

Article

Galapagos, Nature, Heritage, and Contemplation

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Abstract

When we hear of the Galapagos Islands, we think of a place of natural conservation and biological diversity, with the archipelago having been a World Heritage Site since 1978 and a Biosphere Reserve since 1984, expanding its area in 2019. In this study, while exploring the islands, we found that some places brought us spiritual delight, fostered internal recollection, and promoted reflection. Both islanders and tourists visited and evaluated these places using conceptual and combined methodological tools to determine which of these places constituted contemplation sites. The results allowed for a variety of sites that generate new experiences, imagination, spatial holograms, and mental routes for a user to identify, which allows for the creation of new recommended tourist routes and the categorization of intangible heritage, which can be potentiated by the community and tourists in a controlled manner, as indicated by this research.

Keywords: places of contemplation; natural heritage; interpretation of heritage; hermeneutic phenomenology; Galapagos

1. Introduction

The Galapagos Islands, located 972 km off the coast of Ecuador, are an archipelago made up of 13 islands and 107 islets. However, only four islands are inhabited by people (with a population of 28,583 people)—Santa Cruz, San Cristobal, Isabela, and Floreana [1]—representing 3% of the inhabitable island territory. The remaining 97% of the island territory is protected natural areas. These islands were designated a Natural Heritage Site by UNESCO in 1978.

Then, in 1984, the Galapagos Islands were also designated as a Biosphere Reserve because they are an ecologically representative area of unique value. Furthermore, in 2007, the Galapagos Islands were considered a heritage site at environmental risk and included in the list of World Heritage in Danger due to uncontrolled tourism and the uncontrolled presence of invasive species. However, on 29 July 2010, the Galapagos Islands have been removed from the list of endangered heritage sites by the UNESCO Heritage Committee, with the enforcement of policies for controlling tourism and invasive species on the islands being continuously monitored [2]. By 2019, this territory had expanded to 14.6 million hectares, making it the largest marine reserve in the world.

Currently, the Galapagos Islands are an atypical example where nature, conservation, and tourism coexist, with one factor weighing more heavily than the others depending on which actors are engaged in decision making. However, in recent years, the otherness, diversity, and mixed identity of islanders who inhabit the territory have been visualized. What identifies them or allows them to be recognized is their ‘*cultural hybridity*’ [3,4], which



Academic Editors: Fátima Matos Silva, Isabel Vaz de Freitas and Dmitry A. Ruban

Received: 7 May 2025

Revised: 5 August 2025

Accepted: 6 August 2025

Published: 15 August 2025

Citation: Lara Calderón, M.L. Galapagos, Nature, Heritage, and Contemplation. *Heritage* **2025**, *8*, 335. <https://doi.org/10.3390/heritage8080335>

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has been transformed due to the particularities of being a population in which multiple nationalities and cultures coexist.

Bonfil Batalla said ‘*all peoples, all societies and all human groups have culture*’ [5]; while the natural heritage, biodiversity, and existing Ramsar sites in the Galapagos Islands have been adequately identified, they have not been clearly visualized [6], and the cultural identity of these people and their intangible heritage defined in the practices, expressions, knowledge, or techniques transmitted from generation to generation within their communities remain unknown, as do the landscapes, the places, and the interconnections through lived experiences, leading to new experiences, harmony, spirituality, peace, tranquility, etc. [7,8].

Cultural heritage provides ‘the continuous revaluation of cultures and identities, and is an important means for the transmission of knowledge, skills, and experiences between generations’ [9] because the heritage of our community’s past could be mistakenly understood and applied under the same criteria, but this is not how it works: tangible heritage creates certain tangible and physical characteristics different from the intangible or ethereal. Likewise, the SDG 11.4 considers ‘redouble efforts to preserve and protect the world’s cultural and natural heritage’ [10], which was officially established at the Habitat III Conference held in Quito in 2016.

The imaginary of the Galapagos people is related to the native conservation and biological diversity of the islands; furthermore, their remaining cultural mix is represented by their architectural heritage, handicrafts, local traditions, gastronomy, artistic manifestations, etc.; this cultural mix of the Galapagos Islands should be preserved and promoted and will play an important role in attracting tourists.

The cultural heritage of Galapagos results from a mixture of identities: immaterial components that include tangible elements that are derived from the wealth and knowledge of the inhabitants; the unreal ones are derived from the same inhabitant and add value to a particular site, with particular facts that establish a relevant link; and places of memory that developed based on the experience registered in the memory of the population.

In the Galapagos, where nature, history and local ingenuity coexist, we can potentially visualize heritage elements, whether tangible or intangible; however, this does not mean that the three aspects mentioned above entirely represent heritage, but they can under the right assumptions [11].

The instrument in which the Galapagos cultural heritage has been registered is regulated by the National Institute of Cultural Heritage, and it can be viewed on the SIPCE Platform [12], and to date there are ten assets of heritage interest; four assets of intangible cultural heritage; eight immovable assets of cultural heritage; and four archaeological cultural assets.

The territory where the registered and catalogued properties that are part of this research are located is the island of Santa Cruz, home to Puerto Ayora, the largest and most populated city on the island, which concentrates 60.30% of the island’s population and is visited by 9 out of every 10 local and international tourists visiting the Galapagos Islands [1].

1.1. Current State of Tourism in Relation to Local Heritage

Regarding tourism, in the first half of 2024, the Galapagos Islands registered 142,473 tourists: 58% of whom came from abroad, while 42% were domestic tourists [13]. The momentum of tourism has been very weak, which has been influenced by the following variables: first, the slow recommencement of tourism after the COVID-19 pandemic; second, the insecurity or distrust of tour operators and tourists; and finally, economic policies increasing taxes for tourists and locals alike by the Governing Council of the Special Regime for Galapagos [14,15].

Of all tourists that visited Ecuador, the ultimate destination of 64% of these tourists was the Galapagos Islands, of which 95% visited the Charles Darwin Reserve, a Belgian non-profit institution that has managed the natural resources since 1959; these tourists often finish their itinerary in the nature reserve and then leave because the community and government entities have not promoted new places to visit to improve tourist retention [16]. For this reason, it is important to give value to various undervalued places on the islands and to promote more tourist destinations such that the archipelago's tourists are incentivized to stay for longer durations on the islands.

Preserving and promoting the heritage of the region and protecting its biodiversity are fundamental aspects in ensuring the sustainable development of tourism. Valuing and combining the rich heritage of the islands, be it architectural, local traditions, gastronomy, handicrafts, or artistic manifestations, play a decisive role in captivating tourism and enriching the lived experience during a stay in the archipelago [17]. Beyond this, there are also places and landscapes enveloping the islands that bring people inner joy.

At the end of this paper, official documents from 2024 describe that the Galapagos Islands registered a total of 279,277 tourists, reflecting a stable tourism industry, where 55% of visitors were foreigners, most of whom came from the United States (26%) and from the United Kingdom (4%), and the remaining visitors from the rest of Europe and Latin America [18]. It must be considered that the annual tourist population is 9.77 times higher than the existing local population in the archipelago, sparking a debate about the long-term sustainability and the sociocultural impact on the economic sustainability of tourism [19,20]; an issue that the local authorities of the islands have not yet prioritized.

1.2. Why Contemplate a Place and Give It Value?

Often, the technicians who study heritage visualize spaces as independent objects and carry out their studies and interventions in a fragmented way, and they do not take into account the environment and its context, that is, the landscape that gave rise to it [21,22]; they give a place less value than the settlers or the inhabiting community that understands the place and lives there every day, thus underestimating the innate scenario responsible for its valuation. Therefore, it is crucial to *'understand the value of the place'*. Technicians should know how the community imagines a place and how it explains the occupation of its own landscape and the culture that contribute to its valuation.

Walking the path of the Nymphs, we find the phrase *'listen to the silence'* (Figure 1), and *'to silence the mind for a moment'* is perhaps one of the most complex actions for a human being; however, it is not understood how valuable a particular instant is in a place and what its landscape tells us; the integral richness transmits to us the idea *'only silence makes us capable of saying something new'* [23], or the concept from Taoist philosophy called **wu wei**, i.e., *'develops spontaneously by itself, it is not the result of the non-action of the wise, but of the nature of man'* [24].

Contemplating is a state and an attitude that represents a different way of approaching a place, or a landscape, that envelops you or makes you a part of it and provides multiple flows of information which are usually inaccessible [25]. The contemplation of a place generates within us a spiritual and mystical delight and transports you from that place to other intangible spaces of recollection or reflection.

The fool makes use of the ability not to act. No end is reached. He surrenders himself without thinking to the space that 'winks at him', to the magnetism of the next corner, of a distant square in the fog... [26].

Thus, this approach allows us to consider the value of a place, possibly in contrast to sacred spaces such as churches, temples, memorials, shrines, etc. [27], which have been constructed for hundreds of years, providing history, society, culture, and even transmit-

ted spiritual power, allowing the occupant of the space to be the medium or catalyst for the construction of a local or universal identity and thus to develop their dogmatic, ideological, or universal practices.

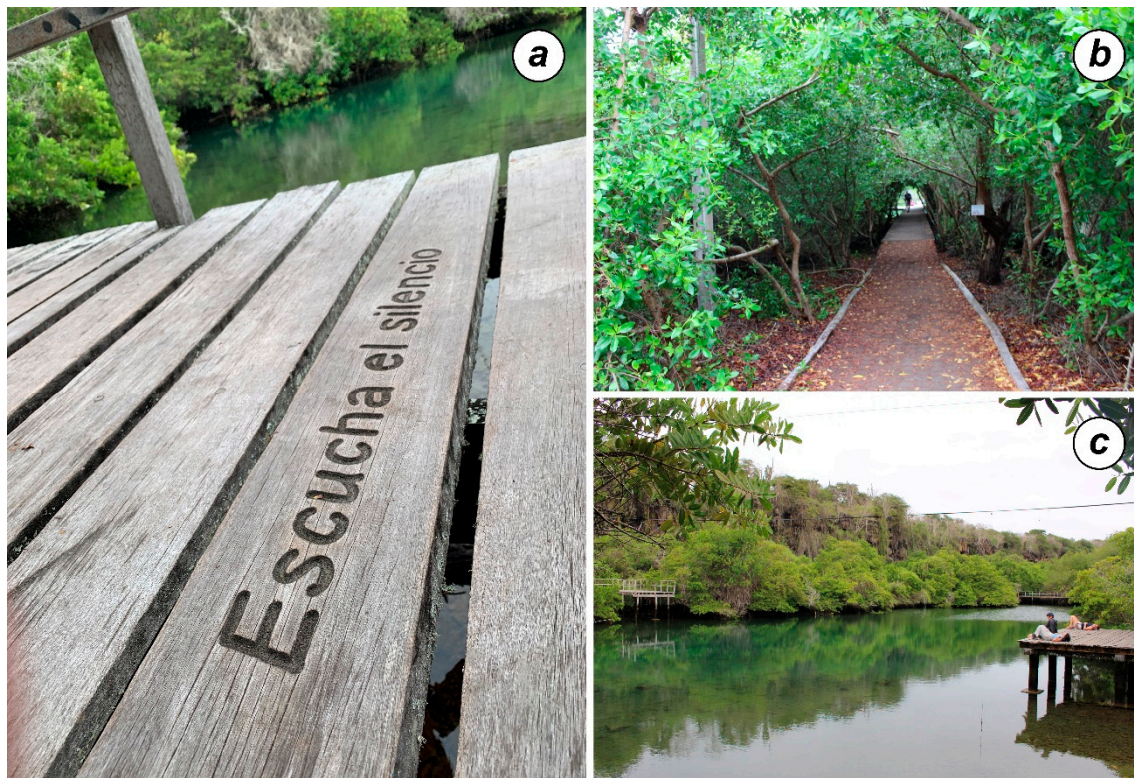


Figure 1. (a–c) Lagoon of Nymphs, Puerto Ayora, Santo Cruz, Galapagos (July 2024).

The value of a place is not a new concept; Christian Norberg Schulz interpreted it to be the basic activity involved in the use of a place, and he defines it as the '*genius loci*'; it includes the coexistence, adaptation, and proof of the ideal balance between nature and culture, i.e., the tangible and intangible things that are involved in our daily existence and that allow us to be members of a cultural universe [28,29]; it is a matter of interpreting the physical and psychological elements that influence the analysis of a user's appreciations, preferences, or tastes, and this analysis is particularly sensitive to the uses and customs in the contemplation sites of interest.

A place will always be a foreground of the people who interact with it, promoting certain use behaviors and generating expectations of '*an unforgettable space*'; these expectations guide actions that imprint the place with specific characteristics that others will recognize, thus allowing the place to qualify as contemplative [30,31].

The natural diversity in the Galapagos Islands is intense; in contrast, they have humble links to ancestral knowledge, but great attributes of universality, because the islands are a territory that is very rich in cultural knowledge. However, this cultural knowledge does not represent their local identity. Being participants in this reciprocal transmission of oral knowledge of stories, legends, rites, and myths creates a sense of historical continuity and forges an emotional bond within the community; these narratives, loaded with symbolism and values, shape the worldview of a social group and contribute to the construction of a collective identity [8].

Intangible manifestations being usually linked to tangible elements should be taken into account: 'a building is built because there is a tradition, a ritual, or a need of manifestation of that people to transmit their intangible heritage' [32]. However, we can consider

that a certain loss of intangible manifestation occurs due to the disappearance of certain objects closely linked to an activity.

2. Materials and Methods

This study used a mixed method, with a sequential comparative design consisting of three phases, since it is difficult to connect concepts such as nature, heritage, and contemplation. The first phase was dedicated to the collection of qualitative data on the daily life of the occupants of these spaces, the Galapagos settlers; then, the second phase involved the collection of quantitative data through surveys of settlers and local and international tourists; the third phase featured semi-structured interviews with notable people who were well versed in culture, tourism, and conservation. This design is characterized by giving more weight to the findings of one of the phases [33] to support the results.

To understand the methodology adopted, I will quote Philippe Degel, an American resident who lived for more than five decades in the Galapagos Islands as a naturalist guide, artist, and cultural actor and shared with us why he has not been able to leave these enchanted islands:

‘6 hours give you a superficial perspective on what you need to see regarding nature.

6 days will bring you closer to an interesting reality of the place and its nature.

6 months you recognize the elements that enclose you in nature, you can know species, recognize their fauna, and flora.

In 6 years you begin to appreciate the details of nature, you know when turtles come, you understand when a tree molts, you recognize the wind and what the breeze tells you.

60 years old you are already part of nature, she feels that you are almost part of her elements, of her ecosystem’. (Philippe Degel, Puerto Ayora, personal communication, 9 July 2024)

We first attempted to understand everyday life on the archipelago, and no one understood the everyday life better than the occupants of these islands, i.e., the settlers. This was achieved through phenomenological–hermeneutic methodology, which was conceived at the beginning of the 20th century and allows us to give value to reasoning, providing meaning to the new, current understanding of an object of interest, in this case, the people (shown to Figure 2) Wilhelm Dilthey raised three fundamental points: life, activity, and its energy [34,35].



Figure 2. Synthesized scheme of the adapted and applied methodological process [16].

The phenomenological method allows for understanding and transmitting '*the world of everyday life*', as it seeks to understand the everyday life of a user, from how people act in their daily lives to what the people think and feel and how they see the world, and to support the idea that the experience of living and feeling a space determines a user's experience [36]. This not only proposes the necessary process to correctly execute the method, but also communicates ethical principles, since the most important thing is to be respectful of the opinions of the participants, since a researcher enters the lives of people to carry out their experimentation [37].

Doris Fuster defines the existence of three important phases in the use of the method: The first stage involves the clarification of imageries, with the inputs required to carry out the research; the second stage involves collecting information supported by existing sources such as anecdotes, customs, personal experiences, stories, and observations that allow a sequential inquiry of the research objectives; the third phases involves reflecting on the lived experience that, in an orderly manner, structures the meanings, terms, and experiences that the users transmit to us '*an effect of profound change, which produces a gratifying evocation and that allows to move our being*' [38].

The second phase represented conducting surveys in the territory with users to highlight the value of the place, with a set of methods and techniques of strategic communication used to reveal the meaning of the place [39,40], thus giving more emphasis to the Sam Ham TOA model [41,42]; for this purpose, a systematic observation process was implemented, and the results obtained from this information were tabulated following the Likert scale in order to analyze the value of the different sites, the degree of appropriation of the people, and their meanings.

This is based on the principles of cognitive psychology, since they allow a more effective understanding of the inhabitants and visitors, considering that each individual perceives, selects, processes, and integrates information differently and these are displaced, reinforced, modified, and produced in a different way conditioned by each individual [43,44]. However, the established methodological bases will configure new alternatives for the contemplation sites to be utilized by the inhabitants as tourist attractions and will provide visitors with alternatives to spend the night on the islands.

This process allows the settlers and the visitors to enhance our knowledge with their experiences, imagination, spatial holograms, mental tours, etc., and they will be the ones to communicate to us the body of knowledge to determine which places, spaces, and corners possess intangible value so that we can configure a network. Heritage interpretation is the '*art of revealing in situ the meaning of the natural, cultural or historical legacy to the public that visits those places in their leisure time*' [45–47]; for many authors, the contemplation of a landscape and giving value to a site are highly subjective [48].

The third step involved semi-structured interviews, conducted with notable people in the fields of culture, tourism, and conservation, which served as a valuable tool for reading and evaluating the sites of contemplation; together, these three techniques allowed us to obtain data that were analyzed both quantitatively and qualitatively, providing a comprehensive framework to eliminate the subjectivity of the theme '*intangible heritage*'. We tried to overcome prejudices with these methodological positions to understand the experience that the site of contemplation transmits to a user [49].

3. Results

The pre-existing documentary sources of the SIPCE Platform of the National Institute of Cultural Heritage describe 26 sites in Santa Cruz; the Ministry of Tourism of the MINTUR prioritized 17 sites in Santa Cruz; the Tourism Plan generated in 2020 by the technicians of the Municipality of Santa Cruz identified 43 sites [50]. For example, some

sites have special regulations because they are within the protected area of the Galapagos National Park, others have military security restrictions, the vast majority, although documented, have complex accessibility, and several of the sites registered in 2008 SIPCE are no longer valid sites.

Once the existing relevant information regarding the territory was reviewed, the next step was to tabulate, compile, and prioritize the sites; a total of 28 places in Santa Cruz were mapped, and were then analyzed, registered, and visited. These places transmit the practical intangible value of recollection, tranquility, and inner peace; contemplation is a state but also an activity because it offers multiple flows of information to those who otherwise would not be able to access and thus transmit the beauty of a place *'without being part of it'*. The Galapagos Islands are undoubtedly a natural paradise, a museum, and a living laboratory of species evolution [2,51].

Foreigners are the most impressed by the flora and fauna of the islands; furthermore, no one imagines that they would witness a giant land turtle or pink marine iguana walking down a city street, or worse, a 200 kg sea lion swimming next to them on the seashore (Figure 3). This is impressive because there are more than 2900 existing marine species [52] and an impressive number of terrestrial species on this archipelago; this requires the contemplation and appreciation of the region, which requires special sensitivity to appreciate its value [53] in terms of its beauty, its shapes and forms, and, above all, the feelings generated by living in it and observing it.

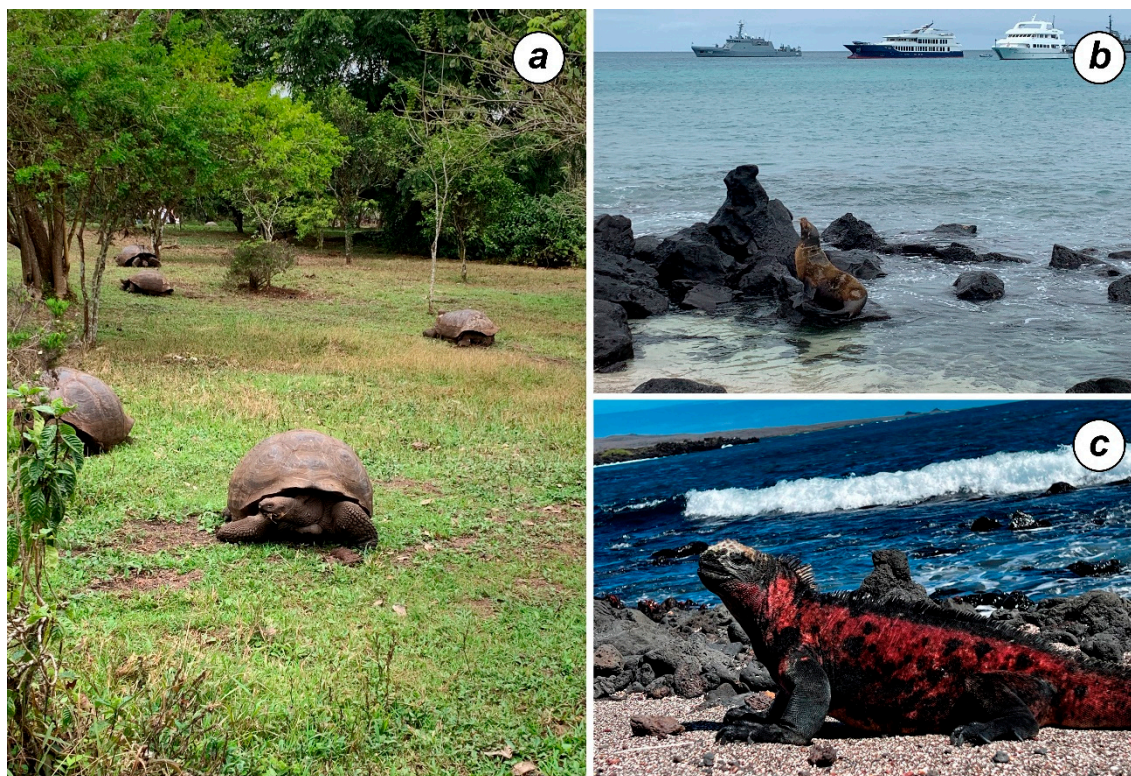


Figure 3. (a) Giant tortoise image (*Chelonoidis*) taken during the visit to Rancho el Chato 2. (b) Sea lion image (*Zalophus wollebaeki*) at Playa de los lobos in San Cristóbal. (c) Galapagos marine iguana (*Amblyrhynchus cristatus*) at the 'Charco de los flamencos' site in Floreana.

Contemplating allows people to perceive the duality of life and death represented by the contrast between the black mantle of igneous rock expelled centuries ago by the island's volcanoes and the turquoise blue of the sea. Unless a person lives in the archipelago, they cannot estimate the diversity of its nature; by finding balance between the imagined and

the lived, people could live in a space full of mysticism nestled in a beautiful and magical geographical setting full of nature (shown to Figure 4). In the words of a former educator, *'there is no better artist than nature'* (María López—Bellavista, personal communication, 10 July 2024).



Figure 4. Images of (a) a landscape recorded at 'Playa del amor' on Isabela Island and (b) a blue-footed booby recorded at 'El túnel' on Isabela Island.

Behind an attractive arched portico of ceramics, with a very natural shape, hides a singular walkway of picturesque and dazzling colors of pots, ceramics, and mosaics (Figure 5). The most precious lived experiences of the artist Cristina Nelson Gallardo transmit adaptation, resilience, and art. However, the most fascinating thing is that this colorful, playful, and dazzling scenery of artwork present in the background ends with a diaphanous interwoven hedge of mangroves; as if it were the opening of an analog camera diaphragm, the natural arch of green branches ends with the view of the celestial and turquoise horizon of the ocean; it is hard to believe that this site of contemplation is in the middle of the city of Puerto Ayora, but *'the history of a community is woven with the thin threads of the history of its citizens'* (María López B—Bellavista, personal communication, 12 July 2024). And that is what we are aiming to achieve in this and other places on the islands.

The total absence of light and traveling a few kilometers underground allow one to appreciate the lava tunnel or volcanic tube that is formed due to the lava flows during the process of volcanic cooling in the interior, and this evokes a memory of a childhood place, a quiet place, which represents peace, which allowed Philippe Degel to be in contact with nature and make this his protected place (shown to Figure 6). These memories are anchored in the lived present, in the past, and in the features that he perceives to be similar to those that are part of this new scenario; he places them in the spatial holograms of his memories and those of the present. When we have been part of a transformation process and it has allowed us to change the way we think, feel, and even live being a part of nature, the Greek call this *'metanoia'*; it means that *'one can only learn from nature, being part of it'* (Philippe Degel—Puerto Ayora, personal communication, 9 July 2024).



Figure 5. The Ceramic Garden, the Galapagos Islands (2024).

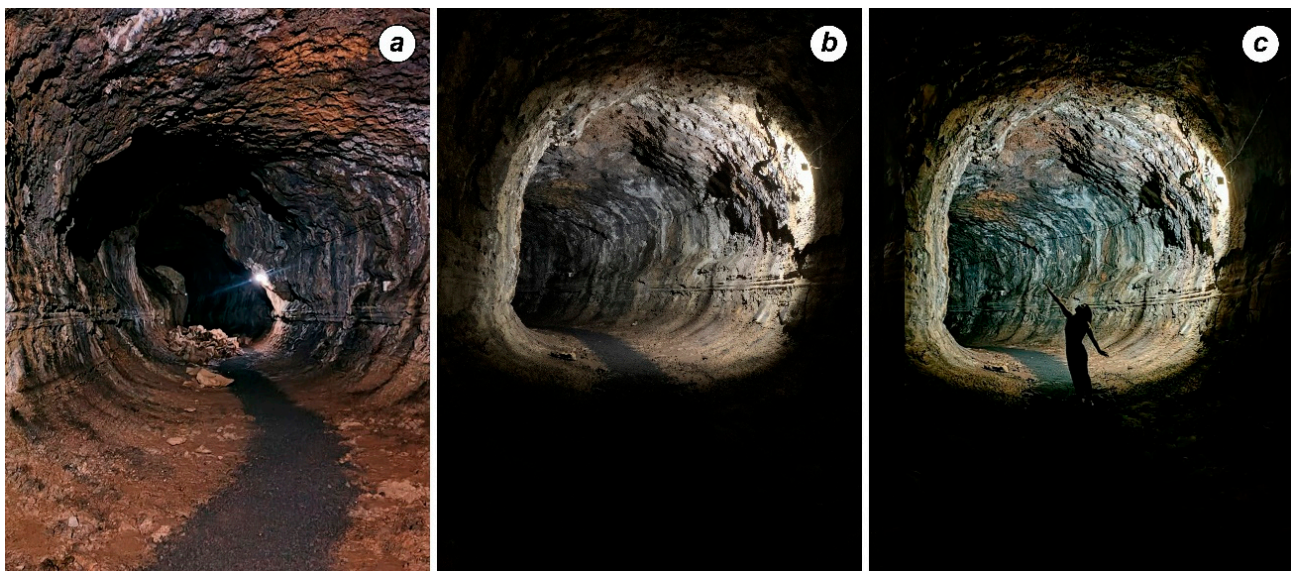


Figure 6. Images of the Bellavista Tunnel Tour, Galapagos (2024).

A place of tranquility in the face of today's hectic urban life, or the contemplative schemes in the face of inhabited places in a city, involve being surrounded by nature. Byung-Chul Han considers that daily interventions in cities and in the landscapes are to blame for the destruction of nature; thus, it is necessary to interrupt the destruction and exploitation of nature. This is how inactivity, silence, or peace achieves harmony, because *'there is an effective relationship between nature and human beings'* (Diego Bermeo—Puerto Ayora, personal communication, 2 July 2024), allowing natural spaces to be places for reflection (Figure 7).

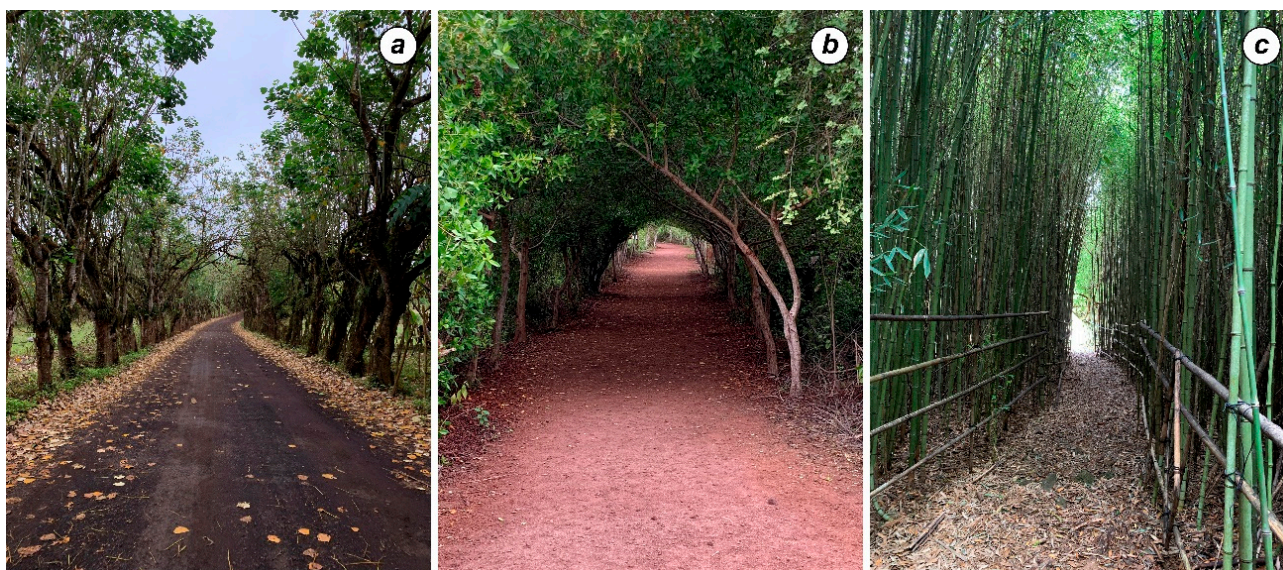


Figure 7. (a) Natural branch arch trail leading to El Chato Ranch; (b) entrance trail to the Fausto Llerena Breeding Center, Charles Darwin Research Station; (c) bamboo trail at TerraMar Ranch.

In today's society, we need to visualize new sustainable tourism alternatives that have demonstrated the possibility to combine tourism development and the preservation of cultural and natural heritage, generating benefits for both visitors and the local community [54]. Thus, it is possible to propose interventions that maintain equity between the conservation of the natural and cultural heritage, whose economic exploitation allows to maximize the social benefits of the local activity, seeking harmony and a change in the productive matrix from nature and adventure tourism to cultural tourism [55,56].

There are destinations with natural scenery and great observation value that are directly related to the terrestrial and marine ecosystem in the Galapagos territory; however, the community, based on a composite identity [4,57], determine the value of these destinations and transform them into places of contemplation or spaces that house the new experiences of intangible heritage.

4. Discussion

The human history and social identity of the Galapagos Islands are relatively new, since its first settlers arrived on the island in the mid-twentieth century; however, a mixture of cultures has been created due to the great ethnic variety of its inhabitants originating from the central highlands of continental Ecuador [58,59]. Additionally, the multiethnic enrichment resulting from the partial or permanent stay of researchers and tourists has added to this diversity. Fifteen years ago, Carlos Guevara studied the spatial quality of the island dwellings, commenting '*the cultural identity of the inhabitants of the Galapagos is information, as it is the product of a fragilely authentic minority with an aggressive and well-stocked migration*' [60].

Our society still does not have a clear concept of leisure and how it contributes to the integral development of an individual's well-being, allowing for physical, spiritual, and psychological balance and, thus, better personal and social development, allowing them to deepen their conceptualization and international understanding [61].

Joffre Dumazedier considers that '*leisure is a set of occupations to which the individual can dedicate himself voluntarily, whether to rest, to amuse himself, or to develop his information... or his free creative capacity, when he has freed himself from his professional, family and social obligations*'; basically, leisure repairs the wear and tear from our daily lives [62,63].

This study allows us to identify the value of sites, places, and landscapes; we are not during our free time alien to reflection, the encounter of an abrupt nature that moves our internal spiritual, philosophical, and sensory conceptions, allows us to feel alive and the influence of our environment on our new experiences.

Of the places visited on the islands, those that have the best infrastructure, equipment, viability, and description are the sites that are managed by the Galapagos National Park, and local and international tour operators have generated synergia to enhance the tourist routes and make the foreigner's stay better when visiting the Galapagos Islands.

At TEDxLa Laguna, Verónica Zumalacárregui stated that '*tourism can empty a country from within*'. This is a reality that Europe experiences on a daily basis [64], and we do not want this problem to be replicated in Santa Cruz, Galapagos. Today, certain island sites have exceeded their Tourist Carrying Capacity (TCC), which will eventually lead to the progressive deterioration of the authenticity of these places and the loss of identity pertaining to the local heritage.

The promotion and implementation of tools that support the promotion of new places of delight, reflect the local identity, and, above all, help develop activities that rescue the value of these places will be important in developing a community with local identity and culture.

5. Conclusions

Nature is the best model to imitate and perfect for achieving a sustainable society, as it has been supporting society for thousands of years; as humans, we generate linear thinking models that gradually fail, while nature adapts, corrects, discovers, verifies, and processes heuristically every day.

All sites do not qualify to be considered as heritage or contemplation sites: '*the principle of belonging to the feeling of ownership of said heritage induces the population to take advantage of it rationally... but linked to the conservation and maintenance of said cultural assets*' [65]; the exceptional value that a place provides us alters our behavior and gives us inner joy from reflection.

This study invites us to be a part of a memory route created from settler and tourist tours, and it generates a limited sample of contemplation sites based on the natural heritage of the Galapagos Islands; at the same time, it is intended that the contemplation sites of Galapagueño projects provide value to their visitors, becoming a cultural and natural delight and enhancing new tourist resources.

It is difficult to comprehend why tour operators limit their plans and itineraries to users' own explorations, not allowing outsiders to create their own memories and spatial valuations, thus limiting the establishment of new experiences with contemplative value or controlling tourist explorations.

For planning with a sustainable approach, the efficient management of resources, education, and environmental awareness, as well as the periodic evaluation of sustainable impact indicators, is crucial to safeguard natural resources and the activities of each place; for this purpose, a policy must be established that goes beyond the manuals or treaties of tourism managers or developers, as *these people have a high awareness of conservation and nature* (Wacho Ramos—Santa Cruz, personal communication, 6 June 2024).

The Galapagos Islands are blessed by what nature has given them. However, the Galapagos people have experienced difficult times due to limited economic resources. *Resilience, adaptability, solidarity, and, above all, environmental awareness about their existing nature* (in agreement with the comments of Lenin Rogel, Santa Cruz, personal communication, 29 July 2024, and Mariuxí Farías, Director GNP, Sustainability Week, 28 May 2025,

Quito) are the great bastions of these people who are currently trying to identify the elements that enhance the value of the Galapagos Islands.

Funding: The dissemination of the results of this research phase was funded by the Visiting Research project of the International University of Ecuador in partnership with the Polytechnic University of Madrid.

Data Availability Statement: The historical books mentioned in this paper are primary sources, some of which are considered ‘gray literature’, but they serve as a fundamental basis for the qualitative research of this paper.

Acknowledgments: I am grateful for the openness and ease of access provided by the Municipal Government of Santa Cruz, the Directorate of the Galapagos National Park, cultural actors, the people who participated in the surveys and interviews, and the installations of the International University of Ecuador in Santa Cruz. I am grateful for the general research support from Carlos Guerrero Calderón, Nicole Merizalde Zapata, and Silvina Arslanian Torre, great colleagues and field support.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares that he has no conflicts of interest. Sponsors had no role in the design of this study; in the collection, analysis, or interpretation of the data; in the writing of the manuscript; or in the decision to publish the results.

Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used in this manuscript:

UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural organization
SDG	Sustainable Development Goals
GNP	Galapagos National Park
INEC	National Statistical and Census Institute
MINTUR	Ministry of Tourism of Ecuador
SIPCE	Cultural Heritage Information System of Ecuador
TEDx	Technology, Entertainment, Design/independently organized event

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