



Regenerative tourism and circular economy in tourism enterprises in Jama, Manabí

Turismo regenerativo y economía circular en los emprendimientos turísticos de Jama, Manabí

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Received: 30 Jan. 2026 | **Accepted:** 13 Mar. 2026 | **Published:** 20 Jul. 2026

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How to cite this article: Tipantuña-Carreño, S. K., Mora-Cedeño, Y. Y. & Vera-Vera, J. R. (2026). Regenerative tourism and circular economy in tourism enterprises in Jama, Manabí. *Revista Amazónica de Ciencias Económicas*, 5(2), e1507. <https://doi.org/10.51252/race.v5i2.1507>

ABSTRACT

Regenerative tourism and the circular economy have emerged as promising approaches to promote more sustainable and resilient tourism development models; however, their practical implementation in emerging tourism destinations remains limited and insufficiently documented. The purpose of this study was to assess the level of adoption of regenerative tourism and circular economy practices among tourism enterprises in Jama, Manabí, Ecuador. A mixed-methods approach was adopted, with a non-experimental, cross-sectional, and descriptive-analytical research design. The results reveal medium to medium-high performance in regenerative tourism indicators, particularly in sociocultural dimensions such as cultural valorization, community participation, and the creation of meaningful experiences. In contrast, innovation in regenerative tourism products and the implementation of circular economy practices exhibit predominantly medium levels, with progress in basic operational aspects but notable weaknesses in technical and strategic indicators, including carbon footprint measurement and the adoption of renewable energy. It is concluded that the transition toward integrated regenerative tourism models requires the strengthening of technical capacities, regulatory frameworks, and territorial governance mechanisms. This study provides empirical evidence from a little-explored territory, contributing to the applied understanding of tourism sustainability in emerging contexts.

Keywords: emerging destinations; circular economy; tourism ventures; territorial sustainability; regenerative tourism

RESUMEN

El turismo regenerativo y la economía circular se consolidan como enfoques emergentes para impulsar modelos de desarrollo turístico más sostenibles y resilientes; sin embargo, su aplicación práctica en destinos turísticos emergentes continúa siendo limitada y escasamente documentada. El propósito de esta investigación fue evaluar el nivel de adopción de prácticas de turismo regenerativo y economía circular en los emprendimientos turísticos de Jama, Manabí, Ecuador. Se adoptó un enfoque mixto, con un diseño no experimental, transversal y de alcance descriptivo-analítico. Los resultados evidencian un desempeño medio a medio-alto en los indicadores de turismo regenerativo, particularmente en dimensiones socioculturales como la valorización cultural, la participación comunitaria y la generación de experiencias significativas. En contraste, la innovación en productos turísticos regenerativos y prácticas de economía circular presentan niveles predominantemente medios, con avances en aspectos operativos básicos, pero con debilidades en indicadores técnicos y estratégicos, como la medición de la huella de carbono y el uso de energías renovables. Se concluye que, la transición hacia modelos regenerativos integrados requiere el fortalecimiento de capacidades técnicas, marcos normativos y mecanismos de gobernanza territorial. Este estudio aporta evidencia empírica desde un territorio poco explorado, contribuyendo a la comprensión aplicada de la sostenibilidad turística en contextos emergentes.

Palabras clave: destinos emergentes; economía circular; emprendimientos turísticos; sostenibilidad territorial; turismo regenerativo



1. INTRODUCTION

Currently, the tourism sector faces a critical challenge: while it accounts for approximately 10% of global GDP, it also contributes significantly to environmental degradation, generating between 8% and 11% of global greenhouse gas emissions (UNWTO, 2024). This situation has led to a shift in the way tourism is understood, moving away from models focused on unlimited economic growth toward approaches that recognize the finite nature of the planet's resources. Sustainability has therefore evolved toward more ambitious perspectives that seek not only to conserve ecosystems and communities, but also to actively restore and enhance them (Bellato & Pollock, 2025).

Regenerative tourism has emerged as a creative response to the global environmental crisis and to the limitations of conventional tourism models centered on resource extraction and short-term outcomes (Bellato et al., 2022). In Ecuador, tourism activities take place in vulnerable ecosystems without adequate planning, resulting in territorial imbalances, biodiversity loss, and the deterioration of natural resources. Corral-Gonzalez et al. (2023) argue that this situation highlights the importance of having assessment tools that facilitate mediation and guide tourism projects in the region toward regenerative and circular practices.

As part of these regenerative practices, the circular economy proposes models aimed at keeping resources in use for as long as possible, minimizing waste, and promoting natural regeneration (Sandoval Sandoval, 2025). This approach is particularly important in coastal territories where ecosystems are fragile. In Manabí, this need is intensified by tourism pressure on limited water resources, waste generation on beaches, and high energy consumption, all of which require circular solutions adapted to the local context to protect natural and cultural resources (Cedeño-Zambrano et al., 2025).

Jama canton, located in northern Manabí, presents favorable conditions for implementing these approaches because it has small- and medium-scale tourism enterprises, high-value coastal natural resources, and tourism-oriented communities undergoing recovery following the 2016 earthquake. However, the canton lacks validated tools to guide regenerative and circular practices. Therefore, the present study aimed to analyze the performance of regenerative tourism and circular economy indicators in its tourism enterprises through a systematic literature review, characterization of tourism enterprises, design and integration of indicators, and technical validation using the Delphi method and exploratory factor analysis. The findings provide relevant insights at the theoretical, practical, and territorial levels.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The present study aimed to evaluate regenerative tourism and circular economy practices in the destination of Jama, located in Manabí Province, Ecuador (Figure 1). The study area corresponds to a coastal territory characterized by a predominance of small-scale tourism enterprises and a diversified tourism supply that includes accommodation, food and beverage services, and tourism operations, with strong sociocultural and territorial roots.

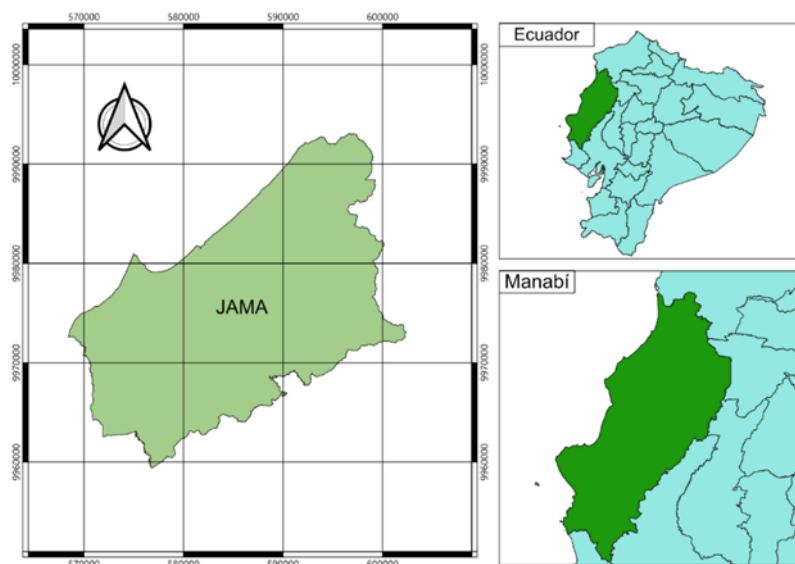


Figure 1. Geographic location map of the study area

Research design

The study adopted a mixed-methods approach (quantitative–qualitative), with a non-experimental, cross-sectional design. It had a descriptive–analytical scope and an exploratory level, appropriate for examining emerging and understudied phenomena in specific territorial contexts. This design made it possible to capture empirical information on regenerative tourism and circular economy practices implemented by tourism enterprises at a specific point in time.

The operationalization of the constructs was carried out through a multidimensional indicator system structured under an inductive–deductive approach, integrating conceptual contributions from the scientific literature with empirical evidence from the study territory.

Population and sample

The population consisted of 56 tourism enterprises identified in Jama canton. Because the study was conducted in a territorial context with limited access to local stakeholders and a low willingness to participate spontaneously, reluctance among entrepreneurs in Jama was associated with perceptions of insecurity and institutional distrust in the coastal area. In this context, a non-probability purposive sampling design based on accessibility was employed. This methodological approach is consistent with exploratory studies in the social sciences and tourism that recommend the use of non-probability sampling when the target population is difficult to reach or when a complete sampling frame is unavailable (Hernández González, 2021; Mucha Hospinal et al., 2021; Teeroovengadum & Nunkoo, 2018; Wang, 2024).

Case selection was based on the following inclusion criteria: (i) active operation of the enterprise during the study period, (ii) engagement in direct tourism activities, (iii) voluntary willingness to participate in the study, and (iv) location within Jama canton. Data collection was carried out between July and September 2025.

The final sample comprised the entire identified population ($n = 56$), resulting in a census-based study. Both formal and informal enterprises were included in order to capture the diversity of regenerative tourism and circular economy practices present in the destination and to obtain a comprehensive characterization of the phenomenon within an emerging tourism territory.

Data collection instrument

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire developed from the indicator proposal by García (2025), which integrates regenerative tourism and circular economy dimensions adapted to the context of northern Manabí. The instrument consisted of five-point Likert-scale items designed to measure the level of adoption of sociocultural, environmental, operational, and strategic practices associated with both approaches.

The questionnaire content underwent a process of review and contextual adjustment to ensure its territorial relevance and conceptual consistency with the objectives of the study.

Data analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, including measures of central tendency and dispersion, in order to identify general patterns in the performance of the indicators evaluated. Complementary qualitative data were used to contextualize and interpret the results from a territorial perspective.

In addition, tourism enterprises were georeferenced using Geographic Information Systems (GIS) for descriptive purposes and to support the spatial analysis. This tool made it possible to represent the geographical distribution of the tourism supply and delimit homogeneous areas according to the concentration and type of enterprises, thereby contributing to a comprehensive understanding of the territorial context of the study.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Results

A total of 56 tourism enterprises established in the study area were surveyed, making it possible to identify patterns in the adoption of good practices related to regenerative tourism and the circular economy.

Profile of tourism enterprises in Jama canton

Of the total sample surveyed ($n = 56$), most enterprises were concentrated in the food service sector (57.14%), followed by accommodation (30.36%) and services related to tourism operations (12.5%).

Regarding their length of time in the market, the findings show that 64.29% (the majority) of the tourism enterprises (32 of 56) had been operating for more than five years and were predominantly small-scale enterprises. In this regard, the results demonstrate a high level of resilience during periods of crisis, as these enterprises had to overcome highly complex situations such as the COVID-19 pandemic, as noted by Jijón Porras and Rivera Govea (2020), as well as the insecurity crisis currently affecting the country, particularly in coastal areas where most tourism enterprises are located (Figure 2).

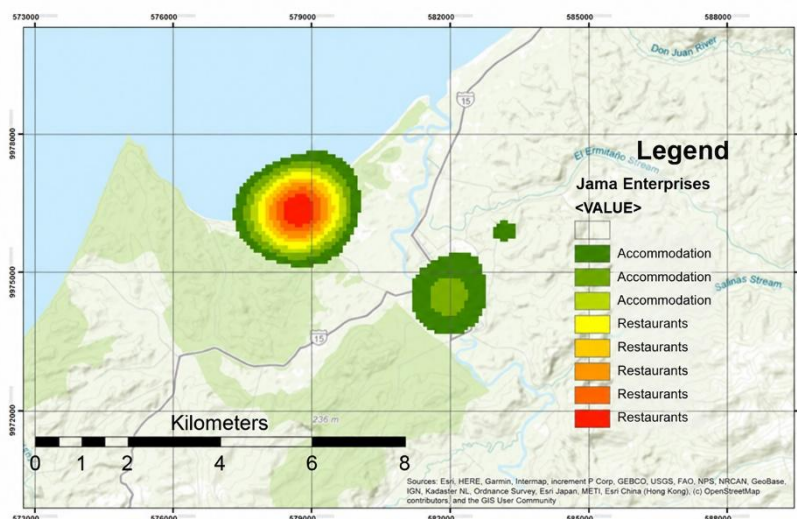


Figure 2. Distribution of tourism enterprises in Jama

Jama is located in northern Manabí along the Spondylus Route and has approximately 40 km of coastline. Its climate ranges from subtropical dry to humid tropical, creating favorable conditions for a rich diversity of flora and fauna. From a geographical and business perspective, tourism enterprises are located mainly in coastal areas (Figure 2), resulting in development characterized primarily by a strong tourism supply for the sun-and-beach segment. However, the destination presents weaknesses in territorial planning, infrastructure, signage, basic services, and the technical and managerial capacities of entrepreneurs, as well as limitations in tourism governance.

Evaluation of Regenerative Tourism and Circular Economy practices in tourism enterprises in Jama

The results for the regenerative tourism indicators showed an overall medium to medium-high level of performance (Table 1). The highest values were observed in indicators related to the valorization of cultural heritage, active participation of local communities, and the creation of meaningful experiences for visitors, suggesting that tourism enterprises in Jama have incorporated practices aimed at strengthening the territory's social and cultural capital.

Table 1. Performance of regenerative tourism indicators

Indicator	Mean	SD	Level
TR1 Creation of conditions for environmental regeneration	3.87	1.06	Medium-High
TR2 Incorporation of innovative tourism products	3.36	1.19	Medium
TR3 Active participation of local communities	3.53	1.07	Medium-High
TR4 Cultural exchange and exchange of local knowledge	3.58	1.20	Medium-High
TR5 Valorization of cultural authenticity	3.85	1.06	Medium-High
TR6 Meaningful experiences for visitors	3.60	1.07	Medium-High
TR7 Promotion of community well-being	3.62	1.05	Medium-High

The results reflect growing recognition of the importance of environmental regeneration and community well-being as differentiating elements of the tourism supply. However, the indicator associated with innovation in regenerative tourism products showed moderate values (mean = 3.36), revealing opportunities for improvement in the diversification of the tourism supply and the systematic incorporation of regenerative approaches into tourism product design.

Regarding the circular economy indicators, the results showed predominantly medium levels of performance, with some indicators reaching medium-high levels (Table 2). Progress was identified in operational practices such as planning for the efficient use of resources, basic waste management, and sustainable mobility, reflecting an emerging adoption of circular principles in the day-to-day management of tourism enterprises.

Table 2. Performance of circular economy indicators

Indicator	Mean	SD	Level
CE1 Planning for efficient resource use	3.73	1.24	Medium-High
CE2 Efficient water use	3.44	1.20	Medium
CE3 Efficient energy management	3.55	1.20	Medium-High
CE4 Use of renewable energy	3.35	1.29	Medium
CE5 Waste reduction	3.28	1.28	Medium
CE6 Waste separation and recycling	3.67	1.19	Medium-High
CE7 Sustainable mobility	3.63	1.26	Medium-High
CE8 Use of recycled materials	3.43	1.21	Medium
CE9 Waste monitoring	3.57	1.13	Medium-High
CE10 Carbon footprint	3.35	1.12	Medium

However, indicators associated with technical and strategic measurement, such as the use of renewable energy (mean = 3.35) and carbon footprint estimation (mean = 3.35), showed more moderate levels. This suggests that although actions aimed at efficiency and impact reduction are being implemented, they have not yet been fully integrated into structured environmental management systems, thereby limiting the consolidation of a comprehensive circular economy model in the territory.

The integration of the findings revealed a structural gap between the regenerative approach and the effective implementation of circular economy practices among tourism enterprises in Jama canton. While regenerative tourism indicators showed medium to medium-high performance, particularly in sociocultural and community dimensions (means ranging from 3.53 to 3.87), circular economy indicators reflected predominantly medium performance (means ranging from 3.28 to 3.73), with limitations in measurement, strategic planning, and the adoption of sustainable technologies. This disconnect suggests that tourism enterprises primarily operate through intuitive or experience-based approaches to regenerative tourism, without anchoring these practices in formalized and technically developed environmental management systems.

3.2. Discussion

The results reveal medium to medium-high performance in the regenerative tourism indicators, with particular emphasis on cultural valorization (mean = 3.85). This contributes to relational changes and the strengthening of social capital derived from the transformative effects of tourism within a destination, as noted by Ayala and Vianchá (2023). Along the same lines, community participation (mean = 3.53) shapes the regenerative dimension of tourism activity within the destination, since it depends on community capacities and local development, which function as a support and governance ecosystem. These findings are consistent with Aquino et al. (2024). The creation of meaningful experiences (mean = 3.60) received a similar assessment, demonstrating that key actors such as social enterprises can accelerate the adoption of regenerative approaches when there is a clear structure and a defined purpose (Price et al., 2025; Widari et al., 2025). However, it is evident that the destination needs to increase the adoption of practices aimed at protecting and regenerating the natural resources that support tourism development.

On the other hand, the results also indicate that innovation in regenerative tourism products remains moderate, with a mean score of 3.36, as also reported by Cedeño-Zambrano et al. (2025). This indicator highlights the importance of design, co-creation, and multi-stakeholder collaboration in reducing the gap associated with empirically based tourism operations. Sustained innovation should emerge from participatory processes and promote a multilevel governance approach, as indicated by Egusquiza et al. (2021); Melenez-Roman et al. (2025) and Lee-Remond et al. (2024). In this regard, tourism enterprises in Jama largely operate on the basis of empirical experience, while improvement models remain underdeveloped, thereby limiting their scalability.

The circular economy provides important support for tourism activity as a tool for sustainability. Previous studies contrast with the current situation in Jama, as indicated by Psatha and Skupchenko (2024), who observed partial adoption of circular economy practices due to a lack of funding, information, and capacity. In the study area, circular economy indicators showed predominantly medium performance, with progress in basic operational practices such as resource-use efficiency and waste management, but weaknesses in technical and strategic indicators, including carbon footprint measurement and renewable energy adoption. These findings indicate that, in small and medium-sized tourism enterprises, the circular economy is often implemented in a fragmented and reactive manner, conditioned by financial, technological, and institutional constraints. This nonlinear and barrier-laden implementation generates recurring challenges that require the strategic categorization of technical weaknesses in order to formulate concrete solutions, as indicated by Martínez-Cabrera y López-del-Pino (2021).

The lower mean scores for indicators such as carbon footprint measurement (3.35) and renewable energy use (3.35) suggest that tourism enterprises lack formal environmental monitoring systems and access to sustainable technologies. This situation reflects not only operational limitations, but also the absence of local regulatory frameworks that encourage or regulate the adoption of more advanced circular practices, which often stems from limited government support, as demonstrated by Nassanbekova (2024). In this context, technological, financial, and institutional barriers contribute to the fragmented implementation of the circular economy, as explained by Takacs et al. (2022).

The gap identified between regenerative orientation and the effective implementation of circular economy practices is particularly relevant for understanding territorial development. While regenerative tourism in Jama is supported mainly by sociocultural and relational dimensions, the circular economy requires technical capacities, measurement systems, and regulatory frameworks that are not yet fully consolidated in the territory. This disconnect has also been reported in other emerging destinations, where sustainability is often treated more as a discursive value than as an integrated operational management system. Circular economy and regenerative models should therefore be implemented in heterogeneous ways and supported by community collaboration and the destination's local capacities (Kastenholz et al., 2023; Mishulina, 2023).

From a territorial perspective, the results reinforce the idea that the transition toward regenerative tourism models supported by the circular economy does not depend exclusively on individual entrepreneurs, but also on the existence of a broader support ecosystem that includes public policies, financial incentives, technical assistance, and multilevel governance processes. In this regard, the case of Jama demonstrates strong potential to advance toward more resilient and regenerative tourism models, provided that capacity-building strategies and institutional support mechanisms are effectively coordinated.

CONCLUSIONS

The study demonstrated that tourism enterprises in Jama show a higher level of progress in regenerative tourism indicators, particularly those related to cultural valorization, community participation, and the creation of meaningful experiences. This confirms that sociocultural and relational dimensions constitute the main foundation of the regenerative approach in emerging tourism territories, even in the absence of formal regenerative planning models.

In contrast, circular economy indicators show a predominantly medium level of development, with specific progress in basic operational practices related to resource-efficiency planning and waste separation and recycling. However, critical limitations remain in the incorporation of technical tools, environmental measurement systems, and long-term strategic approaches, revealing a structural gap between

sustainability intentions and the actual operational capacity of tourism enterprises to implement comprehensive circular models.

In this regard, it is necessary to strengthen environmental efficiency processes and improve the technical capacities of tourism enterprises in Jama, taking advantage of the territory's natural conditions to promote an accessible and clean circular economy. In addition, the findings highlight the need to develop strategies that support the different levels of local government, with an emphasis on strengthening public policies and territorial governance to improve coordination between government institutions and stakeholders within the tourism system.

FUNDING

The authors declare that they received no financial support to conduct this study.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest related to the subject matter of this study.

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