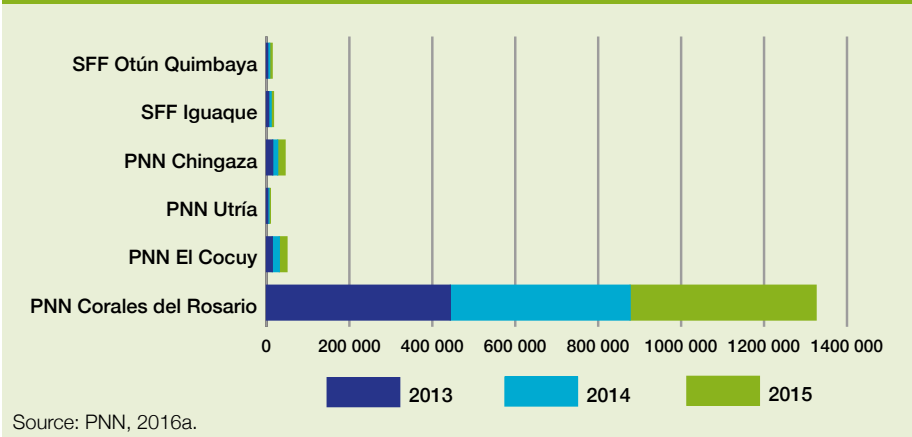
Today, communitarian entrepreneurs focus on obtaining a sustainability certification for their activities, enhancing their language skills and diversifying their products, activities and services. This is achieved by enhancing the participation of different actors in the ecotourism value chain and fostering the empowerment of local communities.

## Conclusions

Ecotourism is a major sector with great potential for Colombia. More effort is needed to enhance its development and openness to international markets in a sustainable manner. Competitiveness of the sector is a challenge that requires investing in infrastructure and equipment as well as in human talent. These efforts must strengthen communities' entrepreneurship and organizational capacities, to enable them to manage their assets and financial resources and promote their touristic product. Furthermore, they need support to enhance their research and innovation capacities to develop new ecotourism products fulfilling sustainability standards (e.g. BioTrade). They also need to establish a network between public, private and civil society to avoid duplicating efforts.

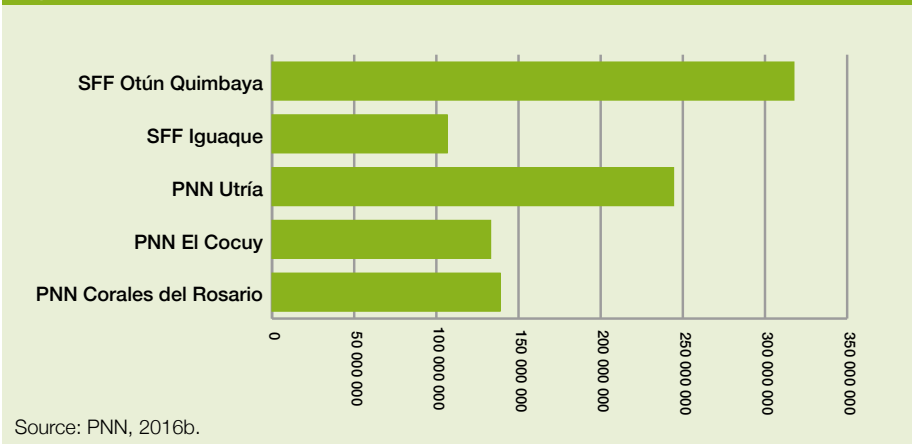
From the business point of view, designing the touristic experience implies the synergy of multiple elements to enhance positioning, development and innovation of the product. Naturar Iguaque (2015) stated: "We (should) stop selling beds and food to

Figure 4.4 Visitor flows to communitarian ecotourism destinations



Source: PNN, 2016a.

Figure 4.5 Revenue (2014)



Source: PNN, 2016b.

PNN Los Nevados, Laguna del Espejo (Mirror Lake)

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*promote a unique experience, based on co-creation,<sup>20</sup> establishing the 'visitor's experience' in the heart of the communitarian ecotourism promise".*

Close interaction with local communities is essential to generate positive change between public and private actors at local, regional and national levels. It is also important to generate a positive response in safeguarding

the natural resources. This approach fosters enlightened private participation in conservation. It is a tool for territorial planning and environmental management of PNN.

The CEPNN has a strong institutional and business insight that fosters the role of BioTrade in the development of the Andean region. It also encourages the inspiring idea that BioTrade is not just an idea in Colombia but a reality.