

Sustainable tourism policy in practice: A comparative case study of Argentina and Costa Rica

Valentina Tamargo*, Ágnes Pál and Éva Szabóné Erdélyi

Budapest Business School, Budapest, Hungary.

* Correspondence: valen.tamargo@hotmail.com

Abstract: Argentina and Costa Rica are two Latin American countries rich in natural attractions that make up most of their tourism attractiveness for visitors. However, Costa Rica has managed to establish itself as a successful example and leader in the Sustainable Tourism sector, while Argentina could not. The aim of the present work is to explore what can account for such differences: more specifically, why Argentina has been unable to establish healthy sustainable tourism development. To examine the research question, the present study sets to describe the Tourism Development Policy of Argentina and Costa Rica, analyse their sustainability, and compare both countries by using a comparative qualitative and interpretative case study method. Comparisons will be made concerning three different governance levels: international, national, and local. The results of the present study show a close resemblance of both countries' international policy with a stark difference at the national level, with two main consequences. Firstly, it suggests a greater importance of the National Tourism Development guiding plan when it comes to setting directions of the sustainability of the sector. Secondly, the biggest contrast that can be identified between the two countries is found on the environmental component of sustainability. Thirdly, it is observed that the application of National Tourism Policy at a local level has a high impact on the sustainability of the touristic activity, especially in terms of the involvement and inclusion of local communities. Finally, suggestions and easily applicable modifications are formulated based on the Costa Rican example to improve the country's tourism Development in the years to come.

Keywords: tourism development; sustainable tourism; tourism policy

1. Introduction

Tourism is a major force in the world's economy and an activity of global significance. Previous to the current Covid-19 pandemic, tourism was a major source of income contributing to more than 10% of the world's GDP. However, its impact goes beyond the economical. Touristic activity has important social and environmental effects on the visited destinations and their communities. Sustainable Tourism is a concept born from the growing concern about these social and environmental issues, and it has only been expanding since the very first protection societies were born in the early 1900's. Today, sustainability is at the very center of the tourism industry development and a possible key to the industry's recovery to pre-pandemic standards. Sustainability theory is comprised of a very broad framework that includes economic, environmental, and socio-cultural issues. International cooperation projects like summits, declarations and agenda meetings including the Global Code of Ethics for Tourism or the WTO's Sustainable Goals are examples of current efforts towards a shift in the tourism paradigm. However, following the "think globally – act locally" strategic argument, real change begins with each country and each community adapting their practices and setting up appropriate policies to regulate touristic activity.

In this respect, some countries are doing a better job than others by managing to make sustainability easy and profitable, and blooming on the development of an "Eco-Tourism" industry. This raises the question, however, of why countries with a similar abundance of natural resources and protected regions of touristic attractiveness have failed to do the same. The present study aims to answer this question by the means of a comparative case study. We will analyse one of the most successful examples of sustainable tourism in practice, that of Costa Rica, and compare it with a country of similar geography, economy, and natural

Citation:

Tamargo, V., Pál, Á., & Szabóné Erdélyi, É. (2022). Sustainable tourism policy in practice: A comparative case study of Argentina and Costa Rica. *Prosperitas*, 9(1-2), 1. Budapest Business School. https://doi.org/10.31570/prosp_2022_0009

History:

Received:	18 Feb 2022
Last Revised:	1 Mar 2022
Accepted:	19 Mar 2022
Published:	1 Apr 2022



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resources that has, however, failed to establish itself as a Sustainable Tourism Destination leader: Argentina. Furthermore, we will attempt to identify practices that could potentially be exported from one country to the other with a view to achieving similar positive results.

Costa Rica and Argentina are countries rich in natural attractions that make up most of their tourism attractiveness for visitors. Both also have a large percentage of their territories under national or international laws of environmental protection. However, only Costa Rica has managed to establish itself as a successful example and a leader in Sustainable Tourism Development. If we look at the Tourism & Travel Competitiveness Index (WEF, 2019), we can see that Argentina has one of the lowest scores in the Environmental Sustainability index and Costa Rica has one of the highest. How can we account for this difference? Why has Argentina been unable to establish a healthy Sustainable Tourism Development and a leading Eco Tourism Industry? The goal of this study is to answer these questions by comparing the two countries' Tourism Policies and discover what policies or lack thereof may be holding the country of Argentina back from establishing an image of itself as a true Sustainable Tourism Destination and achieving positive results in that field. Furthermore, we are interested in finding what Argentina could learn from the Costa Rican example to come closer to this goal. These represent the main research questions that the comparative case study hopes to find answers to.

2. Literature review

2.1. Sustainable Tourism

Sustainable Tourism, as widespread as it has become in the last few years, is often misunderstood. Its definitions are varied and, as we have mentioned, its framework is wide, containing economic, environmental, and socio-cultural issues, as well as many sub-types of touristic activity. Today, the leading publications and literature on what the guidelines and management practices should be for Sustainable Tourism are those of the United Nations World Tourism Organization's (UNWTO). Their guidelines are the most agreed-upon, and the most well-known of them is the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, along with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The Organization has also created the World Committee on Tourism Ethics (WCTE) in 2003 and the Committee on Tourism and Sustainability (CTS) in 2013, which is one of the leading institutions dedicated to monitoring and reporting on the implementation of Sustainable programmes led by the UNWTO. Finally, the Charter for Sustainable Tourism (WCST, 1995) and the Global Code of Ethics for Tourism (UNWTO, 1999) constitute the most applicable guide, including not only a set of principles for governments, businesses, communities, and tourists, but also an implementation mechanism to manage the voluntary application of this guide.

2.2. Sustainable Tourism Parameters and Indicators

Creating comparative indicators of sustainable tourism has always been a challenge because of the subjectivity and the broadness of the topic. It becomes easier to measure if we focus only on one specific type of tourism, such as eco-tourism, and we see some authors create a framework for its evaluation (Stronza, Hunt and Fitzgerald, 2019). However, Sustainable Tourism in general does not have only one definition and, even if we were to choose one, it would be too generic, vague, and all-encompassing, with innumerable indicators that could be identified. Another problem, besides deciding on the indicators themselves, is measuring them. The economic variable of sustainability can be the easiest to measure quantitatively, which is why most comparable indicators developed so far focus mostly on an economy-based definition of sustainability. Sadly, this is not enough, as the social, cultural, political, and environmental aspects cannot be relegated. For these remaining variables, choosing the right indicators and measuring them become difficult. For example, we could say that Tourist Satisfaction is an important part of social sustainability in tourism, and that the best way to measure it would be through interviews, but there is difficulty when refining the questions themselves without compromising the validity of the experiment and the application of the same method concerning two or more destinations nationally.

In this regard, the Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC) established 37 conditions representing the minimum requirements that tourism businesses should ensure to protect and sustain the world's resources while guaranteeing that tourism serves as a tool for conservation and poverty alleviation. However, it is difficult to take these 37 conditions from such small units as businesses to the national level. In contrast, the European Union is an international organisation that was the closest to success in creating a list of comparative indicators for sustainable tourism including all relevant components. However, these indicators have been created with European countries in mind, which are easier to compare due to the existence of a European System of Accounts (ESA) and other unified statistical databases that facilitate the study and comparison between any two European countries like Romania and Croatia (Bob, Ghita and Saseanu, 2010). Therefore, non-EU countries are difficult to compare using this set of indicators, even though some authors have tried to apply them in the case of non-EU countries, such as Serbia, with modestly successful results (Jovicic and Ilic, 2010).

Other authors have pointed out that there are incompatibilities between what academics and policymakers need when developing a sustainable tourism indicator, so it can happen that the indicators become scientifically relevant but too complex to be operational, or that, conversely, political aspects interfere with the scientific validity of the indicators (Tanguay et al., 2013). Because of this tradeoff, the authors conclude that, while core indicators can be identified, these need to be adjusted to match the destination's policy framework to guarantee their usability. This is the strategy that will be applied in the present study.

Lastly, it is important to consider that Ko (2005) has gone as far as to argue that simply "systematic sustainability assessment methods are not used in tourism", and that this discipline can only be approached by descriptive analysis based on qualitative and subjective observations, which is the additional approach in the present work.

In short, the comparative study of sustainability in tourism is made difficult by the fact that it is almost impossible to gather equal and comparable data on these subjective indicators from two different countries. And, if we were to choose our indicators solely based on the data that is available in the two cases studied, such an approach would yield validity issues. Therefore, the present work will select the policymaker approach as well as a qualitative and descriptive analysis methodology to evaluate the policy instruments that help these countries achieve their sustainable tourism development results.

2.3. Sustainable Tourism Policy

Sustainable Tourism policy design, implementation, and the role it plays both in Sustainable Tourism and in Tourism Development in general are a current issue of great academic interest, especially as researchers study the connection between policies and results. Particularly interesting for the present research paper are studies about the relationship between sustainable tourism policies and other policies in general that may have prompted or inspired these policies. Interestingly, as Mellon and Bramwell found, oftentimes "[s]ustainable tourism-related policies co-evolved with, and through, policies for community well-being, actor participation, and sustainable development" (Mellon and Bramwell, 2016). This might mean that the success or lack thereof in developing a strong sustainable tourism sector may be connected not only to specifically tourism-related policies but also to other more generic policies at the national level.

As for research on the tourism policy of Argentina, we find studies for specific areas, such as Social Tourism Policy (Schenkel, 2018) or Community Based Tourism (Mtapuri and Giampiccoli, 2021), but Sustainable Tourism Policy analysis that can give an answer to our research questions at present is lacking.

3. Methods

The present empirical study is of a qualitative and interpretative nature, as well as comparative in method. Its objective is to offer descriptive inference (understood as the systematic observation of a phenomenon to enhance our understanding of it).

The study is presented in two parts. Firstly, Costa Rica’s and Argentina’s sustainable tourism policies are analysed by dividing them into three levels: international, national and regional. In each section such policies are described and compared. Secondly, based on the previous comparison, the aim is as follows: to identify reasons for Argentina’s failure to establish itself as a successful Sustainable Destination, to identify areas of possible improvement and policies that could be adopted from Costa Rica, and to develop recommendations based on the observations made.

The two countries, i.e. cases, to be compared were selected for their similar nature and based on the “most different cases” approach. If we take the World Economic Forum report on Latin America and Caribbean Travel & Tourism Competitiveness (see Figure 1 below), we can see that both Argentina and Costa Rica have a high T&T Competitiveness Score in Natural Resources (4.5 and 4.9 respectively on a scale of 1-to-7). However, their Environmental Sustainability index scores are remarkably different: with Argentina receiving 3.4 and Costa Rica 4.9 on the same scale of 1-to-7. If we delve deeper into the Environmental Sustainability category to the specific subindex of Sustainability of travel and tourism industry development, we see an even bigger contrast: Argentina scored a 4.3 and Costa Rica an impressive 5.9.

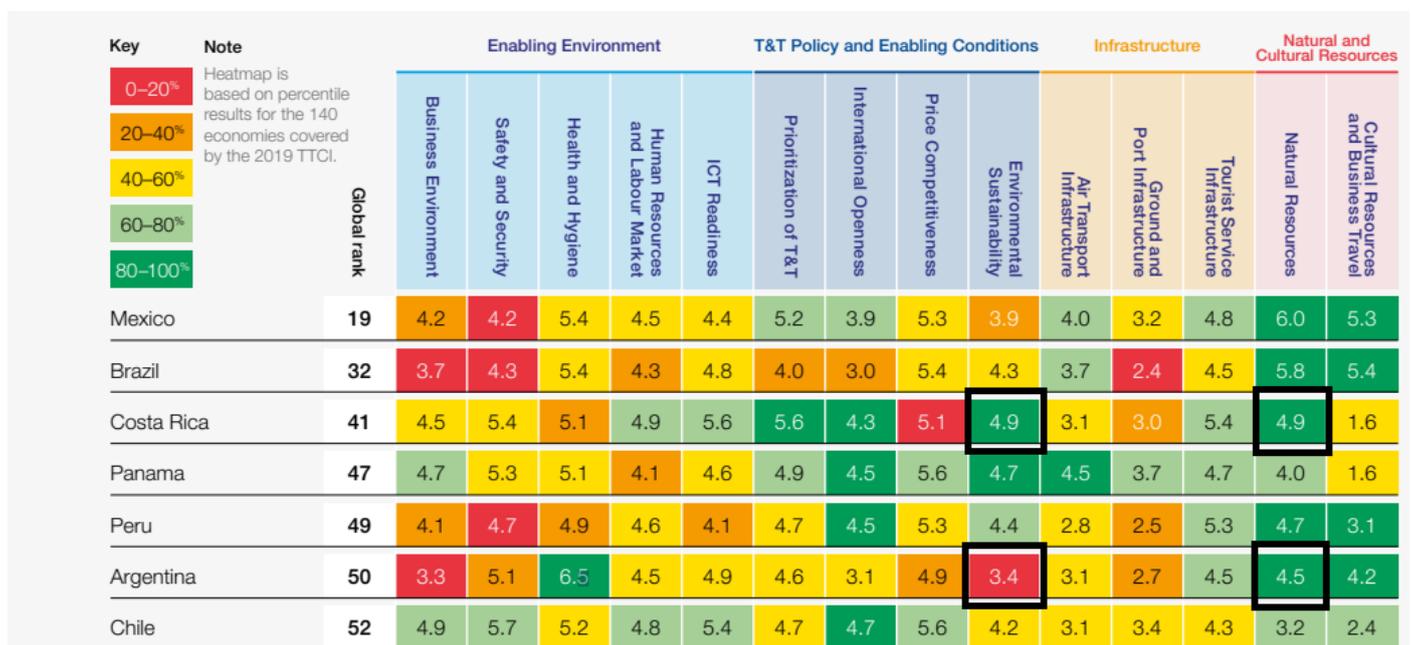


Figure 1. Scores of 6 Latin-American countries from report on Latin America and Caribbean Travel & Tourism Competitiveness. Source: World Economic Forum, 2020. Source: own work

4. Results

4.1. Sustainable Tourism Actions at an International Level

To compare sustainability tourism policy at the international level, we might start by considering the quantity of relevant treaties that Argentina and Costa Rica currently abide by. In the Travel & Tourism Competitiveness Index, there is a sub-index called “environment-related treaties in force”, and we can see that both countries scored the same, with 23 out of 29 points (World Economic Forum, 2019). Thus far, we can observe that both countries are mostly on par with each other when it comes to international actions, and this does not show any remarkable contrast. This could lead us to believe that international actions have little to do with the difference between the two cases. However, let us further review other international actions to see whether we can identify more notable differences.

Another indicator of commitment to international efforts towards sustainability is the Agenda for Sustainable Development of the UN and more specifically the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), of which Tourism activity is a big component. One of the indicators to follow the progress and adherence to the Goals is via the Voluntary National Review. These are reviews of the goals carried out by the High-Level Political Forum on

Sustainable Development and they serve to share the experience, successes, and failures towards achieving the goals the countries adhered to. Both Argentina and Costa Rica took part in the review in 2020, but their statements are markedly different. In the case of Argentina, the statement mainly reports on the country's recent political, economic, and social challenges that have made the work towards fulfilling the goals of the 2030 agenda difficult, such as the foreign debt, and the coronavirus pandemic. The statement seems like a justification for the lack of advancement towards the goals rather than a report on progress. Costa Rica, on the other hand, released their statement presenting the progress made since 2017, and it includes the development of more national indicators to measure the goals, as well as multiple national plans that incorporate or are linked to the goals, mainly the National Plan of Development and Public Investment (PNDIP). They also provided examples of passed legislation relevant to the application of the SDGs and they reported the results so far with clarity, announcing that 59% of the SDG indicators show a positive tendency, 13% a regular or stable tendency, and 28% a negative one. Both Voluntary National Reviews can be found in the Sustainable Development Website of the UN (2021).

Thus, as far as the commitment by word on sustainability issues, Argentina and Costa Rica are both quite involved, although Costa Rica appears more accountable when it comes to following the UN's agenda. However, the level of commitment to the SDG's, especially when it comes to tourism, cannot be measured only by these statements. It is important to see the partnerships and the projects that transform the goals into action. It is in this aspect that Costa Rica very clearly surpasses Argentina's efforts and manages to transform these vows into real projects, which makes a difference in the results of both countries.

If we take a look at SDG-related projects, we find that Costa Rica is a main participant in two important partnerships. The first one is the Certification for Sustainable Tourism (CST). The CST was first applied in Costa Rica, and it is also the first system to achieve the integration of the principal elements of sustainable tourism. Through a new initiative, the country is cooperating to transfer this system and make it available in other Latin American countries, e.g., Honduras, Guatemala, El Salvador, and Panamá among others.

A second international project of importance that Costa Rica takes part in is the Global Partnership for Sustainable Tourism. This is a network of tourism stakeholders including the public and private sectors, non-profits, UN agencies, international organizations and academic institutions: these entities collaborate by building partnerships, adopting policies, creating projects, and sharing experiences and knowledge. Participating countries included not only developed countries (France, Norway, Korea) but also developing countries (Brazil, Morocco, Oman). Argentina was not a participating country in either of these partnerships. On the other hand, Argentina did participate in several multilateral SDG projects that stemmed from the Ocean Conference and could be related indirectly to tourism activity, such as the IHO Hydrography Capacity Building Program for Coastal States, the plan to Implement the National System of Protected Marine Areas, and the plan to implement the Biodiversity National Strategy, among others.

It is important to note that these last commitments to the SDGs bring the international commitment to a national level. Therefore, we can thus far conclude that, when it comes to international actions involving Sustainable Tourism, the two countries seem to show minor but clear differences. Costa Rica has a seemingly more active, specific, and targeted participation, as well as better accountability when it comes to measuring and following progress in relation to the framework built by the UN along the SDGs. Argentina, however, has built a strong presence in many multilateral agreements, but seems to lack a strong follow-up from the values cherished to the concrete actions to change reality and achieve more substantial progress.

4.2. National Sustainable Tourism Actions and Policy

In this section we are analysing Argentina's and Costa Rica's National Tourism Development Plans to ascertain their general national strategies, their perspective of the touristic activity and their definition and consideration of Sustainable Tourism in their development.

When it comes to Sustainable Tourism in Argentina, the main piece of legislation and guideline is the Federal Plan of Sustainable Tourism (in Spanish: Plan Federal Estratégico de Turismo Sustentable 2015 – 2025) (MTNA, 2015). The Plan was created with the participation

of numerous authorities, both from the national level, such as the Ministry of Tourism and the National Institute of Tourism Promotion, as well as the regional tourism authorities, national park administrators, academics, and even tourism company participants. There was no civil society participation. The main goal of the Plan was described as one serving as a policy tool to guide the conservation of the national tourism heritage and create a tourism development that is sustainable, federal, and inclusive.

The plan has 9 main parts. It begins with the description of tourism as a state policy and describes the current development model for this sector. Then, the text takes us "from the model to the plan" and describes the mission, vision and goals, as well as the strategic outlook. The following section goes from plan to action and describes strategic goals and actions to take. In the next sections, the development plan is divided into areas such as "social inclusion", "national tourism heritage conservation", and "quality for competitiveness". The last two chapters are dedicated to the marketing strategy and important data for tourism as well as future projections.

In the first section, where the current Tourism Development Model is described, tourism itself is defined as a "citizen's right to enjoy relaxation and a force for inclusive territorial development to be perfected" (p. 46). Furthermore, there is the claim that Sustainable Development principles have been adopted in the country conceptually in the last 12 years, thus creating two important policy axes: the conservation of the touristic national heritage and the economic development with social inclusion. It seems clear that planning is considering the conceptual principles of Sustainable Development by taking into account cultural, social, economic and environmental sustainability, at least in an aspirational sense.

The outstanding characteristic of the Strategic Plan is that it is mostly qualitative rather than quantitative. There is a brief current situation analysis and an explanation of recent tourism indicators' changes in the final section but, even then, it is quite a general view of Argentina's Tourism in numbers, along with two short sections on regional and global tourism overviews. It is not such a comprehensive tourism analysis as the one Costa Rica has developed, as we will see. Another main observation is that Argentina's description of its tourism model includes the main values, the tourism definition and the main aspirational pillars of the model, and it is almost entirely conceptualized rather than operational. On a positive note, the plan shows a change of paradigm that is indeed a big step forward for the country, as it is finally adopting (at least conceptually) all dimensions of sustainability.

Costa Rica's own strategic development national plan is called the National Plan of Touristic Development (in Spanish: Plan Nacional de Desarrollo Turístico 2017 – 2021, referred to hereinafter as PNDT; ICT, 2017). The plan consists of four chapters with corresponding subdivisions. The first Chapter is dedicated to describing Costa Rica's tourism model. The second chapter describes the international tourism context with recent events such as the growth of tourism, the kind of demand, the domestic and international tourism, etc. The third chapter deals with the strategy, including policies, goals, and specific actions as well as programs and projects undertaken to assure that the goals of the plan are met. Finally, the fourth chapter closes the plan by listing the benefits brought by tourism, both in employment terms as well as economically, and a brief comparison with other destinations is also given. More importantly, it also sets standards for the control and follow-up of progress.

If we begin with the description of the Tourism Model of Costa Rica, we can already see a difference as opposed to the Argentine plan in the way this task is approached. While the Argentine model was described along values, concepts and aspirational ideas as the fundamental pillars, the Costa Rican plan goes in depth, exploring not only the conceptual foundations of their tourism industry, but also the historical evolution, the differentiation strategy, positioning, policy, specific strategy planning and destination development actions. As for the definition of tourism, Costa Rica identifies three core values: sustainability, innovation, and inclusion. The system is also described as "adaptive" in the sense that it attempts to create procedures facilitating a move towards goals with unpredictable results. If we compare this national definition of Tourism with Argentina's definition, inclusivity is also considered, but sustainability and innovation are not part of the main definition of the activity.

Sustainability, a main pillar, is described as a basic and indispensable trait of any tourism model, which should not reduce the capacity of the territories in question to sustain future touristic activity. This definition is reminiscent of the most widely accepted description of Sustainability, coming from the Brundtland Report of 1987: "Meeting the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of the future generation to meet their own

needs". The PNDT also guides itself by the general sustainable development goals established by the WTO in all aspects (economic, environmental and sociocultural), and it understands that these practices must be applied in all forms of tourism. For Costa Rica specifically, it is established that sustainability goals are translated into four main principles: 1. optimal use of environmental resources while preserving natural resources and diversity; 2. respect, tolerance, and preservation towards sociocultural authenticity of hosting communities; 3. economic activities that are viable long-term and generate income and labour while diminishing poverty in the community; 4. boosting tourist satisfaction and awareness of sustainability issues. Sustainability is such a key element to the Costa Rican tourism sector that it is mentioned as one of the branding elements and unique selling points in the country's marketing strategy and is considered in every aspect of the PNDT. Other notable differentiation factors that are unique to Costa Rica include the Conduct Code, the Green Passport (UNEP, 2013), the "Ecologic Blue Flag" Programme, and the "Sustainable Tourism Certification Programme" (CST), which are all sustainability-related projects that are broad in scope, strong in results and unique in formulation. As the plan states, these aforementioned elements differentiate the country from other tourism destinations. A strong sense of identity is notable in the text, and it seems Costa Rica has clearly defined its unique tourism offer and strongly based it in sustainability theory.

The second chapter, entitled "Present Situation", is dedicated to the state of the tourism context in a global scope. It is quite extensive and not only describes recent years' evolution in the tourism industry at world level, but it also takes note of all national tourism resources (parks and natural reserves, urban and maritime areas, etc.) and tourism companies (airlines, hotel chains, rentals, gastronomy, etc.) in the country and their spatial distribution, almost like a report or census. This chapter additionally includes a full analysis of the tourism demand and a brief comparison with other destinations. The Argentine plan does not include a wide view of the international state of tourism nor such a detailed analysis of its own demand or competitors.

The third chapter, entitled "Strategic Framework", includes a SWOT analysis, an explanation of the policy planning model that shows that it is in line with the plan's three main pillars (innovation, inclusion and sustainability) and the country's vision for the future, which included general goals as well as more specific measurable objectives.

The fourth and final chapter closes the document with an "integrated execution plan", which places this tourism plan in the National system, and it designs a control method with various indicators for follow-up on progress. With this, the plan manages to involve and identify all participants, as well as related sectors and other actors that have an influence on its development. Importantly, the information and data system created to measure and follow the plan's implementation and results are also designed to work in the long term as a global index of sustainable tourism development in the country. In the Argentine counterpart we see no plan to follow up directly and actively on the actions taken or to create accountability.

As finishing observations for this section, we argue that the strongest points of the Costa Rican plan are that it is detailed and well-strategised as it includes both a complete initial diagnosis, defined goals, vision, strategies, and a model for control and follow-up of progress. This makes the plan realistic and accountable. Furthermore, it importantly makes sustainability a main pillar, describes which definition of sustainability is adopted, mentions the WTO guidelines and the specific sustainability goals for the country. The Argentine Plan, in comparison, lacks perhaps the same level of depth when it comes to presenting and analysing the entire tourism sector before detailing the future plans, as well as lacks some considerations such as the global tourism tendencies and evolution, and a more sustainability-focused approach at every stage. Furthermore, the Argentine plan details broader goals but fails to set clear strategies that lead to specific objectives to fulfil those goals. The plan lacks accountability, and a method for measuring and controlling the progress and success of the plan.

4.3. Sustainable Tourism Actions at Regional Level

In this final section of the discussion, the paper will focus on two specific tourism attractions that are also protected natural areas, such as National Parks, to get an insight on how the Sustainability of Tourism is managed at a regional or local level. This is important because it will also showcase the importance of the local community and businesses when it

comes to the Sustainability of the Tourism sector. The selected National Parks are Poás Vulcano National Park for Costa Rica and Iguazú National Park for Argentina, because of their importance both as a natural site and as a tourist attraction and product of the country. In both cases we will describe the Park's Management Plan along with some other legislation regarding the parks' protection or sustainable development, as well as important sustainability indicators such as the Rainforest Alliance certification, or local communities' initiatives.

The Poás Volcano National Park is Costa Rica's second most visited conservation area after Manuel Antonio National Park. It is located in the "Central Volcanic Mountain range" (Cordillera Volcánica Central) and it houses one of the world's biggest active craters. The 6506-hectare area became a National Park in 1971 and its administration is under the National Parks Service, of the SINAC (National Conservation Areas System) and the Ministry of Environment and Energy. The Park works under a controlled visitation system, where visitors must make a prior reservation and, when visiting the site, are divided into groups of no more than 56 people that can enter the park at a set time and visit it for around an hour. Tours run every 20 minutes, and there are a total of 18 groups a day, or 1008 visitors. This controlled visitation system is a key Sustainable Development strategy that aims to avoid the negative effects of mass tourism. Mass tourism is a common phenomenon in highly popular destinations that is characterized by a large scale, often artificial tourism activity that is carried out in huge groups of people and that usually dominates and subdues the local economy and social spaces. Additionally, mass tourism has negative impacts on the environment due to its highly-exploitative and resource-intensive tourism activity. The fact that the Poás Vulcano National Park limits the number of visitors is only one of the many actions that shift tourism from Mass Tourism into a more Alternative and Sustainable style, because it makes it easier to manage visits and avoid damage to the environment.

The Park's Management Plan, last updated in 2008 (SINAC & ACCVC, 2008), is divided into four chapters. The first one is an introduction that includes the Park's general description, location, legal constitution and administration. The second chapter is dedicated to analysing the Park's state using a SWOT analysis. The third chapter looks at the Legal and Technical Framework for the park in detail, as well as the conservation goals, vision, mission, and future image. It also describes the different protection categories of the park's zones (such as absolute protection, restricted use, special use, public use, etc.). The fourth and final chapter discusses operationalising the goals and proposes actions and strategies, as well as describes specific programmes. The specific programs that are created are the following: Administration, Control and Vigilance, Land Tenure, Natural Resource Management, Community Management & Environmental Education, and Public Use. The Community Management programme is especially interesting, as it is another example of Alternative Tourism and Socially Sustainable Tourism. It is focused on supporting, and helping the local community maintain itself by being centrally involved in the area's economy and community. This includes not only economic goals like prioritizing local suppliers and services before foreign ones, but also social and educational objectives like educating the community on the importance of the resources that are being protected in the park. For truly sustainable development, the cooperative and coordinated work of all actors involved in the region in all areas of work (social, economic and environmental) is of vital importance, therefore the inclusion of these goals is a step towards the right direction from the very start, albeit aspirational.

Iguazú National Park, Argentina's most visited National Park, comprises 59,945 hectares and was created in 1934 to protect the natural area and biodiversity of the Iguazú Falls. The natural attraction is located in the northeast of the country and also continues into Brazil, that also protects the area in their own national park, of the same name. Iguazú has since been chosen as one of the Seven Natural Wonders of the World (2011) as well as a UNESCO World Heritage site.

There are two main documents that guide the Parks' functions. One of them is the Public Use Plan of the park (APN, 2001), a 198-page document that is strikingly detailed and all-encompassing. The first two chapters are dedicated to describing the Park within the regional context, with its attractions, infrastructure, equipment, and the Park's public use, which includes an analysis of the visitors and the type of visits that are paid. The third chapter is dedicated to an in-depth diagnosis of the public use of the park, including the environmental impact, quality, security, development, etc. The following chapters include the vision and goals for the park, and ten specific projects regarding the Park's points of improvement. Finally, the

last two chapters evaluate the Park's carrying capacity and establish a protocol to evaluate the Park's public use. The second guiding document is the Management Plan for the years 2017-2023 (APN, 2017), a 328-page document and even more in-depth collection of all aspects of the area, which partially repeats content from the Public Use Plan. The Management Plan includes an Introduction (history, context, objectives of the park and the Plan itself), a Characterization (geographical location, physical aspects, natural heritage, sociocultural elements, economic aspects, public use, etc.), followed by a Diagnosis (conservation values and elements, problems and threats to its conservation, management analysis, etc.), and numerous Strategies and Programs to be incorporated into the future development of the park.

Being Argentina's most visited National Park (with 1,563,273 visits in 2019), as well as a World Natural Heritage site (1984) and one of the Seven Wonders of the Natural world (2011), it is not surprising to see that the regulation plan would be so extensive. However, it is a remarkable contrast compared to the lax and largely vague National framework of Tourism and the general management of other tourism attractions in Argentina. It is clear from this document that the value and importance of the destination as a natural and cultural heritage are recognized and the responsibility of its protection apart from its exploitation is considered. In fact, ever since the Institutional Management Plan published in 2001, it was established that "the park's public use will be organized under sustainable recreation and tourism criteria" (APN, 2001: 23). We can therefore say that the park's main guidelines are adequately aligned with the Sustainable Tourism and Sustainable Development theories. In what follows, we will next explore whether the actual management practice is also in line with these values.

Some of the outstanding policies of the park include: an electric ecological train that connects the main waterfalls and provides a sustainable method of transportation within the park; the walkways to visit the park on foot are elevated to avoid erosion of the natural soil due to visitors, as well as free movement of fauna across the ground; the comprehensive waste treatment of the entire park, amongst others. However, in a clear difference to Poás Volcano National Park, the number of visitors is not limited or controlled. According to the Park's Management Plan, the carrying capacity of the park establishes that the optimal or ideal number of visitors is 3,860 a day but the daily number of visitors is usually between 5,000 and 6,000. What is more, there are instances where visits reached even more than 8,000 (the Park's maximum capacity being 7,720), which not only affects the quality of the visit but also results in a service collapse, delays, and long waits for all of the park's activities. This can happen at certain points of the high season, or during certain parts of the day even during medium season. As we previously mentioned, Poás Volcano National Park limits the number of visitors and divides them into timed groups which can enter in the scope of guided visits rather than in the forms of free-to-move tours. Due to the difference in size of the two parks, this area is hardly comparable, since one of them registers 1000 visitors a day, and the other more than 5000. However, it is very clear that Iguazú National Park would benefit from a policy of this type to improve customer experience, as the Park's latest survey shows that visitor congestion is one of the biggest factors for dissatisfaction.

This is only one of the problems also acknowledged by the Public Use of the NP. Other environmental threats mentioned in the Poás Park's Management Report are as follows: trespassing, conflicts regarding the Park's limits; illegal extraction of flora and fauna; presence and propagation of exotic species; loss of cultural heritage; habituation of animals; pollution of air, water and visual space; soil contamination; and negative impact on the local fauna. It is due to the administrators' awareness of these issues that a section of the Plan is dedicated to identifying current problems and potential threats to the park. This is being taken so seriously that maps with the specific areas where some of these threats (like illegal hunting, or plant extracting) are taking place are produced. However, it is more notable how the Park's administration proposes projects to change or solve the mentioned threats. In the Public Use Plan, there are 10 projects presented. An outstanding one among them is the Project on the Quality of the Visit. It serves the betterment of the Park's services as well as increases the capacity to accommodate high visitor levels. Some of the actions include adding more bathrooms, increasing accessibility, adding more roofed resting areas, and facilitates increased feedback on visits including measuring satisfaction level, waiting times, congestion, etc. This project seems modest, but it could be a step in the right direction, as it reminds us of practices that have already been in existence for some years in Costa Rica and are working well. However, there is no sign in any of the proposed projects that the park's management

would consider any sort of control or limitation over the number of daily visits, just like this is done in Poás Park. A daily visitor limit would be the most obvious and efficient solution, albeit not the most profitable one. Additional measures that are needed in order to solve this, and lessons that could be learnt from Poás National Park are the education of visitors concerning the fragility and importance of the area, as well as better trained employees and service providers when it comes to environmental issues.

5. Conclusions

After the description and analysis of the three main levels at which we studied both countries' tourism policies and actions, we conclude that there are numerous differences to be noticed and various degrees of distinction at all levels.

At the international level, we have found little difference when it comes to the outward presentation of the countries' national commitment to sustainability. In theory, both Argentina and Costa Rica speak of supporting Sustainability in Tourism and to that end participate in international bodies, multilateral agreements, and several projects. The slight differences in commitment or international cooperation for Sustainability projects seems to be insufficient to explain the difference in both countries' performances. The most significant indicators are the differences to be noticed in actions taken at the national and regional levels.

At the national level we notice considerable big differences that may account for the variance in performance. As far as these countries respective National guiding plans in Tourism go, Argentina's seems less data-based and more goal-oriented, aspirational, and conceptual. Costa Rica, on the other hand, has a complete, qualitative, operational, and accountable plan in place. The country also seems to have a clearer and more defined National Tourism Model and Development plan. Costa Rica has based its tourism industry around destination positioning, which is tied to nature, conservation, and responsible use of the environment. This identity-building process has helped the country achieve their goal and make that image a reality. Furthermore, we conclude that Costa Rica is leading in Environmental Sustainability while Argentina seems more focused on Economic and Social aspects of sustainability (which are also important factors of any sustainable activity). We should remember that the total Competitiveness ranks were not too far apart (41st for Costa Rica and 50th for Argentina). The biggest difference in their T&T Competitiveness Score, was only regarding Environmental Sustainability. Therefore, even if Costa Rica seems to be the leader in this aspect, we need to remember that a complete definition of Sustainable Tourism must include also socio-cultural and economic factors. A lower score in Environmental Sustainability does not mean that Argentina is generally unsustainable but, when it comes to the protection and promotion of its natural tourism resources, the country has yet to go from an exploitative development to a fully sustainable one. The fact that Argentina is very rich in natural diversity but has been unsuccessful in receiving recognition, such as the Sustainable Certification, may very well be due to their definition and execution of a Sustainable Development strategy, the way their Planning and Development Goals are presented, the lack of specificity in their objectives and the fact that these objectives are mostly aspirational. Additionally, it is important to outline that having a strong ecotourism industry does not necessarily lead to a healthy development and a sustainable tourism sector. As Stem, Lassoie, Lee, and Deshler (2003) point out, even in Costa Rica there are mixed results, and more work is needed to attain better conservation and true sustainability.

Finally, at the regional level, we conclude that the way both National Parks studied are managed make a notable difference on the impact of visitors, especially in the environmental aspect, and contribute to the importance of small actions that can create real change. As we described, Argentina seems to manage Iguazú National Park first and foremost as a leading resource and Tourism product, instead of a natural and protected area that is allowed to be visited. This shifts the focus from the protection to the economic exploitation of the site at the expense of the Park's general Sustainability. It is also important to note the difference in the inclusion and involvement of local communities. It needs to be emphasised, as Falcón and Pérez Márquez noted in their work, that "local development that considers all four sustainability dimensions (environmental, economic, socio-cultural and political-administrative) is a fundamental factor to achieve true sustainable development in the country" (2015).

6. Summary and recommendations

The authors' recommendation for Argentina would be first and foremost to clearly describe and fully adopt the contemporary sustainability values and principles as guided by the UN's Sustainable Development Goals and apply them to the development of all touristic activity from its very inception instead of allowing these values and principles to stay aspirational. Many international institutions create guidelines to make this process easy, such as the United Nations Environment Programme and the World Trade Organization's "Guide for Policy Makers" (2005). Argentina must also change from an old definition of sustainability, which focuses mainly on the economic and social aspects, to one that fully includes environmental issues as key parts of a good development of the sector. However, it is also important to move past mere concepts, goals and aspirations to an action-focused plan that defines specific strategies to tackle the obstacles and achieve goals. Additionally, there must be an accountability plan to track progress, identify issues and report results. In more specific terms, the suggestion would be to establish so-called "Smart Goals", that is, goals that are specific, measurable, attainable, relevant and time-based.

Locally, it is important to distinguish a tourism attraction, whose main goal is to be a source of income, from a protected area, which is first and foremost part of the natural and cultural heritage and additionally serves as a tourism attraction and economic asset. There needs to be a prioritisation of conservation and protection rather than just an attempt to mitigate the negative effects of mass visitation. Iguazu National Park is a complex example, because it is a beautiful and massive area, which is also the country's most visited site by tourists, therefore it is hard to balance this identity with the idea that it is also a World Heritage and that, as such, it belongs to humanity and must be protected. Ideally, all visited areas would be treated with the same respect and protected for prosperity in line with the Sustainable Principles. Perhaps, a more radical change of perspective is needed, and some authors have already proposed alternatives such as a Community Based Diffused Tourism (Mtapuri and Giampiccoli, 2021).

Finally, it is encouraged and advised for Argentina to make use of international cooperation and communication to be able to learn from others and apply solutions that work in similar countries. There are several international cooperation forums that could in fact make a difference by sharing knowledge, giving policy advice, and even offering resources from leading countries to those still in the development of their Tourism sector. A good starting point could be working with the Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC), which provides guidelines at several levels ranging from travellers through small tourism businesses to Governments. Nationally, this organisation provides a framework and assess destinations to give out certification and recognition of standards for Sustainable Tourism.

In conclusion, we firmly believe that Argentina has made invaluable progress over the past 25 years, going from what was defined by some as "unsustainable underdevelopment" (Gilemmo and Moscoso, 2019, p.110) to a better path towards Sustainable Development. Although the country still has a long way to go to achieve this goal, we believe Argentina has a good opportunity and positive forecast for re-building their tourism sector and re-organizing their tourism strategy, especially after the halt in the tourism activity caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Argentina's tourism industry has the potential to be a unique economic driving force and differentiation factor, but we will have to wait and see if their Travel & Tourism Competitiveness Score improves in the next World Economic Forum report, especially with respect to the country's weak subindex of Environmental Sustainability. This could happen if smart decisions are made in the upcoming years and if in the future lessons are learnt from peers, especially from Costa Rica.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, methodology, formal analysis, investigation, writing: Valentina Tamargo; review and editing: Dr. Ágnes Pál and Dr. Éva Szabóné Erdélyi. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: Valentina Tamargo has received a Stipendium Hungaricum Scholarship and a grant of Student Excellence (Stipendium Hungaricum) for her studies, including this research. She has also benefited from a Budapest Business School's Faculty of Commerce, Hospitality and Tourism grant supporting the preparation of a Hungarian Students' Scholarly Circles paper for the present research.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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