

Communication

# Tourism Research in Cuba: Gaps in Knowledge and Challenges for Sustainable Tourism

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**Abstract:** As the government of Cuba plans to rapidly expand the tourism sector and heavily invest in infrastructure to accommodate the projected 10 million tourist arrivals in the next decade, scholars widely agree that Cuba urgently needs to adopt sustainable tourism principles and practices if the industry is to be harnessed as a successful means to achieve national development goals. There is a dearth of empirical studies on the environmental, social, and economic impact of tourism, which has implications for tourism policy and planning. The unique, but not insurmountable challenges of conducting research in Cuba are noted, with key research questions outlined that urgently need to be addressed moving forward.

**Keywords:** Cuba; tourism; sustainability; sustainable tourism; impacts; Caribbean; research agenda

## 1. Introduction

Tourism is a rapidly growing sector in Cuba, and it is projected to grow at rates that exceed the average projected growth rates for the Caribbean, and the world overall [1]. In the first quarter of the 20th century, Cuba dominated the Caribbean as the top destination, and it remained in that position into the 1950s, receiving almost 36% of the region's tourists [2]. Tourism was boosted by prohibition in the US in the 1920s and 1930s, and arrivals reached a peak of 272,000 in 1958, when approximately 88% of tourists arrived from the US [2]. Tourism plummeted after the revolutionary government of Fidel Castro took power in 1959, and growth remained stagnant through the 1970s. The collapse of the Soviet Union prompted the Cuban government to promote international tourism as a means for economic recovery, although it did so reluctantly [3]. In the decades that followed, growth in the tourism sector was dramatic. Between 1990 and 2007, tourism grew 11% per annum in Cuba, which was nearly double the rate of tourism growth globally [2], swelling from approximately 300,000 visitors in 1990 to more than two million visitors in 2004. In 2014, visitor arrivals in Cuba were second only to the Dominican Republic in the Caribbean region, outpacing the Bahamas and Puerto Rico by approximately double [4]. The World Tourism Organization reported that visitor arrivals increased from more than 2.8 million in 2012 to more than 4.0 million in 2016, a 43% increase in just four years [5]. Top tourism destinations on the island include the history and architecture of urban UNESCO World Heritage sites (e.g., Havana, Santiago de Cuba, Trinidad, Vinales), as well as white sandy beaches (e.g., Varadero, Baracoa, Cayo Coco, Maria del Gordo) (Figure 1).

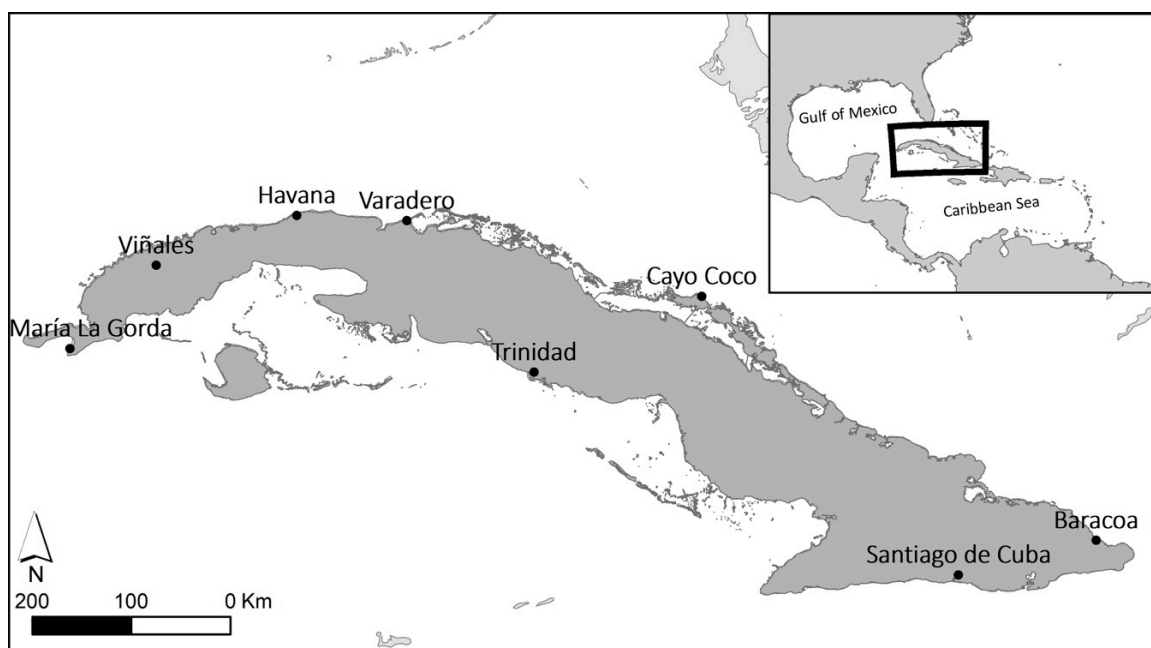


Figure 1. Top Tourism Destinations in Cuba.

Despite this growth, visitor expenditures have continuously declined since the 1990s, with low repeat visitors (return rates), which is in direct contrast to other Caribbean and Latin American destinations. To remain competitive, Cuba needs to distinguish itself from the dominant tourism model in the region (i.e., 3S (sun, sea, sand) all-inclusive packages), which has been Cuba's focus since the 1980s. Additionally, 3S mass tourism has been widely criticized for its myriad of negative impacts, including high resource consumption, low diffusion of economic benefits to the local population, high dependence on large-scale international tour operators, social inequity, and cultural erosion (e.g., [6–12]). The Cuban government supports plans to diversify, as outlined in the recently approved national plan, *Proposal for a Vision of the Nation, Axes and Strategic Sector*, which seeks to expand tourism to include marine, nautical, agricultural, cruise, historical, cultural, heritage, conventions, and health-related tourism. The Ministry of Tourism also plans to more than double the number of international-quality rooms by 2030 (from 50,000 to 108,000) to accommodate the projected 10 million international arrivals, plus an additional 5 million projected to arrive as cruise passengers [13]. These ambitious plans have been questioned [2,13], with concern regarding key barriers to tourism development, including burdensome bureaucracy (e.g., restrictions on private enterprise growth), the US embargo (e.g., restricted supply chain network), governmental price regulation (e.g., dual currency system), and high taxation, as well as a lack of capital and financial infrastructure (e.g., geographically limited transportation system and internet access, constraints on loans and foreign investment) [14–17]. Despite these challenges, scholars widely agree that Cuba urgently needs to adopt sustainable tourism principles and practices if the industry is to be successfully harnessed as a means to achieve national development goals.

To date, academic literature published on tourism in Cuba has largely centered on the historical evolution of tourism, including tourism planning, management, and policy, within a socialist economy. Studies concentrate on growth trends (past, current, projected), noting key challenges or barriers to Cuban tourism development, and offering policy recommendations to advance growth [18–20]. The research is almost exclusively based on secondary data and speculative scenarios of future development, with a number of scholars underscoring the dearth of empirical studies on tourism development in Cuba [2,13,15,21,22]. Even on a regional scale, there is a notable absence of tourism research that focuses on a Latin American or Caribbean context [14], as well as nations within a transitioning economy [16,23,24].

As Cuba aims to rapidly increase the number of international tourism arrivals on the island, the sector is poised to face several challenges, including the need for foreign direct investment, infrastructure development, and the high costs of imported goods. At present, there is little peer-reviewed research that has examined the environmental and social impacts of the growth in tourism development in Cuba, as well as little published on the perspectives of Cubans or visitors on the changing landscape as the tourism sector swells. In this Communication piece, we highlight two gaps in knowledge regarding tourism development in Cuba. The discussion of these gaps in knowledge is offered in part as an agenda for research and development strategy for sustainable tourism in Cuba.

## 2. Gap 1: Sustainable Tourism

In discussing a future tourism development strategy for Cuba, Elliott and Neirotti (2008) note that sustainable tourism is dependent on critical long-term considerations of tourism's impacts, notions of equity, an appreciation of the importance of linkages (economic, social and environmental), and the facilitation of co-operation and collaboration between different stakeholders [25]. Even though there has been rapid tourism development in Cuba, there has been little research related to the environmental and sociocultural impacts of this tourism growth.

Although the vast majority of tourism development in Cuba has centered on the coast, relatively few studies have assessed the impact of this land use change. In a coastal scenic assessment of desirable/non-desirable beach conditions in Cuba, Anfuso et al. (2017) evaluated 100 sites, classifying them from 1 (extremely attractive with high landscape values) to 5 (very unattractive with low landscape values and intensive development) [26]. Only seven out of 100 were classified as Class 1 and 19 as Class 2, with the remaining 73 beaches classified as a 3, 4, and 5, implying very low landscape values for nearly three-quarters of the sites assessed in the study. In a litter assessment of the entire Cuban coastline, Botero et al. (2017) classified beaches into four grades (A = excellent to D = poor), with 44 out of 99 beaches receiving an A and 32 a B, with the remaining 23 sites a C or D [27]. Beyond these studies, it is relatively unknown what the environmental impacts of tourism development in Cuba have been. Future research might include assessments of key environmental indicators, including (but limited to) water (availability, quality), waste management, air quality, biodiversity (flora, fauna), shoreline change, energy (use, emissions), and vulnerability to coastal hazards (e.g., sea level rise, erosion).

In terms of understanding the sociocultural impacts, the limited available studies underscore the threat of tourism to revolutionary ideals of socialism, as well as the emergence of host-guest tensions. While the government's focus on 3S tourism development intentionally isolated tourists and limited contact with locals, the rapid growth of tourism has necessitated private enterprises to accommodate the swells of arriving tourists (i.e., private enterprises such as restaurants, or *paladares*, and rooms in private homes, or *casa particulares*), increasing both direct and indirect interaction. In a series of interviews with Cubans, almost all participants indicated that Cubans are generally resentful towards tourism because it fuels inequality and exacerbates racist attitudes and discrimination [28]. Other studies found similar narratives, recording statements of exclusion and socioeconomic stratification [18,19]. In an ethnographic study in Viñales, there were rising concerns that tourism begets greed and self-interest, negatively changing the culture and lifestyle of rural Cubans [29]. When positive statements were made about tourism, they were unanimously linked to economic benefits, such that Cubans who have direct access to visitors are able to earn a higher income and live more comfortably. There is also recent anecdotal evidence that tourism is leading to food insecurity as record tourism arrivals reduce the amount available for consumption by local Cubans, in addition to rising prices as vendors opt to sell their agricultural goods on the black market (i.e., to the 'elite market' of tourists and *paladares* that cater to them) [30]. Given the limited insight, it remains unclear whether these negative sentiments can be generalized to Cubans more broadly. How and in what ways do impacts vary across market segments (e.g., urban, coastal, and rural destinations) and tourism products (e.g., marine, cruise, 3S, nature-based tourism)? Are the impacts uniform across socio-demographics (e.g., gender, age)? Are there additional impacts that have yet to be empirically documented?

With such limited research, it is difficult to critically reflect on which models of tourism development in Cuba are currently successful in terms of minimizing negative impacts and optimizing positive gains, let alone future tourism development opportunities. Given Cuba's unique challenges and barriers (e.g., bureaucratic hurdles and heavy state market regulation), it is also unclear whether successful models from regional competitors can be employed. While general recommendations are reasonable, to implement specific policies and identify best practices requires a baseline understanding of the environmental and sociocultural impacts of tourism growth. In developing a sustainable tourism development strategy for Cuba, the need for critical long-term considerations of tourism's impacts, notions of equity, an appreciation of the importance of linkages (economic, social, environmental) and the facilitation of cooperation and collaboration between different stakeholders are of utmost importance.

### 3. Gap 2: Research Using Primary Data

Research involving the examination of the perspectives of both residents and visitors will inform the development of a sustainable tourism strategy that will meet economic, social and environmental goals [25]. Regrettably, available studies are almost exclusively based on secondary data and speculative scenarios of future development. Most published literature has focused on the historical evolution of tourism in Cuba, predominantly concentrating on growth trends and barriers to development within a socialist economy. Primary data is scarce, which limits understanding of how Cubans perceive tourism development (as outlined above) and how tourism development in Cuba is perceived by tourists (below). Additionally, many studies are outdated, with data collected over a decade ago, raising concerns as to whether the data remains applicable given Cuba's dynamic and rapidly changing socio-political and economic environment.

There are few studies that examine the impacts of the sex tourism trade in Cuba, which has reportedly increased in magnitude with the transition to the all-inclusive model of tourism development [28], although data on the extent of prostitution in Cuba is sketchy [20,31]. Cabezas (2004) examined some of the manifestations of sexual commerce by drawing upon fieldwork with sex trade participants in Cuba [28]. Other studies have used interviews with male sex tourists to examine their motivations [32,33]. Future research could explore the impacts of sex tourism on social cohesion and cultural values, and perceptions of Cubans on the scope of the trade.

In a visitor survey conducted by Elliott and Neirott (2008) in five principal tourist areas of Cuba (Havana, Pinar del Rio Province, Varadero, Camagüey, Santiago de Cuba) ( $n = 273$ ), 62% reported being "highly satisfied" or "satisfied" with the overall tourism product, with 70% "highly agree(ing)" or "agree(ing)" that Cuba has many unique features that set it apart from other Caribbean destinations [25]. However, there was much less agreement regarding the consistency in quality among various tourism-related products and services (e.g., more than one-third indicating "disagree" or "highly disagree"). Similarly, when asked if Cuba "looks well and is maintained," 38% indicated "disagree" or "highly disagree." In a similar study, Tribe & Snaith (1998) examined holiday satisfaction in an exploratory study of tourists in Varadero ( $n = 102$ ) [34]. Random sampling was used to compare means across expectations and performance across 56 positive holiday attributes, revealing that consumer expectations exceed performance over a wide range of destination attributes. Although the findings from both studies are based on a relatively small (and dated) sample, they have implications for tourism product development as the sector expands, while raising additional research questions. Are tourists' perceptions, attitudes and values uniform across market segments and demographics? How do expectations and satisfaction vary among different tourist populations? Additional research involving the examination of the perspectives of both residents and visitors, particularly of larger samples, will inform future research and the development of a sustainable tourism strategy.

### 4. Implications for Tourism Research and Development

Although more research is urgently needed, numerous barriers impede the expansion of data collection to help fill the knowledge gaps identified in this paper. Challenges include the absence of

conventional international accounting, absence of consistent reporting, and a lack of published financial data on investments in the private economy [13]. These same barriers pose significant challenges to tourism development, given the absence of information about both state-owned enterprises (SOEs) and private businesses. Broadly, there is very little information available to help guide researchers who plan to conduct research in politically sensitive locations, specifically in socialist political-economies [35]. Cuba presents its own set of challenges that have important implications for conducting research moving forward.

First, due to unclear authorization procedures and often limited access to key tourism stakeholders, it can be difficult to obtain valid and reliable data. For example, it is difficult to establish contact without being in Cuba (e.g., emails from outside Cuba can be blocked) and a researcher must be invited to the country by a Cuban organization to obtain an academic visa, which can take several months to secure. An official program must then be organized by the host, with similarly lengthy internal organization procedures to allow access to interviewees. As a non-citizen, you are also obligated to stay in licensed accommodation, adding further complexity when accessing stakeholders that reside outside tourism areas.

Second, honest viewpoints from tourism stakeholders can be difficult to elicit by foreign researchers, with notable concerns regarding intentional unreliability. Interviews are often mediated by government-provided translators or guides, and even when this is not the case, the interviewees are those that have been approved by the state and public criticism of the government is considered a crime in Cuba [35]. Cuban tourism groups and other SOEs do not publish financial or annual reports, and their Cuban executives are rarely accessible to academic researchers [13], which likely explains why available research on Cubans' perceptions of tourism have been approached primarily through participant observation or ethnography.

Collectively, these challenges can strain professional (i.e., time) and financial resources in applied tourism research in Cuba and other politically sensitive locations, and studies using quantitative methods often result in smaller sample sizes that reduce generalizability, or they lack the nuances of attitudes and perspectives that are revealed through the application of qualitative research methods. Given the recent sharp rise in tourist arrivals in Cuba, advances in research addressing both gaps in knowledge—(i) the environmental and social impacts, and (ii) the perspectives of both residents and tourists, particularly of large samples—is timely, relevant, and necessary to inform economic development policy generally, and a sustainable tourism development strategy, specifically.

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