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Tourism Development in Costa Rica: History and Trends

Costa Rica, a small country in Central America, has transformed itself into a popular and well-visited tourism destination. For many, this country is an example to follow because of its successful tourism development strategies. While much has been written about Costa Rica's tourism efforts, the literature that exists is scattered and lacks schematization. The purposes of this article is to 1) serve as an introduction to the current special edition of tourism in Costa Rica, and 2) summarize the country's tourism history and trends to provide a clearer understanding of what Costa Rica has done and is doing to promote its tourism development. The paper notes tourism related policies that aided the development of the industry. However, this article also directs the attention to the different strategies pursued by the country that indirectly benefited tourism development in Costa Rica.

Keywords: Costa Rica, tourism history, tourism trends

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Introduction

Costa Rica, a small country in Central America (51.100 km², pop. ~ 4.5 million), has become a well-known and increasingly visited tourism destination. The latest statistics of the United Nations World Tourism Organization identify Costa Rica as leading the Central America region with a 35% market share (UNWTO, 2005). According to the 2009 Travel and Tourism Competitiveness Report, Costa Rica is ranked 42nd in the world and first in the Central American region in terms of tourism competitiveness (WEF, 2010).

But how does a small country whose largest sector for years was agriculture, transform itself into a tourism mecca in a couple of decades? What tourism strategies were implemented and how quickly did these come into effect in Costa Rica? What are the country's main tourism attractors? Who visits Costa Rica? How has the tourism sector changed over the last years? This paper intends to answer these and other questions by summarizing the history and current trends of tourism in Costa Rica while also serving as an introduction to this special issue.

Much has been written about the different aspects that are linked to the country's tourism history. However, such literature is scattered and tackles very specific aspects of tourism in Costa Rica. Thus, a need arises to provide a source that schematizes and links different events associated with the development of tourism in a country that for many is an example to follow (see Colburn, 2006). An overview of these aspects can guide academics and practitioners to better understand relevant processes and interrelationships associated with developing a nation-level tourism program.

Costa Rica's success is, to a large extent, the result of strategies and programs that were directly associated with tourism development in the country. However, as noted by Colburn (2006), and as it will be explored in this paper, many other factors contributing to Costa Rica's successful tourism development story are the result of national level social and environmental strategies that were not intentionally designed with tourism in mind. These programs allowed for the improvement of the country's living conditions, which eventually served to attract and promote tourism. A summary of many of these directly and indirectly related factors to tourism development is presented in the following section.

History of Tourism in Costa Rica

Early times

While Costa Rica has received visitors throughout its history, formal tourism efforts started in the early 1930s with the involvement of the government in the industry (ICT, n.d.). Such involvement consisted of the promotion of a privately built and owned first class hotel in San José named "Gran Hotel Costa Rica." Tourists visiting this hotel often travelled by sea, anchoring in the Caribbean coast, where they then continued by train to the capital (see table 1 for a summary of the events presented here).

	Indirect Factors	Direct Factors	Tourism Situation	
Supply driven tourism development	1930s	Involvement of government in tourism Creation of nation level tourism board (1931)	Low numbers of tourists Underdeveloped infrastructure and tourism supply	
	1940s	Social reforms and abolishment of the army (1949)		
	1950s	Increasing betterment of the country's living conditions	Opening of Juan Santamaria international airport (1957)	Low levels of tourism demand and supply
	1960s		ICT becomes State Institution (1955)	Starts of academic tourism and nature-drive visitation
	1970s	Creation of National Park System (1970)		Increased visitation Low levels of supply specialization and segmentation
	1980s	NGO and non-profit revolution Nobel Peace Prize awarded to Costa Rica's president (1987)	Tourism Incentive Law (1985) ICT and CINDE foreign investment incentive program (1988)	Increased numbers and nature of available lodging and infrastructure Emerging demand and supply segments
	Increased demand-driven tourism development	1990s	Promotion of mass tourism Second international airport opened (1995) Promotion of sustainable discourse, practices, and certification programs	Promotion of large-scale foreign tourism enterprises
2000s		Rapid growth experienced throughout the country	Split trends between small scale environmentally and socially conscious tourism efforts vs. large scale bottom line tourism development	

During that same time, the first set of regulations associated with the tourism activity in the country was created with the formation of the *Junta Nacional de Turismo* (Law 91 of June 16, 1931; ICT, n.d.). This institution's main objective was to serve as the principal entity in charge of tourism regulation in the country.

The decade of the 1940s was critical for Costa Rica as it experienced decisive changes that emerged with the conclusion of its last civil war. This period of time was not only critical in Costa Rica's history, but also relevant for future tourism development, as the country's army was abolished in 1949. The eradication of the country's military forces freed up resources that were destined to social programs including education and health. Such programs promoted better living conditions within Costa Rica while also serving to establish its identity as a peaceful and stable country (Kristof, 2010). These changes were particularly commendable in a region characterized by underdevelopment and overburdened by political unrest (the Economist, 2010).

During the 1950s the social reforms established after the civil war were put in effect. The outcomes of political stability and developed social programs started being evidenced with the improvement of the country's living conditions. Such conditions promoted the birth of scientific tourism in Costa Rica, particularly noticeable during the 1960s with the increased visitation of foreign scientists and researchers (Budowski, 1990; Hill, 1990; Laarman & Perdue, 1989). Laarman & Perdue (1989) noted how these individuals not only tended to return to Costa Rica, but also encouraged others to visit the country. Minca & Linda (2000) indicated that following the trend set by scientists and researchers, nature-lovers started visiting Costa Rica, "giving birth to what could be seen as a first phase of ecotourism development" in the country (p. 111). In addition to their relevance for tourism, Colburn (2006) argues that the influx of academics and well-prepared migrants to the country played a key role in the design of Costa Rica's development strategies that followed.

In 1955, further efforts directly associated with tourism were established when the *Junta Nacional de Turismo* was renamed to *Instituto Costarricense de Turismo* (ICT; Law 1917). The institution was at this point awarded with the rank of an autonomous State institution with its own budget, recognizing the importance of tourism for the country's development (ICT, n.d.; Raventos, 2006). Additionally, in 1958, the Juan Santamaria International Airport (initially named El Coco International Airport) was dedicated, widening the possibilities for international travel to the country.

The 1970s marked the creation of Costa Rica's National Park Service. Such effort, led by a community of biologists in the country, sought to stop the large-scale resource exploitation experienced in Costa Rica since the 1940s (Minca & Linda, 2000). This was particularly noticeable in the country's at the time heightened deforestation levels (Camino et al., 2000; Chomitz et al., 1999; Hill, 1990). The creation of the National Park Service was a turning point in the way natural resources were utilized (and perhaps even viewed by Costaricans), as their use started shifting away from traditional extractive practices (Arroyo et al., 2005; Zbinden & Lee, 2005). Further, the creation of the National Park Service also provided new opportunities for visitation and enjoyment of protected areas in Costa Rica.

The beginning of the 1980s was characterized by the emergence of numerous foreign NGOs and non-profits in Costa Rica (Hill, 1990). Their presence promoted foreign financial and human capital into the country, which aided Costa Rica's development (Colburn, 2006). Perhaps because its good international standing and its proven capacity to stand out among its Central American neighbors, Costa Rica received far more financial aid than the rest of the countries during the crisis of the early 1980s (Colburn, 2006). These circumstances provided Costa Rica with capacities to continue improving its living standards and to keep attracting tourism.

In 1985, the government decreed the Tourism Investment Incentives Law, which promoted the development of the tourism industry (Law 6990; Coffey, 1993). Through such law, hotels, restaurants, tourism-related air and water transportation enterprises, car rental companies, and travel agencies were eligible for certain privileges. These included income tax exemptions for 12 years on undistributed profits, exemption from all tariffs and surcharges on imported or domestic products related to the development of tourism-based services or infrastructure, exemption of property taxes for 12 years, and access to preferred interest rates on loans (Coffey, 1993). Coffey (1993, p. 88) concluded that:

Tourism officials generally agree that the incentive program has had a significant impact on the development of tourist facilities. The most important of these incentives is the import tax waiver. This aspect of the program allows investors to recoup a reasonable return on their equity and allows the industry to compete with other locales in the Central American-Caribbean Region. Without these tax benefits, the costs of imported goods would be prohibitive for many investors.

Minca & Linda (2000) noted that at this point, the country experienced a “broad base change in the nature of [its] infrastructure” (p. 111).

By the end of the 1980s, Costa Rica gained the attention of the international press, when the President of the country, Oscar Arias Sánchez, was awarded the Nobel Peace prize for his efforts to promote dialogue and peace in Central America. In addition to helping out with the country’s international visibility, Mr. Arias’ deed helped to reinforce Costa Rica’s image of a peaceful and stable country.

In 1988 the *Coalición Costarricense de Iniciativas de Desarrollo* (CINDE) and the *Instituto Costarricense de Turismo* (ICT) designed a strategy to aggressively promote tourism development in the country (Hill, 1990). Both entities signed an agreement to establish an incentive program aimed at attracting foreign tourism investors to Costa Rica (EN, 2007; Hill, 1990). Such efforts were mainly focused on expanding the country’s infrastructure including hotels, resorts, commercial centers, roads, and electrification (Acuña & Ruiz, 2000).

At the beginning of the 1990's, earlier efforts aimed at promoting tourism in Costa Rica were paying off, as tourism indicators continued to show positive and growing trends. Colburn (2006, p. 353) noted that when tourists reached Costa Rica, "they [tourists] encountered more than peace, they encountered infrastructure, including national parks and museums." At that point, tourism was the third largest source of foreign earnings in the country (Hill, 1990).

Minca & Linda (2000) noted that between 1990 and 1994, the government in office promoted a large-scale model of tourism development to increase the country's competitiveness in the mass tourism segment. Following this strategy, the country opened its second international airport by 1995 in the city of Liberia (Martínez, 2003).

At the same time, research on tourism's negative impacts, particularly at the local level, was reaching widespread international recognition (Ceballos-Luscarain, 1996; Murphy, 1985; Wall & Mathieson, 2006). This resulted in efforts aimed at promoting alternative types of tourism in Costa Rica. Tourism-based cooperatives and associations, including the *Consortio Cooperativo Red Ecoturística Nacional* (COOPRENA) and *Asociación Costarricense de Turismo Rural* (ACTUAR), were established by local residents with the guidance of extra-local entities. Such efforts were focused on educating local residents in topics related to tourism development often in the forms of rural tourism and ecotourism. These efforts sought sustainability that, in addition to protecting the natural environment, also promoted broad local involvement, equality, and ownership of local resources (Cordero, 2002; Trejos et al., 2006).

By the end of the 1990s, government institutions also started promoting programs seeking sustainable practices in the country. The ICT, for instance, created a certification program named *Certificado de Turismo Sostenible* (Raventos, 2006). This program awarded hotels with a number of green leaves (instead of stars) that rated an enterprise's level of im-

pact on the environment. Another program, the *Bandera Azul Ecológica*, rated beaches in terms of cleanliness, water quality, security, and waste management practices (Raventos, 2006).

Current Times

Today Costa Rica is experiencing rapid economic and population growth (mostly fueled by large numbers of foreign immigrants), which has resulted in a series of mixed effects on its economy, social, and natural environments. Despite the numerous efforts engaged in towards the improvement of the country's living conditions, it is recognized that Costa Rica has several pressing issues to resolve, particularly in areas like income inequality, illegal immigration, and crime (EN, 2007). The Protection Project (2007, p. 78) noted:

[Costa Rica] it is still a developing country with approximately 20 percent of the population living below the poverty line. In addition, a large number of families that are no longer living below the poverty line still barely manage to cover their basic needs and are at risk of being thrown into poverty in the event of adverse circumstances.

Directly associated with tourism, concerns have been raised in regards to excessive development in some parts of the country with related problems resulting from limited and polluted water sources, destruction of natural habitats (particularly acute around the West Pacific coast), and a high incidence of sex tourism (Corella, 2010; Díaz, 2010; EN, 2007).

Nonetheless, overall, national and international observers agree that Costa Rica's past strategies have paid off (Colburn, 2006; EN, 2007). The United Nations Human Development Index classifies Costa Rica as a country with a high level of human development (UNDP, 2009a). While Costa Rica is not a rich country, it presents higher GDP per capita values, and a lower number of its population is unemployed and living under extreme poverty than the rest of Central America (CIA, 2009; Colburn, 2006). The country's literacy rate reaches over 95% (ODD, 2000) with a life expectancy at birth of 79 years (EN, 2007), indicators that surpass even some developed countries. In 2009, Costa Rica was ranked the number

one country in the world database of happiness (WDH, 2009). Colburn (2006, p. 350) concludes:

Costa Rica’s broad-based economic and social development enable most of the nation’s 4.2 million inhabitants (an estimate for 2005) to live reasonably well, with their basic needs met, with opportunities to study, and – depending on their drive and abilities – with the possibility of a wide range of careers. Costa Ricans have opportunities. They are neither worn down by numbing poverty nor forced to abandon their country in search for self-advancement.

Such conditions resulted in an extremely attractive environment for the promotion of tourism (Weaver, 1998). Coupled with the country’s tourism development strategies, Costa Rica is today seen as a desirable destination and a safe place for investment, both factors that are critical for tourism development and visitation. As a result, the country’s tourism industry has increased exponentially. Between 1975 and 2008, the number of international arrivals in Costa Rica grew almost 600% (see Table 2).

Table 2. International Arrivals to Costa Rica between 1975 and 2008.

	1975	1988	1995	2008
Total Visitors	299,037	329,386	579,457	2,089,174

Sources: Hill (1990); ICT (1997, 2008); Raventos (2006).

The large majority of tourists visiting the country are North Americans comprising 67% of the visitors (of which 84% come from the United States, 10% Canada, and 6% Mexico). The second largest groups of visitors to Costa Rica are Europeans with a 24% of the market (ICT, 2002). Visits to National Parks increased from 658,657 in 1996 to 1,205,123 in 2006 (EN, 2007).

Earnings from tourism between 1996 and 2006 grew around 9% annually (EN, 2007). By the 21st century, tourism has become the second largest foreign earning activity in the country and represented 7% of GDP in 2006 (EN, 2007). Raventos (2006) estimates that just

in the 3-year period between 1997 and 2000, the number of created jobs directly related to tourism was over 4,000.

Such numbers illustrate what several have considered the success story of Costa Rica, attributed here to the country's macro-level decisions and strategies directly related to the tourism sector. However, in order to better understand the nature of the changes within the tourism sector, the following section evidences the most important trends in Costa Rica's tourism development.

Trends in Tourism Development

Costa Rica has gone through many changes throughout its history seeking ways to improve its living conditions. Overall, two major approaches commonly followed are those seeking primarily *economic growth* or those seeking quality of life outcomes, also referred to as *development* (Daly, 1990; Morris, 1980; Seers, 1979; Sen, 1999). The former approach relies heavily on increased production, job provision, and infrastructure development (Firebaugh & Beck, 1994; Quiroga, 1994). While unquestionably important, many have pointed to the relevance of other factors beyond economic ones (McMichael, 2004; Morris, 1980; Sen, 1999; Seers, 1979). This is particularly the case when recognizing issues of inequity and resource distribution among member of society.

In contrast, the *development* paradigm is interested in promoting a growth that is conducive to improvements in multiple aspects of human life. Matarrita-Cascante (2010, p.

1142) added:

Development, as distinguished from economic growth, seeks improvements in overall living conditions in addition to material standards (Firebaugh & Beck, 1994; Maser, 1997). Development strategies often focus on reducing poverty, child mortality, and inequality while enhancing education, health, and self-reliance (Holden, 2008; UNDP, 2009b), agency and solidarity (Bhattacharyya, 2004), personal freedom (Goulet, 1968; Sen, 1999), social civility, and tolerance (Maser, 1997). After the late 80s, such development goals were associated with the notion of sustainability, concerned with practices that produce economic progress, intragenerational and intergenera-

tional equity, social justice, and environmental responsibility (Holden, 2008; World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987). Ultimately, these outcomes reflect a continuous and positive change in the totality of human experience, leading to an improved quality of life (McGillivray, 2006, 2007).

From a tourism standpoint, such approaches have driven the ways in which tourism has been developed in different parts of the world. For some, tourism has been understood and treated merely from an economic growth perspective. As such, tourism has been associated with the modernization paradigm, characterized by increased job provision, top down planning strategies with limited local involvement, and high infrastructure levels and capital inputs (Sharpley & Telfer, 2002). In contrast, tourism understood and treated as a complex process involving multiple stakeholders and resources whose effects in society extend beyond economic outcomes, reflects the development paradigm (McIntosh et al., 1995). Under this perspective, tourism has been associated with the alternative development paradigm characterized by incremental rates of development, a bottom up planning strategy with high local involvement, and low infrastructure levels and capital inputs (Sharpley & Telfer, 2002). Additionally, other characteristics associated with development-driven tourism include local ownership of capital, internal industry control, mixed accommodation type, disbursed spatial distribution, independent marketing targets, and special interest tourists (Sharpley & Telfer, 2002). Such distinct approaches have been present in the history of Costa Rica's tourism development and are key to understanding the trends guiding tourism development in the country.

Given the country's diverse and numerous natural assets, Costa Rica's tourism sector has always been developed with nature (and its protection) in mind, suggesting strategies more in line with the development paradigm. Among such natural assets, Hill (1990, p. 15) noted that Costa Rica contained "12,000 varieties of plants, 205 species of mammals, 849 species of birds, 160 species of amphibians, 218 species of reptiles, and 130 species of fresh-water fish," in a surface that amounts to only .01% of the world (Raventos, 2006). Accord-

ingly, the Costa Rican Board of Tourism (ICT)'s promotional campaigns market Costa Rica as a country with "no artificial ingredients." Tourism visitation and promotion has historically been based on such natural beauty (EN, 2007; Hill, 1990; Place, 1991). For instance, in 2005, 62.3% of the tourists who visited Costa Rica reported exploring the country's flora and fauna (ICT, 2002). Additionally, about 78% of the tourists who visited Costa Rica indicated sun and beach activities as being the major factor in their visits to the nation (ICT, 2002).

While nature is and will be one of the most relevant components of Costa Rica's image, other factors also play a role in shaping the tourism experience in the country. Costa Rica's political and economic stability, and high development levels (e.g. educational levels, healthy population, access to water) has been key to Costa Rica's tourism (Hill, 1990; Place, 1991; Jackiewicz, 2006; Van Tassell & Daniel, 2006). These conditions suggest that, at least, an emphasis on growth has also been part of the discourse in the country and its tourism sector.

Taken together, the country's natural and socioeconomic conditions resulted in a tourism that, according to EN (2007), was based from its onset on *supply*, capitalizing on the combination of the country's natural, political, economic, social, and infrastructural conditions. Such supply offered tourists: "... a combination of biodiversity – flora and fauna and microclimates concentrated in a small geographical region – with volcanoes, nearby relative virgin beaches, friendly people, and picturesque towns" (EN, 2007, p. 198).

Such a 'supply-driven' approach has historically been highly interrelated with local-level experiences and small size tourism enterprises. Tourists visiting Costa Rica adapted to the "offered" local situations and conditions as they were, or as EN (2007) calls it the 'authentic' Costa Rican experience, where luxury and comfort were not the main goals.

After the aggressive tourism development strategies promoted during the 1980s and beyond, changes in the supply-oriented tourism approach in Costa Rica started becoming

evident. This trend in tourism development reflects the transition between approaches less concerned in development paradigm and more by the economic growth approach. Raventos (2006), citing the Costa Rican's Board of Tourism strategic plan, identifies three periods of tourism development in Costa Rica since the 1980s. The first stage, the pioneering period (1980-1988), consisted mainly of academic and scientist tourists (a trend that initiated back in the 1960s). During this stage, tourists still stayed in small and simple cabins and lodges or research stations. The second, or growth period (1989-1994), was characterized by attracting less academics, but still "ecologically minded tourists who would be interested in experiencing nature" (Raventos, 2006, p. 377). Lodging possibilities during this stage grew in numbers and nature (e.g., more hotels with larger capacity). The third stage, the evolution period (1995-2001), attracted a larger scope of tourists with more particular interests (still within nature-based activities). During this stage, tourists segments were more clearly defined, which included sun and sea, adventure, convention, and health tourism, among others (Raventos, 2006). Three to five star hotels with larger numbers of rooms emerged during this period.

The most recent tourism development trend in Costa Rica is characterized by the presence of large-scale international corporations (EN, 2007). Fueled by neoliberal practices at this point highly adopted in the world, this stage in Costa Rica's tourism development reflects a strong focus driven by the economic growth model. EN (2007) notes that this trend is the result of strategies promoted in the late 1980s and early 1990s (see previous section and table 1 for summarized information). As part of this current trend, large firms posit the country as a destination for mass, large-scale tourism in which the industry is changing from supply to demand-driven (EN, 2007). Forms of tourism that traditionally were non-existent or limited in Costa Rica, started sprouting during this recent stage. These include adventure

tourism, cruise tourism, mass tourism, health tourism, and sex tourism (EN, 2007; Protection Project, 2007).

The country's emphasis during this current stage has shifted from providing tourists with an authentic local and natural experience, to catering to particular needs and demands of tourists. This trend is the result of the country's complex set of dynamics in which natural resources and authentic experiences were juxtaposed with aggressive promotion of foreign investment seeking infrastructure development and large scale tourism enterprises.

The adoption of such an approach, to a large extent fueled by neoliberal practices and market logic has been associated with impacts on culture, heritage, and conservation practices, reduced competitive advantage by locals, and increased prices, inequality and poverty among others (Igoe & Brockington, 2007; Matarrita-Cascante, 2010; Schilcher, 2007). As a response, the role of NGOs, local-level associations, and government efforts, has become prominent during this stage. In an effort to counter balance the perceived threats emerging from large-scale foreign driven tourism, such stakeholders have shifted the emphasis from what Cordero (2002) called "the natural to the social beauty." As a result, newer efforts revolve around providing communities with knowledge to promote local ownership and development of their own tourism-based projects. Expected outcomes are to engage in local control of the factors that lead to improvements of local economic, social, and environmental conditions (Trejos et al., 2006). However, some communities have been faced with several issues resulting from these processes including green washing, power concentration, lack of local involvement, and hardships with generating economic profits among others (see Matarrita-Cascante, 2010 and Zumbado and Molina in this edition).

Thus, Costa Rica's current tourism development faces a challenge in which two different trends are clearly observable (driven by the overall contrasting objectives between plain economic growth and development paradigms). The outcome will be driven by what

tourism stakeholders give importance to. Will Costa Rican tourism-dependent communities balance the objectives put forward by the two overarching paradigms? This chapter of Costa Rica's tourism history is written as you read these lines.

Conclusions

The story of Costa Rica's tourism was summarized in this paper. While many of the country's tourism-driven policies have been critical to the tourism industry's imminent growth, macro-level decisions helped the country achieve desired conditions for successful tourism development.

While much has been said about Costa Rica's success, it is important to recognize that several and at times diverging strategies (e.g., promotion of small scale local ownership vs. large scale mass tourism development) were placed in motion. These strategies reflect distinct development paradigms resulting in complex environments in which different stakeholders push for the promotion of multiple forms of tourism development. This is particularly the case of the present stage of tourism in Costa Rica. This clashing scenario, however, is to some extent not new in Costa Rica. While Costa Rica's tourism has largely been linked to appreciation and protection of its resources, many have noted that the paradox faced by the country, has always existed (Buchsbaum, 2004; EN, 2007; Hill, 1990; Van Tassell & Daniel, 2006). EN (2007) indicated that the reality of tourism development in Costa Rica is not always in accordance with its brand-image of a country entirely committed to nature. From a macro-policy level, the strategy to pursue ecotourism has always faced dilemmas, especially when accounting the neoliberal practices put forward by the government in the late 1980s and 1990s promoting larger foreign investment and numbers of tourism enterprises (Van Tassell & Daniel, 2006; Weaver, 1998). Additionally, even at the local level, EN (2007) and Van Tassell & Daniel (2006) note that for many, the bottom line is always on people's mind de-

spite their strong “verbal” commitment to conservation and the principles of ecotourism. Buchsbaum (2004), examining the case of Costa Rica, refers to this as “pure ecotourism” vs. “watered-down ecotourism.” Nonetheless, what is to come is still to be seen in Costa Rica’s tourism development history.

Costa Rica, as every country, faces the challenge of promoting tourism that provides benefits to its population, its natural resources while providing the tourist with a satisfactory experience. In the process, the country faces the risk of damaging the resources that brought many tourists there to begin with. The balance to reach a successful case is very delicate. However, what we can take from Costa Rica’s tourism development story is that certain base conditions are essential for an overall successful tourism development. Positive tourism outcomes require apt macro-level policies promoting positive nation-wide conditions and constant and dedicated efforts by the different tourism stakeholders.

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