

A Model for Sustainable Tourism Development in Inland Latin American Areas: The Case of the Northern Region of Nicaragua

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Central American countries' globalisation processes have improved macro-economic situations, as in the case of foreign debt, the same cannot be said for human development, where traditional societies have not had the capacity to respond to instruments introduced through the new knowledge society. Linked to this, tourism and services provide an opportunity to these countries because of the wealth of both their natural and cultural tourism resources. However, these developments must embrace sustainable models of tourism and to achieve this, tourism must not be presented as an end in itself, but rather as a tool for development. Here, we apply the model for integrated tourism development to the area of study (the Northern Region of Nicaragua, Las Segovias).

Keywords: sustainable development, integrated planning tourism, integral diagnosis

Introduction

Many Latin American countries are amongst the least developed, as is the case of Central America, where Honduras, Guatemala, El Salvador, or Nicaragua form part of what is known as the geography of poverty and inequality (Kanbur & Lustig, 1999; Romero, 2004).

Although the structural adjustment plans applied since the 1980s have made progress in correcting the major macro-economic imbalances such as inflation, public debt, etc. (International Monetary Fund [IMF], 2000; Gwartney & Lawson, 2001), the social reality at a local and regional level is very different. Thus, the adjustment plans for the liberalisation of international markets, within the framework of the processes of globalisation of post-modern society at the beginning of the 1990s, went beyond the power or capacity of governments to define and apply autochthonous economic and social policies, as is reflected in the case of Nicaragua (World Bank, 1991; Vargas, 2001; Avendaño, 2000; 2002).

Thus, the processes of globalisation of post-modern society have left these countries clearly on the side of the "loser regions" (Benko & Lipietz, 1994), with the very limited response capacity of traditional local societies, whose socio-economic structures face difficulties in accessing the instruments of the new knowledge society.

Nevertheless, faced with this situation, attempts have been made over recent years to take advantage of the new economic trends, which include those linked to the tourism industry (Sánchez & Moreno, 1999) as a significant system and instrument to encourage regional development (Mill & Morrison, 1992; Gunn, 1994; Sessa, 1998; Hall, 2000; López, 2005). This offer takes the form of environmental (the region contains 10% of the planet's biodiversity) and cultural tourism products (the pre-Columbian and colonial civilisations).

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However, in regional tourism development, we should not fall into the contradictions deriving from the “developmentalism” that has repercussions for both environmental and socio-cultural aspects. All of this has arisen from the application of strictly macro-economic and sectorial approaches, while tourism has a “polyhedral” and “transversal” character, especially in inland areas where the offer is represented by the territorial resources as a whole and the region’s sectorial activities, normally dominated by small businesses (Trejos, 1999).

In this sense, many developing countries have mimicked developed areas and have prioritised these macro-economic aims of tourism (Burns, 1999), in many cases represented by the PASOLP tourism planning model developed by Baud-Bovy and Lawson (1998), offering products under the clearly exogenous formula of “holiday destinations”. Concerning this, authors such as Go (1998) and Vanhove (1998) pointed out the difficulties that these “enclave tourism” models have in developing countries since they practically ignored the local population. Concern has been expressed over this tendency in the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP, 2000) which states that development efforts have often focused on the encouragement of economic expansion, while human development covers all the dimensions that contribute to defining the quality and welfare of human life in an interdisciplinary way. Likewise, the development plan to emerge from the World Summit on Sustainable Development held in Johannesburg in 2002 recognises the importance of integrating the three components of sustainable development (United Nations World Tourism Organization [UNWTO], 2001): economic growth, social development, and protection of the environment.

Hence, the old polemic on tourism planning facing developing countries is once again brought up here: What should come first: tourism in the strictest sense or development? The answer is without doubt the latter. Therefore, tourism must represent a way of encouraging, by means of integrated and sustainable strategies, the global development, while putting the aim of the society’s welfare before the strictly sectorial objectives of tourism.

Given the complexity of this approach (Murphy, 1985), planning efficiency must be improved through greater participation of the local population so as to avoid endangering their viability, since social competitiveness is also involved alongside the economic issue (Aydalot, 1986; Camagni, 1991; Maillat, Quevit, & Senn, 1993; Garofoli, 1995; Storper, 1998). How efficient this social competitiveness will be depends on the capacity of the social agents to act together and in agreement with various institutions; valid in relation to this is the example to come from public institutions’ initiatives such as the European experiences of LEADER, PRODER, etc. (López, 1999; 2009), in which tourism activities are integrated into general measures for action and present an integrated “bottom up” plan.

In this sense, the integrated tourism analysis, in the same way as certain economic approaches, shares cultural, social, and institutional valuations; in other words, the so-called “cultural turn” echoed in the economic geography of recent years (Crang, 1997; Amin & Thrift, 2000; Hall, 2000; Moulaert & Sekia, 2003), which gives a more thorough view of what human development should be. In this respect, cultural values can be efficient from an economic perspective, as they encourage, through their tacit knowledge in the relational and organisational sense (Von Krogh, Ichijo, & Nonaka, 2000), the transmission of the processes of innovation and management (Mariussen, 2001; Malmberg & Maskell, 2002), as well as bring values of solidarity (Throsby, 2001) that, in the end, dictate the degree of economic success or failure enjoyed by a society.

Finally, this paper expands on the conceptual aspects of an integrated tourism model and its application in the Central American scenario, the case of the Northern Region of Nicaragua (Las Segovias), and presents the results of the integrated tourism diagnosis.

Theoretical and Methodological Approach: Application in the Northern Region of Nicaragua

Based on the above, it is thus obvious that tourism initiatives lack of models and methodologies that match the characteristics of each territory and the new notion of sustainable development, which would facilitate both territorial and social cohesions.

Against this background, the main objective is to attain a series of strategies by means of models that bring about improved development through integrated tourism systematisation, while. This involves carrying out an analysis and diagnosis in which the specific objectives are as follows:

- (1) To transform resources into products and enhance existing products;
- (2) To match the product or products to the demand in order to establish the bases for greater competitiveness reinforced by training and new technologies;
- (3) To propose territorial designs in accordance with the available resources;
- (4) To identify “tourism environmental units” (TEUs) so as to prioritise exceptional projects;
- (5) To match tourism development to the territory’s reception capacity.

Integrated tourism takes on importance as a result of the complexity and transversality presented by the business of tourism. This is reflected in both the territorial and socio-economic and cultural dialectic of the various spaces, where each area involved in this dynamic chooses a particular development model, thus significantly influencing the characteristics presented by the basic tourism resources of the area.

Consequently, this requires not only the territorial planning of potential tourism zones, but also the introduction of tourism planning models or methodologies based on integrated global strategies that foster development in general. In this way, we approach a conceptual position in which tourism is presented as an instrument for development rather than an end in itself. The weak socio-economic situation deriving from the decline in agricultural structures, together with the healthy aspect of tourism and service industries may help to generate synergies in other activities that to one extent or another form part of the tourist industry itself.

Tourism activity takes part in an integrated system, since tourism is constituted as a functional, dynamic system that is, at the same time, socio-economically and spatially complex, where a variety of elements interrelate in a constant process of readjustment. Thus, going beyond the simplification presented by the UNWTO (1994; 1999), which basically recognises the two elements of supply and demand, our perspective of development has a much broader dimension, integrating a range of different elements. In this line, the integrated tourism system is made up of two levels (see Figure A1 in Appendix A), one of which, “A”, includes a block of basic issues that represent the foundations of integrated tourism, amongst which we find territorial, demographic, and socio-economic aspects. An analysis of these aspects should provide not only information on the basic characteristics of these areas, but also their suitability to the territory where the tourism model to be developed will be integrated. The second level, “B”, operates on the basis of level “A” and contains the “elements of the tourism system” in the strict sense of the term. Amongst these elements, we highlight tourism resources, markets or demand, companies directly related to tourism and those that generate synergies, and institutions, which should facilitate factors that reshape the resources.

In addition, the conceptualisation of integrated tourism development must also intrinsically include the following:

- (1) The sustainability of resources, together with economic, social, and environmental viability and profitability through productive qualification;
- (2) The endogenous character of integrated development that forms part of sustainable development (Cunha, 1988);
- (3) An understanding that spaces are not of a closed nature, but that they participate in an “open system”, although according to Dumolard, certain internal characteristics are preserved (Gómez Mendoza, Muñoz Jiménez, & Ortega Cantero, 1994);
- (4) Participation, since integrated tourism development requires society in general and both public and private agents in particular;
- (5) The carrying out of scalar approaches based on “TEUs”. These “TEUs” correspond to an area with a basic territorial resource, or failing that, possess a minimum number of complementary territorial resources that enable the advancement of tourism within that space (López, 1998; 2014).

Finally, eight phases make up the methodological planning process:

- (1) Basic territorial demographic and socio-economic explorations; environmental explorations: landscapes and environmental and urban settings; and quality of basic natural resources;
- (2) Analysis and diagnosis of the tourism setting on sub-regional and regional scales;
- (3) Inventory, evaluation, and potential of the tourism resources: quantification and distribution of resources, resource hierarchy; resource weighting; and index of tourism potential;
- (4) Analysis of the factors that affect the state of resource development: urban organisation and type of settlements; building type and morphology; urban morphologies and main areas of identity; traditional fabrics of society and new growth; communication and accessibility; and tourism management;
- (5) Socio-tourism explorations into demand: survey of demand (in situ); interviews by means of questionnaires with the main social and economic agents; telephone survey of travel agents in the main national markets; round table discussions, explanatory day conferences aimed at raising awareness; and single-issue day conferences on potential products;
- (6) Analysis and diagnosis of the tourism companies and those companies that generate synergies on integrated tourism development: diagnosis of tourism companies (state of infrastructures, diagnosis of human resources, sources of financing and level of technology, extent of environmental impact, and degree of competitiveness, commercialisation, and marketing); diagnosis of theme tourism on which the companies are based (present markets, potential markets, and non-regulated offer); and diagnosis of companies with possible synergies with tourism development;
- (7) Carrying out a global diagnosis by applying an SWOT analysis;
- (8) A strategy proposal.

Application of the Integrated Tourism Model in the Northern Region of Nicaragua: The Departments of Estelí and Nueva Segovia

The study base in this research covers departments of Estelí and Nueva Segovia, located in the central Northern Region of the Republic of Nicaragua (see Figure A2 in Appendix A). The two departments both share a border with a third department, Madriz, and the three departments form an area known as Las Segovias.

The three departments cover an area of 9,212 km² (Estelí 2,235 km², Madriz 1,602 km², and Nueva Segovia 3,123 km²) with a population of 430,953 inhabitants, which gives a population density of 46.78 inhabitants/km².

The main indirect research sources for the research into these territories were: the Ministry of the Environment and Natural Resources (MARENA, 2001); the Institute for Territorial Studies (INETER), topographical map 1:50.000 numbers 2855 II, 2856 I-II-IV, 2857 II-III, 2954 I-IV, 2955 IV, 2956 I-III-IV, 2957 I-II-III, 2958 II, 3056 III-IV, 3057 III-IV, as well as the map of the administrative political division of Nicaragua, scales 1:750.000.

For this territory areas study has been: the Nicaraguan Institute for Municipal Promotion (INIFOM), the Nicaraguan National Statistics Institute. Associations referred to included: ADESO Las Segovias; the River Estelí Basin Geographical Information Society (SICRE); the Nicaraguan Tourism Institute (INTUR); German Technical Cooperation (GTZ); the Centro-American Integration System (SICA); and Fund for Tourism Development (FODESTUR). The direct or field work resources included:

(1) Tourism resources. Fieldwork carried out during March, April, and May 2002, producing an inventory with a total of 67 resources;

(2) The resources fieldwork was completed with contributions of the factors that reshape the offer in the study area;

(3) Concerning demand, a total of 842 questionnaires were administered to tourists in 67 hotel establishments in the departmental capitals of León, Granada, Managua, Estelí, and Nueva Segovia, and in the tourism complex in Montelimar, on the coast of the department of Managua, with a sample margin of error of +/-6% at a satisfaction level of 95.5%;

(4) Analysis of business structure.

Integrated Tourism Diagnosis of the Departments of Estelí and Nueva Segovia

Once an analysis had been made of the basic aspects and elements that make up the tourism system, we went on to conduct an SWOT diagnosis of both the items making up the basic aspects and those comprising the tourism system.

Synthesis of the Diagnosis of the Basic Aspects

Given the conditions of the population, there is still to a large extent a subsistence economy, partly as a result of institutional weakness and scarce manoeuvrability on economic issues which, together with a fragile social structure (deficiencies in the family structure and social roles), make any progress most difficult. The property structure also has a major influence on this situation: the sharing out of land by the Sandinistas (Reinhardt, 1987; Anibal, 1993) aimed to achieve greater social justice, but did not take into account that the new structures generated, given that the conditions of production for essentially a coffee monoculture require vast stretches of land to be viable, were destined either to the new trend to sell land or to a "kitchen garden economy" with no guarantee of sustainability. However, positive aspects such as the importance of nationality, the disposition towards sociability and political organisation together with the existence of social support organisms were also in evidence.

Nevertheless, if the problems that give rise to poverty, in some extreme cases, are not solved, the risk of social tension appears. To this end, a more integrated approach to solutions on the part of the administration would be of great advantage.

In this sense, the economic structure is of vital importance to Nicaragua, and logically, also to the northern departments. The burden of foreign debt, the interests on which constitute more than 15% of the fiscal expenditure budget (Avendaño, 2000; 2002), should not be forgotten. This situation creates foreign dependency that determines and conditions the economic dynamic. This is reflected in the trade gap, with the slowing down of exports due to low internal production and scarce diversification. Likewise, foreign dependency has led to limited government investment manoeuvrability, which has been most acutely felt in investment in services with a direct repercussion on social welfare, reflected in the poverty of the country and the region.

The high costs of resources for production and the comparative advantages given to industries located in free zones (Agosin, 2001), together with a financial market that finds it difficult to raise capital and designate it to investment in production, reflect a lack of competitiveness, especially in industry and agroindustry.

In spite of this situation however, Nicaragua, specifically the north, has natural resources that together with certain macro-economic aspects, economic liberalisation, reduction of the tax deficit, reduction in foreign debt, and reduction of inflation (Banco Central de Nicaragua [BCN], 2000; IMF, 2000) are seen as clear strengths for future development.

Diagnosis of Tourism System Elements

Territorial tourism resources and “TEUs”. A total of 67 territorial tourism resources are to be found in the departments of Estelí and Nueva Segovia. If we apply the analytical integrated evaluation (López, 1998), their total value amounts to 136.25, of which 44.67% are historical-monumental, 28.40% are natural-landscape, 24.37% craft and gastronomy, and 2.56% folklore.

This implies that from an intrinsic perspective, these resources present medium-lower values, particularly the natural and craft resources, although their low level of organisation and planning somewhat lowers their value to tourism (see Tables 1 and 2). The final hierarchy of the resources is obtained by multiplying the number of resources by the square of the obtained hierarchy, which for the study area reaches the value of 336. In this sense, one positive aspect is that the variety of resources and their geographical concentration enable us to propose a series of five “TEUs”: the town centre of Estelí; Miraflores-Moropotente; Tisey-La Estanzuela and its immediate surroundings; the town of Condega and its surroundings; and the town centre of Ocotal.

Furthermore, clear opportunities are also revealed, such as the increasing international interest in the potential tourism products available in the north, a favourable climate, interest in the indigenous cultures, administrative support.

The markets: demand. The most remarkable aspect regarding this factor is the lack of knowledge about the country and the northern region by the tourist demand (see Figures 1 and 2). This is attributed to a long absence of tourist information offices and the image of a country affected by conflicts, natural disasters, illnesses, etc..

The demand, in other words, the tourist visiting the northern region does not value the services provided as highly as the self-evaluation made by the sector workers. Likewise, the low national demand for tourism services (lack of promotion of the inland market) is presented as a setback or a weakness. This means that the lack of product offer leads to a significant section of the potential demand remaining undefined. To this can be added serious problems attending the increase in demand caused by the lack of structured products, which at the same time should be accompanied by support in services (health, security, etc.) in order to achieve a high-quality stay.

Table 1
Results of the Evaluation of Integrated Tourism Resources

Factor	Variable	Maximum score	Study of the area	%
Internal (X)	A. Intrinsic characteristics (specificity and singularity)	20	9.56	47.8
	B. Degree of arrangement and internal planning	10		
	B.1. Infrastructures and degree of planning	(5)	0.99	19.8
	B.1.1. General infrastructure	(2.5)		
	B.1.2. Urbanisation	(2.5)		
	B.2. Tourist infrastructure and services	(5)	0.71	14.2
	B.2.1. Signalling and information service	(2.5)		
	B.2.2. Equipment and services	(2.5)		
External (Y)	C. External accessibility	10	5.64	56.4
	D. Evaluation of the resource in the tourist market and volume of demand that it generates	10	3.40	34.0
Total		50	20.31	40.62

Notes. Source: Own elaborations. Calculation of primary hierarchy: $J: (X + Y) \times 5/50$, where: J: Hierarchy; X: Internal factors; Y: External factors; 50: The maximum score of the resource; and 5: The maximum hierarchy of the resource.

Table 2
The Analytical and Integrated Evaluation of the Tourist Resources in the Departments of Estelí and Nueva Segovia (by Categories): Average Value of the Tourist Resources

Category	Internal factor (X)			External factor (Y)		Hierarchy index
	A	B		C	D	
		B1	B2			
Natural landscape	11.9	1.3	0.7	4.7	4.1	2.27
Historical monumental	7.9	0.8	0.6	6.1	2.3	1.77
Craft and gastronomy	11.1	1.1	0.8	5.6	5.1	2.37
Folklore and celebrations	7.5	1.2	1.2	4.5	3.0	1.74
Average total hierarchy	9.6	1.1	0.8	5.2	3.6	2.03

Note. Source: Own elaborations.

Despite all these drawbacks, the north presents some very positive aspects, including the fact that the region's clients value the service received more highly than that received by clients in the Pacific region.

The companies. This factor is notable for its lack of business culture and predominance of micro-companies (see Figure 3) and at the same time determined by the high cost of technology, the absence of which means that work is done with obsolete or old technologies. This low level of innovation presupposes the continuation of traditional practices with deficient organisation at work, often manifested in overworked staff. This, together with a poor tradition of business associations, leads to limited competitiveness among firms, the high costs of which foment the rapid disappearance of micro-companies.

However, the commercial tradition is present in all the difficulties mentioned, and the possibility exists to create differentiating products by taking advantage of current legislation, although this legislation should be more realistic vis-à-vis the possibilities available to the local businessman or woman. The company is threatened by a series of problematics deriving from: the advantages provided in the free zones; the lack of

organisational capacity; the slow pace of financial reform; and the shortages in a code of good business governance.

Deficient infrastructures are detected in the hotel and catering sector, particularly outside the departmental capitals and the gastronomic variety on offer is limited, despite the availability of many exotic local products. In part, this is due to a lack of knowledge by the population of these traditional values in the context of tendencies within the tourism demand.

As for the administration, although laws do exist to encourage the tourism industry (INTUR, 1999), the requirements for very high minimum standards make them somewhat difficult to apply, to which the problems accompanying investment repayment must also be added.

The degree of commercialisation can be said to be low. This is affected by the few commercialisation channels available, the lack of experience in the sector, and the lack of promotion. Likewise, the scarcity of companies and resistance to forming associations, with practically all business activities in the hands of two tour operators, represent a major handicap for the local businessman or woman.

Factors that reshape the offer. The serious deficiencies in the way the territory is organised, in particular in the “TEUs”, represent a major weakness. Likewise, there is no adequate “main identification zone” (MIZ) or “territorial access zone” (TAZ) in the town centres.

To this must be added the deficient road network, which shows very low densities especially in the main network, or the problems linked to water and infrastructures. Deficits in services are also significant, particularly in the scarcity of health services, due to low investment and high operating costs. On the other hand, the north-to-south axis provided by the Pan-American Highway, together with low population density, appears as an important strength for the north.

Nonetheless, certain aspects must be corrected because of the risk they present to tourism competitiveness, such as the lack of coordination, undisciplined town planning, and problems over investment prioritisation.

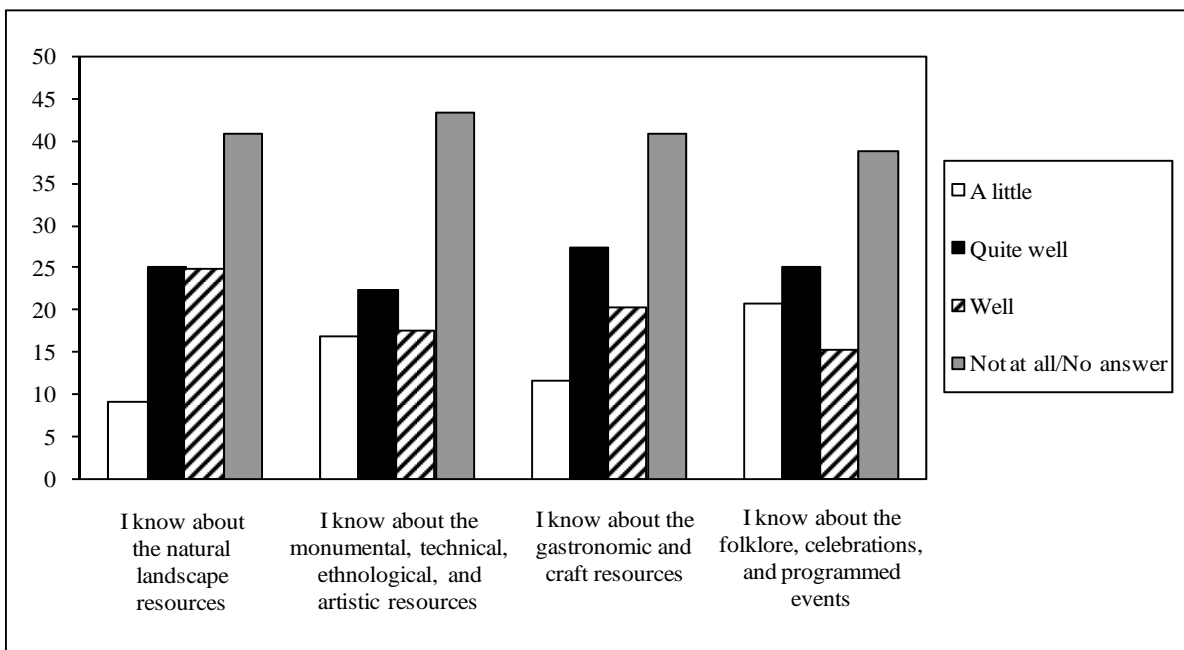


Figure 1. How well do you know the tourist resources of Nicaragua.
 Source: Office for Tourism Studies (GETUR), Universitat Jaume I.

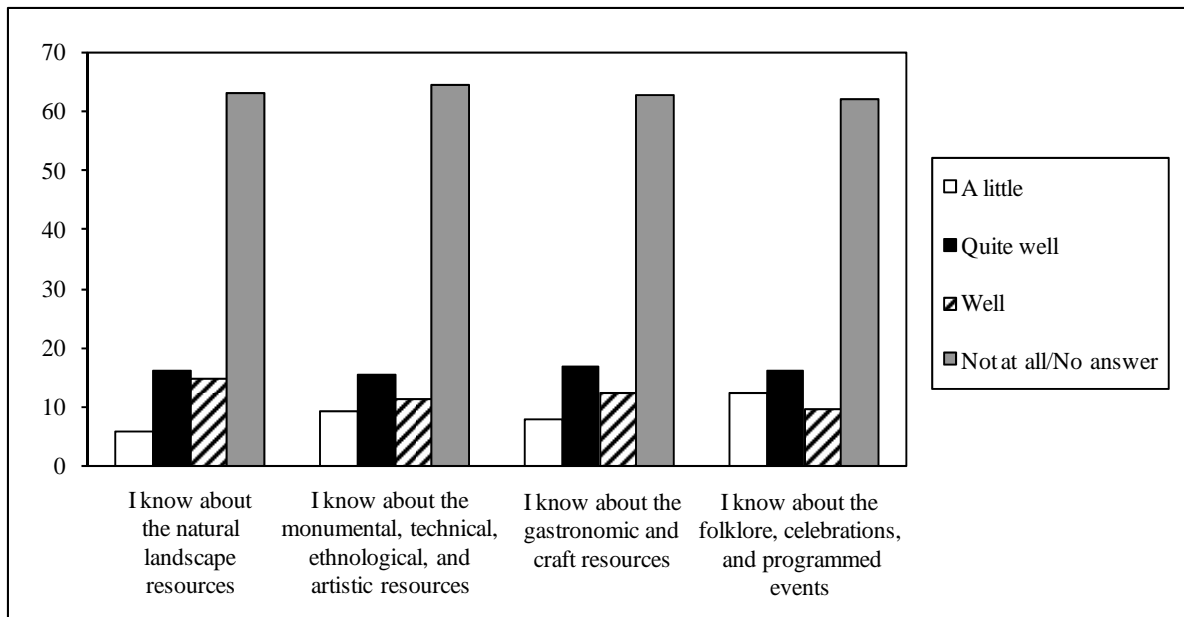


Figure 2. How well do you know about the tourist resources of the Northern Region of Nicaragua.

Source: Office for Tourism Studies (GETUR), Universitat Jaume I.

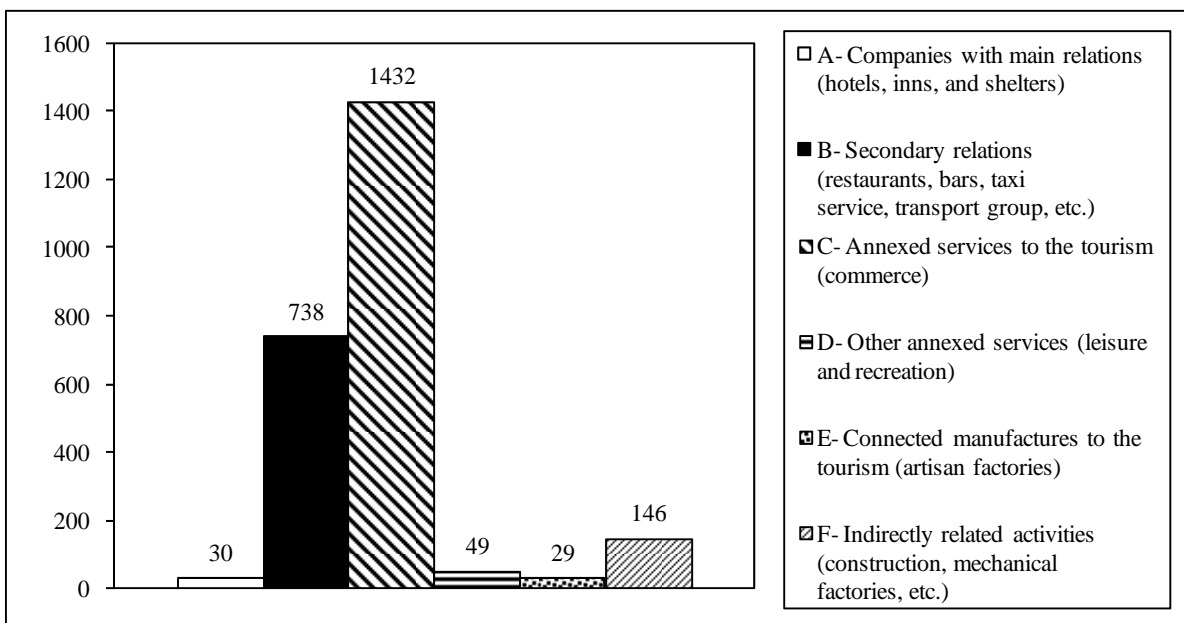


Figure 3. Companies related to the tourist activity. Departments of Estelí and Nueva Segovia.

Source: Own elaborations, Instituto Nicaragüense de Fomento Municipal (INIFOM).

Conclusions and Proposals

In conclusion and as a strategy design, we can summarise that although the physical-natural environment in the northern departments enjoys favourable aspects such as low seismic risk compared with other regions of the country, or better climatic indices, the demographic and socio-economic situation of the area presents serious hurdles to a balanced endogenous and sustainable development, to which must be added grave economic and productive fragility marked by existing financing models.

Against this background, based as it is on a local endogenous and participative development approach, the integrated tourism model may well provide an instrument to facilitate socio-economic activity.

However, in order to make this development possible in the departments of Estelí and Nueva Segovia, it is necessary to improve the quality of the environment and its surroundings by bringing the basic infrastructures up to standard in the departmental capitals and at the same time designing and strengthening the “MIZs”. Likewise, the road connections among the main “TEUs” must also be improved. This must all be effected under a local management plan so as to apply the principles of sustainable development.

These actions may at the same time facilitate the development of tourism products of this character integrated with other activities. Products that may be created in accordance with the existing resources and with the existing demand in the region are: cultural products associated with craft resources (leather in Estelí), pottery produced using pre-Columbine techniques (Ducuale), archaeological resources (El Cebollal, Apagüis), or murals (Estelí); nature/ecotourism in Miraflores-Moropotente or Tisey; agro-tourism based on the resources of tobacco (Estelí) and coffee in Miraflores; or scientific tourism, given the tremendous potential in biodiversity and the already existing facilities in both Miraflores-Moropotente (Ortiz & Barzev, 2000) and Tisey.

However, in order to activate and convert these resources into products, employee training must be promoted, business and management training must take place in the small and medium-sized businesses and business organisations, with a redefinition of the concept of the business network towards a strengthening of its “relations” factor that takes advantage of both the tacit knowledge that forms part of the cultural wealth, and the explicit knowledge to come from globalised knowledge and know-how.

The configuration of these products should be accompanied by communication and commercialisation activities, both of which present major deficits. To do this, tourism know-how must be created on various scales in order to place these receptor regions in the potential markets.

Finally, in order to successfully implement the above-mentioned aspects, tourism policy must be optimised by means of public-private cooperation and partnership formulas, together with a commitment to promoting a greater awareness and involvement of the population in the development of tourism. Of the steps to be taken in tourism development, we highlight the following: to set up council-run tourism departments in Estelí, Ocotal, and Condega; to create a register of craftsmen and women and craft industries, in line with Law 306 (Art. 4.10.5); to set up a chamber for regional tourism in Las Segovias; and to promote new business projects that will champion the figure of tourism entrepreneur, for which new financing programmes will be needed that commit to improved design, presentation, and viability of the investment projects and supported by the loan cooperatives linked to non-governmental organisations (NGOs) as well as to the traditional banking system.

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Appendix A

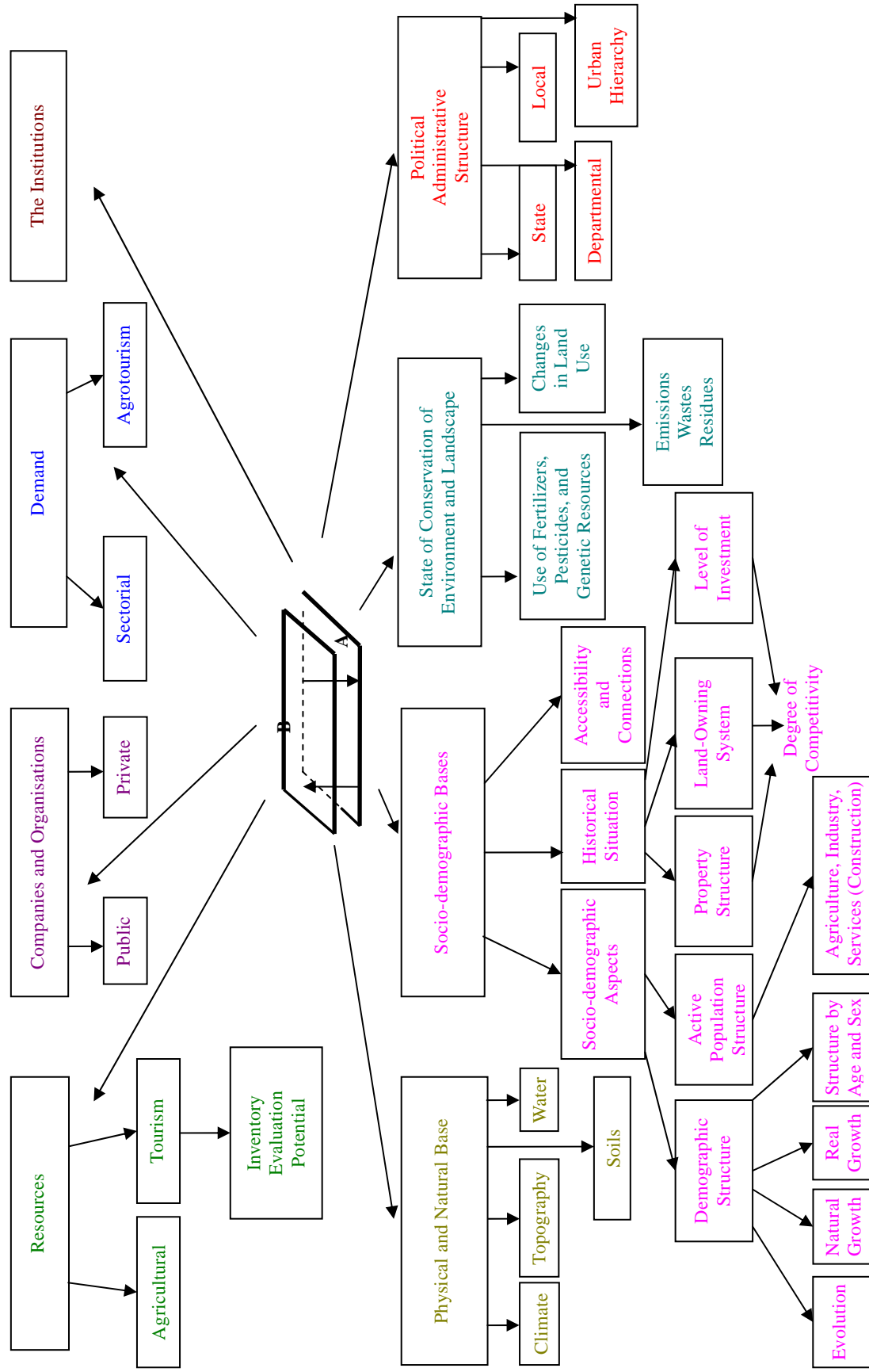


Figure A1. System of integrated tourism development. Source: Own elaborations.

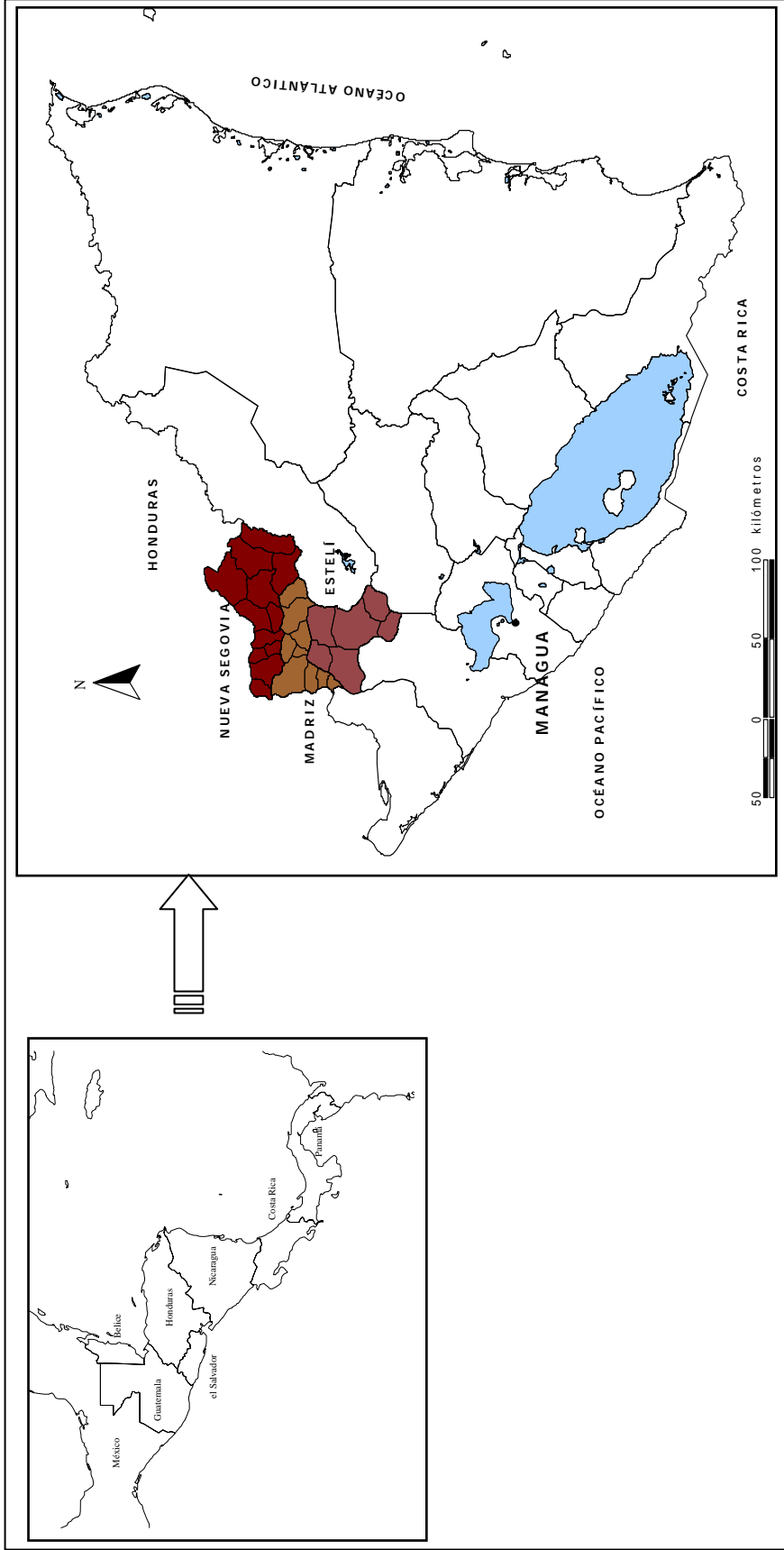


Figure A2. Location of the area under study. Source: Own elaborations, Laboratory for Studies, Organising, and Planning of Tourism Areas, Universitat Jaume I. Castellón.