



**Tourism and Development in Costa Rica: A Just
Sustainabilities Perspective**

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Introduction

Costa Rica's rise as a tourism powerhouse was no accident. Though it covers just 0.03 percent of the Earth's surface, the country contains more than five percent of the planet's biodiversity, from dense rainforests, volcanic highlands to two wide and vastly different coastlines (Kohlman, 2011). For most of the twentieth century, its economy relied on coffee, bananas, and pineapple production. By the early 1990s, however, the balance had tipped, and tourism had overtaken agriculture as Costa Rica's leading source of GDP and foreign exchange (Oviedo et al., 2015).

By 2019, tourism made up more than 13 percent of the national economy, securing its role as Costa Rica's defining industry (Goretti et al., 2021). In 2023 alone, for instance, over 2.7 million visitors arrived to the country, generating nearly US \$5 billion and employing more than a quarter of the country's workforce (Anuario Estadístico de Turismo, 2024). This shift was the result of deliberate policy choices. Costa Rica embraced ecotourism and branded itself a "green republic," investing in biodiversity conservation, expanding its system of national parks, and leading initiatives such as the 1996 Payments for Ecosystem Services (PES) program, which paid landowners to preserve forests (Herrera Rodríguez, 2008).

Yet, tourism has not reshaped the country evenly. On the Pacific coast, surf resorts, gated estates, and luxurious foreign retreats dominate the shoreline, while the Caribbean has retained stronger Afro-Indigenous traditions and leans toward smaller, community-based forms of ecotourism (Brevitas, 2025). Since the early 2000s, increasing waves of foreign visitors and investors have brought both opportunities and challenges: rising property values, environmental pressures, and diminishing public access to coastal spaces (Honey et al., 2010). These dynamics are

increasingly framed as **gentrification**, as tourism-driven expansion continuously alters landscapes and displaces long-established communities.

This paradox raises a central question: *How sustainable is “sustainable tourism” if it safeguards ecosystems while neglecting cultural recognition, equitable distribution of benefits, and genuine participation in decision-making?*

To explore this, the study focuses on three contrasting sites: **Puerto Viejo**, a Caribbean town where small-scale ecotourism intertwines with Afro-Indigenous culture; **Nosara**, a Pacific hub of surf and wellness tourism shaped by foreign investment; and **Belén**, an urban center marked by corporate growth and sustainability planning. This analysis, framed by Dr. Julian Agyeman's concept of *just sustainabilities*, examines how tourism development in various contexts interacts with ecological constraints, equitable distribution, cultural integrity, and inclusive decision-making.

Theoretical Framework: Just Sustainabilities

Julian Agyeman proposed just sustainabilities as an essential extension of sustainability that prioritizes justice. He notably characterizes it as *“the need to ensure a better quality of life for all, now, and into the future, in a just and equitable manner, whilst living within the limits of supporting ecosystems”* (Agyeman, 2012). The plural form of the term indicates that sustainability is not universal; instead, it must be tailored to specific local cultures, histories, and geographies.

Julian Agyeman's concept of *just sustainabilities* insists that sustainability must advance justice as well as environmental protection. He frames this through four interrelated conditions:

1. **Improving our quality of life and well-being:** Justice and sustainability both require improving people's well-being beyond what the current neoliberal growth model has delivered. Agyeman points to alternative economic models, such as co-production, and calls for better indicators of progress than GDP alone.
2. **Meeting the needs of present and future generations (intra- and intergenerational equity):** Equity across time and space matters: justice must extend both to today's marginalized communities and to future generations who will bear the costs of environmental degradation.
3. **Justice and equity in recognition, process, procedure, and outcome:** Drawing on Schlosberg (1999), Sen (2009), and Nussbaum (2000), Agyeman highlights that justice requires not only equitable outcomes, but also fair recognition of cultural identities, participatory processes, and the capabilities that allow people to flourish.
4. **Living within ecosystem limits:** Sustainability ultimately requires respecting planetary boundaries. As Rockström et al. (2009) demonstrate, ecosystem limits are real, even as modern economies often displace environmental costs across geographies or sectors rather than reducing them.

Together, these pillars define a sustainability agenda that insists on justice as a precondition for genuine environmentalism.

When applied to Costa Rica, this perspective reveals the contradiction between its renowned ecotourism model (including national parks and conservation branding) and the actualities of land speculation, coastal gentrification, and disproportionate community advantages. It redirects attention beyond mere "green" credentials to examine who benefits, who is involved, what cultures are acknowledged, and if ecological limits are upheld.

Methodology

This study used a qualitative, field-based approach combining rapid ethnographic observation with informal conversations to explore tourism dynamics in Puerto Viejo, Nosara, and Belén. During site visits in July 2025, I conducted direct observations and spoke with local stakeholders, gathering insights into the **spatial, cultural, and ecological dimensions** of tourism and its impacts on everyday life.

Locations and Activities for Research:

- **Puerto Viejo de Talamanca:** I stayed at *La Kukula Lodge*, a boutique hotel located between Puerto Viejo and Gandoca-Manzanillo National Park. The lodge reflected the principles of eco-tourism and environmental sustainability. Informal conversations with staff, along with observations of the town center, beaches, and tourism activities, provided insights into how this Caribbean destination integrates local culture, visitor interactions, and environmental constraints.
- **Nosara:** Fieldwork in Nosara centered on *Lagarta Lodge* and its programs promoting wellness, conservation, and recreation. Additional visits to the town center allowed me to observe changes in infrastructure, commercial growth, and land use, especially in areas shaped by rapid real estate development and foreign investment.
- **Belén:** Because I live in Belén, it served as a long-term observation site. Drawing on years of personal experience, I examined patterns of urban growth, commercial expansion, and environmental change to compare Belén's development dynamics with those of the coastal towns.

Data Collection Methods

Data were gathered through:

- Direct observation of tourism infrastructure, ecological features, and visitor–local interactions;
- Informal conversations with hotel staff, tour guides, and residents to contextualize findings;
- Participation in tourism activities (e.g., conservation programs) to understand how ecotourism is practiced and promoted;
- Daily field notes capturing emerging themes around justice, equity, and sustainability.

Analytical Method

Field notes and conversations were first interpreted through Agyeman’s original pillars (quality of life, inter- and intragenerational equity, justice in recognition and process, and living within ecosystem limits). To enable systematic comparison across sites and align with environmental justice scholarship, these pillars were then organized into four dimensions:

- **Distributional Justice** (equitable sharing of benefits and burdens),
- **Procedural Justice** (inclusive decision-making),
- **Recognition Justice** (valuing cultural identities and knowledge), and
- **Ecological Limits** (respecting environmental thresholds).

This approach keeps Agyeman’s principles intact while providing a clear analytical framework for comparing Puerto Viejo, Nosara, and Belén.

Limitations

This study employs short-term, non-participant observation rather than extended ethnographic immersion. The discussions were casual and not audio-recorded, resulting in a lack of depth and complexity. Thus, the results should be considered exploratory and illustrative, offering supported concepts rather than definitive causal claims.

Findings

Puerto Viejo

Fieldwork in Puerto Viejo de Talamanca revealed a tourism landscape defined by small-scale, boutique-style accommodations rather than the large resorts dominating Costa Rica's Pacific coast. Hotels like *La Kukula Lodge*, located between the town center and the Gandoca-Manzanillo National Park, showcase a nature-immersed aesthetic: solar-heated water, naturally ventilated rooms, and reforested grounds built on former cocoa plantations. These eco-lodges, while often foreign-owned, emphasize low-impact architecture and environmental awareness, aligning luxury tourism with a sense of ecological responsibility.

The town itself blends cosmopolitan diversity with strong Afro-Caribbean cultural roots. Restaurants range from Costa Rican Caribbean kitchens to Argentinian grills and Asian fusion cafés, while locally led tourism activities, including cacao tours, Indigenous reserve visits, and wildlife watching, embed cultural and ecological experiences into the visitor economy.

Yet the same tourism boom driving economic activity has brought rapid, uneven development: overlapping road expansions, rising property values, and an increasing presence of

expatriate-owned businesses. This raises questions about long-term community benefits and the balance between local control and external investment. Still, compared to Pacific beach towns, Puerto Viejo retains a more socially conscious tourism model, weaving environmental sustainability with cultural visibility even amid mounting growth pressures.

Nosara

In **Nosara**, the physical and social landscapes reveal striking contrasts. The town combines high-end residential properties, luxury restaurants, and exclusive resorts with unpaved roads, potholes, and waterlogged streets, producing a deliberate “wild aesthetic” that sustains the image of remoteness while catering to affluent visitors and landowners. Most businesses, from cafés to surf schools, operate primarily in English with prices listed in U.S. dollars, and service staff are frequently foreign-born, underscoring the limited participation of local workers in the tourism economy.

Among the accommodations, *Lagarta Lodge* stands out for integrating ecological preservation into its operations. Perched above the coastline, the lodge promotes conservation-centered activities such as turtle hatching tours and surf lessons, often led by local experts to ensure environmental respect and community involvement. Yet, in contrast to some nature-immersed ventures, other resorts in the area have expanded through large-scale construction projects that risk isolating visitors from both local culture and ecological systems.

Overall, Nosara embodies the tension between **eco-branding** and **exclusive development**, where luxury tourism coexists uneasily with uneven infrastructure and questions of local inclusion.

Belén

With regards to **Belén**, a once quiet canton defined by coffee farms and scattered homes, this town has witnessed a transformation into a hub of residential growth and commercial activity. Major corporations, including Intel, Citi, Deloitte, and 3M, now occupy vast urban developments, erasing former coffee plantations and green spaces in the service of economic expansion and infrastructure. This rapid urbanization has dramatically reshaped the physical and social landscape (Revista Summa, 2021).

Despite these pressures, Belén has distinguished itself within Costa Rica's Great Metropolitan Area through various notable **commitments to sustainable urban development**. In November 2024, the canton placed first in Costa Rica in the WWF's "*We Love Cities*" competition, which recognizes Latin American municipalities that exemplify innovation in climate-resilient, people-centered urban planning (Martinez, 2024).

Further reinforcing its sustainability credentials, Belén was among the first municipal governments in the country to submit a **Voluntary Local Review** on progress toward the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). In doing so, the canton demonstrated a high level of integration between planning instruments and the 2030 Agenda, showing progress particularly in water access, infrastructure investment, and sustainable production and consumption (SDGs 6, 9, 12, and 16) (Heredia Hoy, 2023).

Together, these initiatives suggest that Belén is attempting to balance rapid economic development with environmentally and socially conscious governance, offering a distinct urban counterpoint to the coastal tourism-focused contexts of Puerto Viejo and Nosara.

Analysis: Tourism and Just Sustainabilities in Costa Rica

The findings from **Puerto Viejo**, **Nosara**, and **Belén** reveal three distinct tourism and development trajectories within Costa Rica: small-scale eco-tourism intertwined with local culture (Puerto Viejo), high-end but unevenly inclusive luxury tourism (Nosara), and urban economic expansion with emerging sustainability initiatives (Belén). Examining these cases through our **just sustainabilities** theoretical framework (distributional justice, procedural justice, recognition justice, and ecological limits) highlights convergences, divergences, and persistent tensions in balancing economic growth, environmental stewardship, and social equity.

Distributional Justice

Distributional justice concerns the **equitable** allocation of tourism's economic benefits and environmental burdens.

In **Puerto Viejo**, the dominance of small-scale hotels, locally run tours, and Afro-Caribbean restaurants allows tourism revenue to circulate within the community. Local guides lead cacao tours, Indigenous reserve visits, and wildlife excursions, ensuring that cultural and ecological experiences generate livelihoods for residents rather than for external corporations. Yet the rapid arrival of expatriate-owned businesses (hotels, restaurants, and retail outlets) signals a gradual shift toward external economic control, echoing patterns documented in other Costa Rican tourism hubs where foreign investment drives up land values, displaces residents, and captures growing shares of tourism profits.

By contrast, **Nosara** reflects a far more uneven economic geography. Luxury accommodations and restaurants quote prices in U.S. dollars, operate in English, and employ foreign staff,

reducing the role of local labor in the high-value segments of the tourism economy. Although conservation programs such as turtle hatching tours involve local experts, much of the land, capital, and profit structures remain externally controlled, pointing to a tendency in ecotourism in Costa Rica to create “green enclaves” benefiting elites while marginalizing local workers.

In **Belén**, tourism itself is limited, but urban development driven by multinational corporations such as Intel and Deloitte produces a different distributional dynamic: conversion of former coffee lands into corporate campuses and residential projects. While the canton has pioneered sustainability reporting and infrastructure investment, such economic transformations often benefit middle- and upper-income groups while eroding agricultural livelihoods and green space access.

Taken together, the cases suggest that foreign capital and rapid development repeatedly outpace local redistributive mechanisms, raising concerns about long-term economic equity despite isolated initiatives supporting local enterprise and conservation.

Procedural Justice

Procedural justice emphasizes **inclusive decision-making in land use, planning, and tourism governance**.

In **Puerto Viejo**, local involvement in tourism operations, especially tours and small businesses, suggests some degree of procedural inclusion at the microeconomic level. However, findings also revealed overlapping, uncoordinated urban development (paved roads, real estate expansion, telecommunications upgrades) proceeding with little visible community consultation. This

reflects broader critiques of Costa Rican tourism planning, where national branding of “sustainable ecotourism” often masks highly centralized decision-making structures.

Nosara presents starker exclusions. Despite marketing itself as an eco-destination, much of its development (luxury hotels, gated communities, private infrastructure) occurs under foreign ownership with minimal municipal oversight. Conversely, **Belén** demonstrates emerging procedural innovations. Its *Voluntary Local Review* of the Sustainable Development Goals (Heredia Hoy, 2023) and recognition in the WWF’s *We Love Cities* competition suggest deliberate efforts to integrate sustainability metrics, participatory planning, and transparency into urban governance (Martinez, 2024). While not tourism-specific, these initiatives contrast sharply with the exclusionary planning observed in Puerto Viejo and Nosara, positioning Belén as a potential model for institutionalizing procedural justice in rapidly transforming regions.

Recognition Justice

Recognition justice concerns the **acknowledgment of cultural identities, traditions, and local knowledge** within tourism and development.

Among the three sites, Puerto Viejo stands out for prioritizing **Afro-Caribbean and Indigenous cultural heritage** in its tourism offerings, from cuisine to music to cacao and wildlife tours led by local residents. Such representation, when locally controlled, can resist the erasure of marginalized identities often associated with global tourism homogenization and gentrification. Yet the influx of expatriate businesses risks shifting cultural representation toward **commodification rather than community self-determination**, a dynamic documented in Caribbean tourism more broadly.

In **Nosara**, cultural recognition appears minimal. English-speaking businesses, foreign staff, and pricing in dollars create a tourism landscape **culturally detached** from its Costa Rican setting. The promotion of “wellness” and “eco-luxury” lifestyles often draws more on globalized imaginaries than on local cultural narratives, reflecting that residential tourism in Guanacaste constructs “tourist bubbles” largely insulated from surrounding communities.

Belén, as an urban-commercial hub, engages less with cultural tourism but illustrates a different recognition challenge: the replacement of agricultural landscapes, once central to local identity, with corporate and residential infrastructures. While sustainability awards highlight environmental metrics, questions remain about how urban residents experience and influence these transformations of place identity.

Overall, only Puerto Viejo demonstrates substantial, if fragile, alignment with recognition justice principles, while Nosara and Belén reflect either neglect or displacement of local cultural narratives amid economic change.

Ecological Limits

Finally, ecological limits address whether tourism and development respect **environmental essential to long-term sustainability**.

In **Puerto Viejo**, eco-lodges like *La Kukula* incorporate solar energy, natural ventilation, and reforestation, suggesting genuine efforts to minimize ecological footprints. However, road expansion, real estate growth, and rising tourist numbers increasingly strain coastal ecosystems, prompting concerns across Costa Rica that even “green” tourism accelerates habitat fragmentation and water demand beyond local carrying capacities.

Nosara, on the other side, embodies this paradox sharply. Marketing itself as an eco-destination, it nonetheless faces deforestation for luxury housing, water scarcity from residential tourism demand, and unregulated coastal construction threatening tropical fauna habitats. The contrast between *Lagarta Lodge's* conservation programs and the surrounding large-scale developments thus underscores the tension between individual eco-initiatives and cumulative ecological degradation.

In **Belén**, ecosystem limits manifest differently: urban heat islands, loss of agricultural green space, and rising emissions from industrial and residential expansion. While sustainability reporting signals growing awareness, an important concern to be taken is that **technical plans often outpace enforcement capacity**, limiting their impact on halting ecological decline in metropolitan areas.

Across all three sites, findings confirm Agyeman's warning that economic growth repeatedly sidesteps environmental thresholds when not ensuring consistency with broader social needs, displacing ecological costs onto marginalized spaces or future generations rather than reducing them.

Synthesis

Viewed together, the three cases illustrate how Costa Rica's celebrated sustainable tourism model delivers uneven justice outcomes. Puerto Viejo offers partial alignment (local cultural inclusion and small-scale eco-lodges) but faces mounting external investment pressures. Nosara exemplifies eco-elite enclaves, where wellness-oriented branding coexists with exclusionary economics and environmental strain. Belén demonstrates procedural and planning innovations yet reflects the urban ecological costs of economic modernization.

The *just sustainabilities* framework thus reveals that sustainability rhetoric alone cannot guarantee equitable or ecologically sound outcomes; rather, distributional equity, procedural inclusion, cultural recognition, and ecological limits **must be institutionalized** to prevent Costa Rica's tourism and development trajectory from reproducing the very injustices it claims to transcend.

Conclusion

This research examined tourism and development trajectories in **Puerto Viejo**, **Nosara**, and **Belén** through the lens of *just sustainabilities*, integrating field-based observations with a framework emphasizing **distributional equity, procedural inclusion, cultural recognition, and ecological limits**. By combining in-place observations, informal conversations, and site-specific analysis, the study illuminated how Costa Rica's globally celebrated model of sustainable tourism and urban development unfolds unevenly across regions.

Findings revealed that **Puerto Viejo** demonstrates relatively strong cultural integration and local economic participation, yet faces accelerating external investment pressures. **Nosara** embodies the contradictions of eco-luxury tourism, where conservation programs coexist with exclusionary economic structures, cultural detachment, and ecological strain. **Belén**, as an urban and commercial hub, illustrates procedural innovations in sustainability planning but contends with the environmental trade-offs of rapid metropolitan expansion.

Altogether, the cases underscore that environmental sustainability alone does not guarantee equitable or culturally inclusive outcomes. For Costa Rica to align its tourism and development trajectories with the principles of *just sustainabilities*, future planning must institutionalize

equity, participation, cultural recognition, and ecological thresholds at the center of policy and practice, ensuring that economic growth neither marginalizes local communities nor exceeds the limits of the ecosystems on which it depends.

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