

Tourism use and management of archaeological resources associated with the “Ruta de la Guerra de Castas”: opportunities and threats of community-based tourism

Elena María Pérez González*
Universidad Europea de Canarias (España)

Cecilia del Socorro Medina Martín**
Universidad Itercultural Maya de Quintana Roo (México)

Abstract: Based on various research projects conducted in recent years in the Maya area of the Yucatán Peninsula (Mexico), this work presents an analysis of the current state of tourism use and management of archaeological resources along the “Ruta de la Guerra de Castas”. The research employs an integrative methodology combining qualitative and quantitative tools, such as workshops, focus groups, and interviews with local communities, emphasizing their active and inclusive engagement. This study highlights the importance of coordination among institutions and entities responsible for managing archaeological heritage and emphasizes the role of local population perception and participation as a strength within a tourism management model for the country’s archaeological heritage. The main findings underline the need for more democratic governance frameworks that foster collaboration among institutions, communities, and private actors. Community-based models are identified as promoting social cohesion, empowering local populations, and generating solidarity-based economies.

Keywords: Archaeological heritage management; Tourism; Mayan communities; Sustainability.

Uso y gestión turística de los recursos arqueológicos asociados a la “Ruta de la Guerra de Castas”: oportunidades y amenazas de un turismo de base comunitaria.

Resumen: A partir de los diversos proyectos de investigación aplicados en los últimos años, en el área maya de la Península de Yucatán (México), en este trabajo se expone un análisis sobre el estado del uso y gestión turística de los recursos arqueológicos en La Ruta de la Guerra de Castas. La investigación emplea una metodología integradora que combina herramientas cualitativas y cuantitativas, como talleres, grupos focales y entrevistas con comunidades locales, asegurando su participación activa e inclusiva. Este estudio determina la importancia de la coordinación entre las instituciones y órganos con competencias en la gestión del patrimonio arqueológico y del interés de la percepción y la participación de la población local que convive con los sitios arqueológicos, como una fortaleza dentro de un modelo de gestión turística del patrimonio arqueológico del país. Los hallazgos principales subrayan la necesidad de marcos de gobernanza más democráticos que fomenten la colaboración entre instituciones, comunidades y actores privados, siendo los modelos basados en la comunidad los que promueven la cohesión social, empoderan a las poblaciones locales y generan economías solidarias.

Palabras clave: Gestión del patrimonio arqueológico; turismo comunitario; comunidades mayas; sostenibilidad.

* Universidad Europea de Canarias (España); <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3078-9463>; E-mail: elenamaria.perez@universidadeuropea.es

** Universidad Itercultural Maya de Quintana Roo (México); <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7737-1577>; E-mail: cecilia.medina@uimqroo.edu.mx

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1. Introduction

This work explores the potential of the archaeological heritage in the Maya area of Quintana Roo, Mexico, with the aim of analyzing the tourism use of such assets and the particularities of community-based enterprises. An analysis of these characteristics must be carried out from a broad and innovative perspective not only from economic and social perspectives but also within the broader cultural and political structures of the region. Therefore, it is essential to include the perception and social participation of the communities hosting the archaeological heritage. Archaeological heritage is one of Mexico's main tourist attractions, particularly in the Yucatán Peninsula, where the Riviera Maya tourism system has made it its primary tourism resource. In 2021 (INAH, 2024), the most visited archaeological sites were Chichén Itzá (Yucatán), Tulum (Quintana Roo), Teotihuacán (State of Mexico), Cobá (Quintana Roo), and Palenque (Chiapas). In 2023, 1,903,537 visitors—domestic and international—visited archaeological zones (Gobierno de México, 2024). Thus, these places are fundamental to tourism in Mexico, where there are 39 sites listed as UNESCO World Heritage Sites, 187 archaeological zones open to the public, and almost 50,000 registered sites in this category (Gobierno de México, 2024). The importance of Mexican archaeology at the global level is evident in its World Heritage List¹ (INAH, 2024), where approximately 80% of the sites are cultural, and 6% are mixed, making the country the leader in Latin America in the number of declared assets (UNESCO, 2023). However, the management of these archaeological sites has so far remained traditional and conservative, increasingly oriented toward tourism purposes, while overlooking aspects such as the sustainability of the sites and the participation of civil society. These aspects could enable a more efficient and participatory management framework².

In the mid-20th century, as part of Mexico's tourism policy, archaeological heritage was incorporated into the *Plan de Acción para el Patrimonio Mundial en México*³. In the 1970s, the Ley Federal sobre Monumentos y Zonas Arqueológicas, Artísticas e Históricas was enacted in 1972 (2023). This law, together with the Ley Orgánica del Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia (1939), Ley Orgánica del Instituto de Bellas Artes y Literatura (2015), and Ley Nacional Indígena (2023; Instituto Nacional Indigenista, 2012), constitutes the current legal framework for the protection of the country's cultural heritage (Sánchez, 2012: 58)⁴, along with the recent Ley General de Cultura y Derechos Culturales (DOF 01-04-2024). According to these laws, the Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia (INAH) is responsible for the custody and management of archaeological zones, overseeing site access, managing federal and international funding, and allocating most resources toward the conservation, study, use, and maintenance of archaeological spaces under a traditional management model (Ligorred, 2019).

Faced with this traditional and institutionalized system, other management models began to emerge in the last decade of the 20th century. These models, more entrepreneurial and private in nature, have introduced new approaches to managing archaeological sites through corporate alliances. One example is the Xcaret⁵ business group, which provides annual funding to the INAH for the use of the archaeological site housed within the company's tourist park (Checa, 2012:84). Additionally, there are auxiliary organizations in the country that assist with site management; for instance, in the archaeological zones of Guanajuato, ticket sales are managed by the state government, or in the case of the “zones of the State of Mexico,” they are overseen by the *Mexiquense Institute of Culture* (Espinosa, 2016:257).

In southeastern Mexico, archaeological sites in Yucatán operate with two ticket offices: one managed by the INAH and the other by the CULTUR trust, which administers 16 tourist sites, including UNESCO World Heritage zones like Chichén Itzá and Uxmal, as well as cultural and eco-tourism centers that are also protected natural reserves (CULTUR, 2023). Another example of these collaborations is the Chacchoben archaeological site in Quintana Roo. There, a negotiation with the community allowed the INAH to manage revenues from ticket sales, maintenance, and research, while the sale of handicrafts to tourists was entrusted to ejido members organized into rural production societies (Checa, 2011:6).

This openness to alternative management models among different administrative entities has encouraged communities to take a more active role in managing archaeological sites. A recent case involves the Ichkabal archaeological site, where the plan to develop the site for tourism was met with resistance from ejido members, who demanded to be project partners and beneficiaries. However, current INAH regulations do not provide for any partnership model like the one requested by the ejido members, making it legally unfeasible (Águila, 2019).

And this openness to new management models is what is observed in the ‘Ruta de la Guerra de Castas.’ For this reason, through this cultural product, we will explore alternatives to make Mexico's archaeological heritage compatible with more flexible management approaches. Specifically, we will aim to propose an integrative methodology, seeking to balance and evaluate every aspect of the patrimonial

value of the assets, social interactions, and the environment (Lafrenz, 2008; Gándara, 1995; Pérez et al., 2018), in a more participatory manner, aligned with the other ideas and trends in cultural heritage management (Council of Europe, 2005; ICOMOS, 2022, Fernández Cacho, 2021; Dallen et. al, 2024; AA.VV., 2019; Almansa Sánchez, 2014; among others).

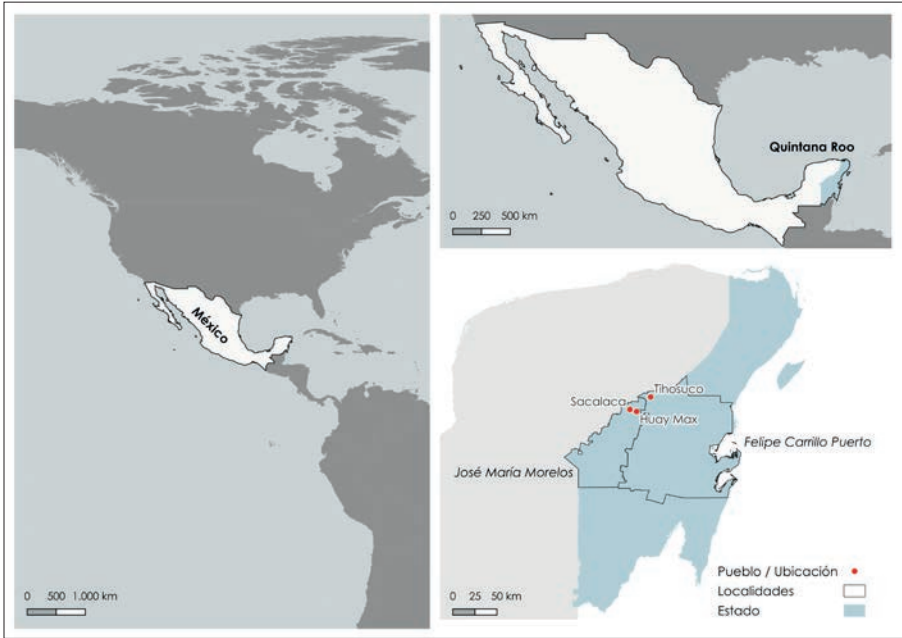
2. The Study Area: La Ruta de la Guerra de Castas

In 2016, the CONACyT thematic Red de Estudios Multidisciplinares en Turismo (hereafter REMTUR) was established. Members of this network-initiated tourism studies aimed at supporting the management of biocultural heritage in the Yucatán Peninsula by integrating territorial planning with social participation (Pérez et al., 2017). Although tourism initiatives already existed in this region, they had not been properly planned, and the population had not been trained to manage them—not only to host tourist activities but also to implement them effectively. The activities in these communities were promoted by the Secretaría de Turismo de Quintana Roo (SEDETUR) through initiatives such as “La Ruta de las Iglesias,” based on the uniqueness of the viceregal religious architecture in the area. In an effort to boost tourism for these assets, investments and support were allocated in 1989 to improve infrastructure. However, these plans never fully materialized.

Within this context, REMTUR’s research contributed to the creation of the “Ruta de la Guerra de Castas.” This route is based on a historical event that is significant not only for the patrimonial values of the assets along its course but also because it reflects and fosters social cohesion and coexistence among the communities that identify with this historical conflict.

The Caste War was an armed uprising that took place in the Yucatán Peninsula between 1847 and 1901, pitting Maya communities against Creole and Mestizo slaveholding landowners. This conflict left a profound mark on the region and its identity and remains a source of pride among local communities today, inspiring activities to disseminate and commemorate the events. This historical framework and its legacy underpin the design of the route, which traverses historical patrimonial sites such as churches or museums across three Maya communities: Tihosuco, Sacalaca, and Huay Max (Fig. 1).

Figure 1: Location of the three Mayan communities on the Ruta de la Guerra de Castas.



The creation of the route enabled the development of small businesses based on history, gastronomy, handicrafts, and other cultural expressions linked to their cultural resources, as well as natural ones such as birdwatching and cenotes. From the outset, REMTUR's research and support, through studies and advisory services, aimed to minimize the impacts of potential mass tourism on the local population. To achieve this, projects were carried out to inventory and assess the conservation status of the resources and to determine the carrying capacity of these territories (Medina, Cupiche, and Barbosa, 2017; Pérez et al., 2017; Pérez et al., 2018; Medina et al., 2019).

This work was complemented by an analysis of archaeological assets, which, given the complex nature of their administrative and territorial management as well as their significance, are a key focus of this study.

3. Methodology

The characteristics of the “Ruta de la Guerra de Castas” product reveal a vulnerable destination, shaped by the realities of its territory. The effort to enhance this destination was developed through an integrative methodology that combined the characteristics of the area to amplify positive elements and mitigate the potential threats posed by launching an economically impactful activity such as tourism. This was particularly critical in these communities, given their reliance on cultural and natural heritage. A qualitative study of the perceptions of the Maya population affected by the route was fundamental to improving the effectiveness of a plan that would be as suitable and adapted as possible to the population's needs. In addition, an analysis of archaeological heritage records and a diagnosis and evaluation of tourism policies in the study area were conducted, with the ultimate aim of understanding how these factors have impacted—and could continue to impact—the adaptability and influence of the tourism product on the population and archaeological heritage.

The methodology employed in this work was descriptive, qualitative, and quantitative. Participatory tools (Table 1), for documentation and measurement were designed, consisting primarily of surveys, workshops (Fig. 2), and collective meetings with the local population to ensure the involvement and participation of the communities along the route (Fig. 3). For the survey, secondary sources on community characteristics were considered, using data from INEGI as well as field visits. So, a sample of individuals aged 18 and older was analyzed using data from INEGI (2015), which served to determine the sample size (calculated with a 10% margin of error and a 95% confidence level). In Sacalaca and Huay Max, the population over 18 years old, irrespective of gender, is 746 and 1,112 respectively, according to INEGI. The resulting sample size was 62 individuals in both locations ($n=62$). In Tihosuco, the population is 3,238, leading to a sample size of 70 individuals ($n=70$), with a total sample size of 132 individuals ($N=132$). Prospective field visits were conducted, and quadrants were mapped out to ensure the data collection process was random and evenly distributed.

For the instrument's design, a bibliographic review on topics related to social carrying capacity and local perceptions of tourism was conducted. This review included works by authors such as Rodríguez and Suárez (2011), Cardoso (2012) and Mendoza and Rodríguez (2017), among others, addressing tourism development, local community perceptions, and the use of their assets as tourism resources. A guiding premise was that residents' behavior or attitudes are an integral part of the tourism product, as tourism is an experience, and the atmosphere created by local attitudes significantly impacts the quality of the product offered (Cardoso, 2012). The survey included six sections. The first introduced the sampling quadrant and the informant's location details. Additional items were included to characterize the respondent, such as their role (resident, authority, tourism committee member), age, gender, education level, occupation, ability to speak Maya or other languages, and place of origin. Another section focused on the perception of assets and resources considered important by locals and their potential as tourism attractions. Questions were also included about the community's use of resources to gather information on costs residents might pay for resource use, their involvement in tourism activities, and resource maintenance. A dedicated section addressed social carrying capacity, exploring residents' perceptions, agreements, opinions, satisfaction levels, and contributions regarding the presence of tourists. Finally, questions about the safety of the locality were included, allowing respondents to share their views on the topic.

Table 1: Participation methodologies with communities applied between 2017 and 2021.

Methodological Tools	Community	Level and objective of participation
Interviews	Tihosuco	Consult the community and gather information for a community diagnosis regarding the route.
Workshop	Universities	Involve and collaborate with universities in the REMTUR network for the route project.
Focus Group	Tihosuco, Huay Max, Sacalaca	Consult and involve communities in providing advice for the development of the route.
Participant observation	Tihosuco Huaymax Sacalaca	Record information for the design and calculation of spatial carrying capacity and accessibility analysis of the cultural product. Consult with the communities
Workshop	Sacalaca	Involve the community in decision-making and empower them to develop the costs and budgets for the route
Meeting	Tihosuco	The community collaborates in forming tourism committees and selecting representatives from each community. Empowerment of the community.
Meeting	Huay Max	The community collaborates in the creation of regulations. Empowerment of the community.
Workshop	Universities	Inform faculty and students participating in the route's design and management.
Interviews	Sacalaca	Consult the community to validate the route itinerary. Involve the community to debate and discuss the route's validity.
Interviews and meeting	Tihosuco	Involve the community in creating cultural indicators to measure the route's effectiveness and efficiency. Empower the community to establish an agenda for relationships with external companies interested in the route.
Presentation of results	Universities	Inform and consult experts participating in the route's design.
Workshop	Huay Max	Inform the community committee and work jointly to improve services for route visitors.
Focus group	Tihosuco	Collaborate with the community in drafting and designing regulations. Budget agreements, visitor recommendations, training, etc. Empowerment of the community.
Meeting	Sacalaca	Involve the community in managing a project jointly with universities on the route's gastronomy.
Interviews	Huay Max	Consult to record information on the community's intangible heritage.

Source: Own elaboration based on the classification of the level and objective of participation by Guitar and Casanova (2023).

To conduct interviews and focus groups. As mentioned in previous paragraphs, this work is part of a project developed in multiple stages, designed as part of the initial plan using an integrative methodology (Pérez et al., 2017). In the first stage of this research, inventories of natural and cultural attractions along the proposed itinerary of the “Ruta de la Guerra de Castas” were created and updated. Subsequently, an evaluation of resource accessibility was conducted, considering social, cultural, temporal, and spatial aspects, along with an assessment of physical and social carrying capacity.

It was deemed appropriate that, for the creation and implementation of the “Ruta de la Guerra de Castas,” studies related to the tolerance level of the local population or the psychological pressure resulting from the presence of tourists should be included. Although such studies are scarce (García and de La Calle, 2012), the reality is that ways of life and living cultural expressions provide valuable information on the potential for social tensions between locals and visitors. This approach to recording perceptions can also shed light on potential conflicts arising from the use and understanding of resources (as well as potential assets) as tourism products by neighboring communities (Barrera, 2011). Furthermore, it can contribute to the design of more participatory and transparent governance models.

Figure 2: Participatory working group in the Mayan community of Huay Max



Figure 3: Participatory working group in the Mayan Community of Tihosuco.



3. The archaeological dimension of the Ruta de la Guerra de Castas: The invisible connection.

Among the values of the “Ruta de la Guerra de Castas”, there is a unique characteristic. Unlike other areas in the country, the relationship between these communities and their cultural heritage is not ancestral. The Maya population of the route settled in this territory in the 1930s, after it had previously been abandoned due to the war itself. In other words, the settled communities encounter and reinterpret their connections with the cultural assets they come across (Ortega, et al., 2010). This fact is noteworthy not only for understanding the concept of recently created heritage but also for examining the everyday relationships these communities establish with archaeological remains.

In the Maya region of Quintana Roo, there is extensive evidence of settlements of various characteristics and sizes—62 in total—recorded across the municipalities of José María Morelos and Felipe Carrillo Puerto⁶. However, for these populations, the importance of these assets is practically non-existent (Pérez et al., 2017), especially when compared to other elements such as churches, which they regard as highly significant. Only the community of Huay Max mentioned “the ruins” in surveys conducted during the research, referring to the Yóo’koop archaeological site located between the ejidos of Huay Max and Sabán.

This archaeological site with Petén-style Maya structures (dated between 650–1521 AD) and its surroundings are a source of tension among the communities due to disputes over land ownership. The first records of this site were made in the second decade of the 20th century (Mason, 1927; Villarojas, 1978). Although some visits by explorers and travelers were documented in the area (Shaw et al., 2002), it was not until the 1990s that the National Institute of Anthropology and History (INAH) officially engaged with the site. In the early 2000s, Shaw and Johnstone conducted studies in 2000, 2001, and 2002, documenting surface materials, stelae, and architectural features in situ (Shaw et al., 2000; Shaw, 2002).

In 2003, researchers expanded their investigations through the “Archaeological Reconnaissance Project of the Cochuah Region,” conducting surveys and mapping in the communities of Xquerol and Sacalaca, continuing until 2010 (Shaw and Johnstone, 2000; Shaw, 2002; 2012). These efforts allow us today to confirm the scientific importance and historical value of the site.

Figure 4: Current state of the archaeological site of Yo’okop.



When analyzing, through meetings and surveys, which elements communities considered important to include in tourist visits, the archaeological site in Huay Max was the most frequently mentioned, followed by the church. In other communities, archaeological remains were not considered, but not because they do not exist, as we will see below. Rather, this is likely because the concept of archaeological sites has different connotations in these communities as well as the absence of studies providing these sites with scientific and historical value, as has been the case with Yo'okop (Fig. 4). Indeed, apart from this site, another significant location stands out in the community of Sacalaca, which was constructed between 200 and 1521 CE. Some elements and materials from this site remain, although the foundations were later repurposed.

It is important to highlight that in this region, the nearest archaeological site open to the public is Chacchoben, located in the municipality of Bacalar. However, despite its connection to the area, it is little known by residents of Sacalaca and Tihosuco.

In our analysis, it is also necessary to delve into a perception held by the population regarding archaeological sites.

There is a distinction between sites that are not managed by institutions, which they refer to as *múulo'ob* (Picas (2022:150) or “hills”, which locals identify as sacred because they were constructed by their ancestors and remain connected to communities through ceremonies and oral histories (Picas, 2022:160).

On the other hand, archaeological sites or those referred to as “ruins” are perceived differently by the Maya, as they are under institutional oversight, which has broken the direct connection with indigenous communities. However, these sites acquire a new level of meaning as they are recognized by the *Ts'ules* (mestizos and whites) as national heritage.

In this sense, a study conducted in four communities near archaeological sites open to the public in Quintana Roo concluded that, even when individuals do not identify as Maya—and this is significant—communities still recognize these sites as historical heritage because they are part of the national patrimony (Ortega et al., 2010:19). This suggests the potentially controversial efficacy of state policies that glorify the indigenous past as symbols of national identity or even as World Heritage (Picas, 2022:149; Johnston, 2017:7).

There are, therefore, many nuances in the perceived complexity of the Maya's past that must be considered when deciding whether or not to include certain archaeological sites in the narrative of the “Ruta de la Guerra de Castas”.

In addition to this, it is important to note that the population along the Ruta de la Guerra de Castas still retains the memory that religious buildings (such as churches or convents) were constructed on top of pre-Hispanic remains. For example, “*where this temple [Templo del Divino Niño, Tihosuco, Quintana Roo] was built, there was previously an archaeological ruin, which was demolished to construct the temple and convent*” (Poot, personal communication, 2021).

Another important element that cannot be overlooked is the existence of sites that safeguard archaeological and historical artifacts within the communities. In 1993, a museum dedicated to the conflict of La Guerra de Castas, known as the Museum of Indigenous Culture of Tihosuco, was inaugurated. This museum revolves around various local initiatives, featuring a permanent exhibition accessible to visitors, satisfying both the local community and some tourists interested in a recreated culture. The museum is a municipally administered institution, with local guides and the participation of residents who are responsible for designing its activities. It also maintains a discursive ambiguity of significant interest. The historical narrative surrounding the La Guerra de Castas has been reinterpreted and adapted by contemporary Maya communities in Quintana Roo, particularly in Tihosuco. Although historical evidence indicates that this conflict pitted Maya communities against Creole and Mestizo slaveholders, the local narrative mistakenly associates it with a struggle against the Spanish.

This recreated version, disseminated through the local museum and its activities, has generated a collective memory that, although historically inaccurate, strengthens community identity and fosters cohesion among its members.

The Tihosuco Museum, managed by the community with municipal support, has become a key articulator of this narrative, promoting a discourse centered on indigenous oppression and resistance. Although it lacks historical rigor, this interpretation reinforces ancestral customs and syncretized cultural behaviors, appealing to both the local community and tourists interested in a recreated version of the culture. Simultaneously, the museum establishes a dual level of communication: one for the community, which validates and strengthens its identity, and another for visitors, where guides address the inaccuracies in the historical narrative.

This process has enabled communities to take ownership of the cultural and natural resources in the area, fostering a framework of community governance that promotes self-management and the resolution of internal conflicts. However, it also raises ethical dilemmas regarding the historical authenticity and sustainability of these narratives within the context of cultural and tourism planning.

The community of Tihosuco, with more advanced tourism experience compared to others in the region, exercises leadership that significantly influences the patrimonialization of resources. At the same time, it creates disparities in the perceptions and values associated with cultural assets across different localities (Medina and Pérez, 2022)⁷. This process has facilitated the articulation of community governance, contributing to the stabilization of internal and property-related conflicts while promoting resource self-management. The Tihosuco Museum operates under municipal administration, with management positions and guide roles filled by community members, who also participate in the design of activities.

The history of the La Guerra de Castas, along with the local memory that has been learned and recreated, is a fundamental component of the cultural and economic planning of the Maya region of Quintana Roo. These narrative leverages local emotions and identity to sustain a “living resistance” in the present day.

Another example is the Museo del Alux. It was recently inaugurated in José María Morelos. The museum’s name is closely tied to stories shared by *chicleros* about their encounters with the mythical beings said to inhabit the forests of the Maya region, shaping the theme and narrative of the space. Despite being called a “Community Museum,” its management is institutional and financed through the municipal budget. Currently, it has a single employee whose salary is covered by the local government, as entry is free and no associated civil society group exists (Pech, personal communication, 2024).

Additionally, in Huay Max, a family preserves archaeological artifacts displayed to visitors under the title “Rebellion of the Mayas”. This exhibit is part of the tour of the Ak’alche Botanical Garden, located on private property and managed by an individual⁸.

On the other hand, there is a museum project in Sacalaca, which has yet to be named. Located in the center of the community, it serves as a repository for artifacts from the church of La Candelaria as well as from the surrounding haciendas. The museum is managed by a tourism committee elected through an *ejidal* assembly and renewed every three years. This committee is also responsible for managing the cenote and organizing tours of the local churches.

All of the above that we have explained represents a complex scenario. Archaeological resources, while potentially viable for leisure and tourism enterprises, could alter the relationships between communities and their cultural heritage. At this juncture, it is essential to recognize the existence of a vast and rich archaeological heritage that remains largely invisible due to several factors: lack of research, weak identity ties with the community, or insufficient training. These factors must be addressed when considering the integration of such assets into leisure and tourism ventures.

Most of these archaeological sites have not undergone systematic intervention, yet they provide significant evidence of the lives of the ancient Maya in the region. These sites require further study, addressing critical obstacles such as permits, interventions, and the administrative oversight of the Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia (INAH).

4. Heritage as diversification through social participation and community-based tourism: Can archaeological heritage be integrated into the “Ruta de la Guerra de Castas”?

The contribution of archaeology to the management of tangible heritage focuses on highlighting the needs of the population, addressing challenges through a process of reflecting on the past to understand the current utility value, ensuring its future preservation, and thereby guaranteeing its care and conservation (Lafrenz, 2008:91). Within this framework, our research poses the question: What are the main issues identified that hinder archaeological heritage from being valued for social use? The study explores the potential benefits of implementing community-based tourism management to address these challenges.

The investigation of archaeological sites and institutional collaboration among the various stakeholders with jurisdiction in the area could facilitate this process. Importantly, integrating community-based tourism into strategic planning within national policies, fiscal frameworks, and efficient tax obligations is essential. Such integration must align with solidarity-based economies and community organization.

While it is true that many community-based initiatives often result in failure these failures are frequently assessed using indicators like economic income, without considering others such as social or

community well-being (Giampiccoli and Nauruight, 2010; Ministerio de Comercio, Industria y Turismo, 2020; ICOMOS, 2002; Council of Europe, 2005; ICOMOS, 2022).

These failures have been driven by inadequate and rigid “management models,” often replicated from external experiences disconnected from the local context. Such models force rural communities to “transform their traditional management practices into liberal economic models, which drastically impact their organization” (Mora, 2019:18). Community-based management goes beyond this approach. It involves creating organized groups with an internal structure that operates collectively, making democratic decisions for the common good.

In the case of the “Ruta de la Guerra de Castas,” community-based tourism, though still in its early stages, is proving to be an effective management model. These communities, which remain organized under a communal structure with *ejido*-style land tenure, have seen significant benefits from the implementation of small economic initiatives. These initiatives⁹, which result from research, training, and outreach efforts associated with the route, have brought multiple advantages to the community. These include improvements in quality of life, greater awareness of the patrimonial wealth they possess, and the acquisition of management tools that enhance their self-sufficiency.

However, it is essential for the community to be open to incorporating external advisors (institutions, academics, civil society) who can mediate conflicts and introduce mechanisms for adapting to new environments (López and Sánchez, 2009; Giampiccoli and Nauruight, 2010). Coordination, collaboration, evaluations, and follow-ups are required, among other actions. Therefore, external actors should act as facilitators and trainers, transferring knowledge rather than taking over the absolute creation of the product (Nair and Hamzah, 2015).

In most cases, products are designed by replicating successful formulas without adaptation, rather than focusing on local resources. These approaches impose external conditions, dominate the market, and hinder the empowerment, fair trade, and solidarity economy of the local population (Esparza and Aquise, 1997; Wearing and McDonald, 2002; Blackstock, 2005; Nyaupane, *et al.*, 2006; Mowforth, Charlton, and Munt, 2008; Telfer and Sharpley, 2008; Kieffer, 2019).

In this context, and as is being attempted with the “Ruta de la Guerra de Castas”, initiatives have identified processes that allow them to integrate into both regional and international markets. This includes the creation of community networks and organizations (some even international), which receive training from civil organizations and take on the commercialization of their associated members. For this purpose, alternative management approaches that align with governmental guidelines and the needs of communal organizations have been adopted.

These are community-based enterprises (CBEs), which operate under a business model that adopts a long-term perspective with a broader focus on the social impacts of their operations. CBEs involve the community in their management and operations, fostering collaborative and trust-based relationships with their members (Fernández, 2011). Community-based enterprises (CBEs) tend to prioritize environmental and social sustainability in their operations. Their aim is to create employment opportunities and improve the quality of life within the community by integrating into the local supply chain, collaborating with suppliers and partners to support the local economy, and minimizing their environmental footprint. In summary, the business model of a community-based enterprise focuses on generating value-added chains while ensuring financial sustainability and long-term economic viability (Jerónimo, 2021).

Among the existing economical initiatives along the “Ruta de la Guerra de Castas”, examples include “La Casa de los Batabes” and “Cruzo’ob.” These initiatives -no legally established- are led by young individuals from Tihosuco with university education and offer biocultural tourism products that involve local students and adults in their activities.

While these initiatives are emerging, there are nevertheless challenges and issues that could hinder the valorization, inclusion, management, and conservation of the sites associated with the “Ruta de la Guerra de Castas”—or even completely prevent these efforts. Whether due to political, economic, land ownership, or temporal reasons, it is essential to address each factor that might obstruct these actions.

To summarize, it is crucial to consider the temporal classification of the archaeological and historical resources referenced in this study. All sites dating from the 19th century to the present are classified as historical assets. The resources and remains associated with the Caste War are dated to the 19th century and are thus not recorded by the Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia (INAH, 2023) as archaeological resources but rather as historical ones. This distinction is reflected in how 19th-century resources are excluded from the various official lists of archaeological sites in the Yucatán Peninsula,

though they may appear on the biennial list of historical assets. Moreover, certain sites and resources dating from the 19th century to the present are considered mixed assets due to their unique characteristics.

Attention must also be given to the importance and necessity of fostering a connection between Maya communities and the archaeological resources linked to them. A clear example of this is the Mexican government's decision to "open a window" in the creation and management of museums, allowing for the establishment of community museums managed and operated by the Maya community itself. This gave rise to the Maya Museum of Tihosuco, located in one of the communities along the Ruta de la Guerra de Castas. The creation of this museum sparked a sense of authenticity and a close bond between the Maya inhabitants and the archaeological and historical assets displayed there. This museum is even considered by the community to be "more Maya" and more authentic than the internationally renowned Gran Museo Maya located in Mérida. It is regarded as part of their heritage, even though it is administered by the state (Gamboa y Cáceres, 2016).

In the case of the Sacalaca Museum, it is perceived as the "property of the entire village," and its management by members of the local community is seen as a marker of its Maya identity (Briceño, 2020, personal communication).

Ownership is also a highly significant factor in influencing archaeological sites and remains, often becoming a critical issue when authorizing actions and interventions on these resources. Since the beginning of repopulation and the granting of *ejido* lands to reoccupied villages (Registro Nacional Agrario, 2022), the territorial boundaries of some settlements were not clearly defined, leading to social conflicts among residents.

First, the archaeological site of Yo'okop is located between the Maya communities of Sabán and Huay Max, which are in conflict over territorial disputes regarding ownership of the land where the site is situated. Second, the archaeological resource located in Sacalaca, while classified as *ejidal* land, is situated within the backyards of local homes. This site has been undervalued by the local Maya community, as evidenced by its reuse to install a telecommunications tower on its summit. This underscores the necessity of fostering a connection between the community and the site's historical significance, considering the important history it represents (Un, 2014).

Both forms of ownership share a common denominator: the difficulty of intervening in archaeological resources and sites located on such lands. This may arise either from a lack of capital to conduct proper interventions and management in collaboration with the National Institute of Anthropology and History (INAH) in the case of private properties or from conflicts generated between different communities or even within the same community.

Another key aspect to consider is the accessibility of the "Ruta de la Guerra de Castas", particularly the condition of infrastructure, communication networks, and basic services such as water supply, electricity, and telecommunications, all of which exhibit certain deficiencies in the areas mentioned. Focusing on community-based and sustainable tourism, the integration of archaeological resources into the current "Ruta de la Guerra de Castas", supported by a robust promotion and marketing strategy, could significantly enhance international tourism. This would increase interest in the Route as a cultural destination, overcoming its perception as an isolated tourism product with limited appeal. Recent research supports this assertion, emphasizing that visits are often conducted independently and not as part of an integrated tourism product, as "each local community offers its resources autonomously, outside the scope of existing promotional strategies" (Pérez, et. al., 2017).

Implementing this project would provide an intriguing avenue for the appropriation of resources through the active participation of local communities. Ultimately, the combination of all these factors could lead to the revitalization of Maya territories as a tourism destination, incorporating community-driven and sustainable efforts, as previously discussed. The overarching goal would be to establish the Route as a renowned international tourism product, managed and conserved appropriately, with archaeological resources serving as icons and symbols of Maya culture for all the surrounding indigenous communities. At the very least, this would be the aspiration.

5. Final Considerations and conclusions

This study highlights the necessity of creating new strategies to activate the archaeological heritage of the Ruta de la Guerra de Castas. Research, coordination, and alliances between the various stakeholders involved in archaeological sites are essential. We believe that the "Ruta de la Guerra de Castas" could serve as an incentive to address the issues identified in this research. The archaeological sites in our

case study are located in areas with contemporary populations, which is not always conducive to heritage conservation. Moreover, if institutions such as the INAH fail to study these sites, they risk disappearing and becoming decontextualized, as has occurred in this region (evident in the lack of identification between current populations and Maya remains). Improving the quality of life for these populations must remain a priority, as even INAH acknowledges. Consequently, incorporating archaeological sites should create a bridge connecting the region's Maya or historical past with present-day communities and tourists.

Therefore, governmental efforts—marked by a ceremony in 2021 in which the President of the Republic issued a formal apology to the Maya people—to address the remnants of social struggle and transform these communities from historical towns into tourist destinations, must be approached with caution¹⁰.

Incorporating the Maya region of Quintana Roo into the state's official tourism plans creates conflicts between institutions and residents. The lack of an integrated planning framework for these resources encourages a utilitarian value approach that not only endangers heritage but also alienates it from the community by failing to implement strategies that generate sociocultural benefits (Jiménez, 2020:32).

This reveals the “traditional vision” of political heritage management, already explained in the introduction of this research, which prioritizes dominant institutional discourses and expert knowledge, supported by legislation, while marginalizing community knowledge and social value (Johnston, 2017:27).

Although goodwill exists among communities and institutions, a management model that reconciles both perspectives must be implemented, exploring a people-centered approach. The current framework of traditional management limits access to more democratic initiatives by local communities. In our view, such models would enable less institutionalized projects, paving the way for innovative community-based management with more sustainable development opportunities for these populations. A community-driven economy—via tourism—aligned with the most sustainable international trends, could integrate a territorial and tourism management model in which cultural, particularly archaeological, resources play a central role. This would enhance the conservation and understanding of these sites and potentially resolve conflicts between communities and other entities responsible for management (Barrera, 2011).

The findings of this study emphasize the urgent need to implement new strategies for managing and valuing the archaeological heritage linked to the “Ruta de la Guerra de Castas” in the Maya region of Quintana Roo. Despite the area's rich heritage, many resources remain invisible due to a lack of research, weak identity links with local communities, and inadequate training. This context poses challenges for both heritage conservation and its effective integration into a sustainable tourism model.

The analysis reveals that traditional management models, focused on institutional approaches with limited community participation, have proven insufficient to foster harmonious relationships between heritage, local communities, and tourism. Conversely, adopting a community-based tourism approach that prioritizes active community participation presents an opportunity to strengthen ties between local populations and their heritage. This model can promote cultural legacy ownership, generate local employment, and develop solidarity-based economies that directly benefit communities.

However, the study also warns of the risks of replicating conventional business formulas, as seen in other areas of Quintana Roo, which have had negative impacts on both heritage and social cohesion. These models could exacerbate historical tensions and undermine local identities. Therefore, strategies must balance respect for community knowledge and sociocultural needs with the integration of technical and institutional expertise, fostering participatory and sustainable management.

The “Ruta de la Guerra de Castas” has the potential to become a recognized cultural tourism destination, provided it is grounded in an integrative and respectful approach to the territory. This requires efforts in heritage conservation, infrastructure improvement, local capacity building, and the creation of flexible legal frameworks that enable communities to play a more active role in decision-making.

This research presents an innovative approach to managing the archaeological heritage associated with the “Ruta de la Guerra de Castas”, proposing a model that prioritizes active local community participation, in contrast to traditional centralized and conservative management practices. This approach advocates for community-based tourism as a driver of development that empowers communities while fostering solidarity-based economies and value-added chains aligned with local needs. By integrating capacity-building tools and establishing identity links between communities and their heritage, the model moves away from conventional formulas, aiming for a contextually adapted and sustainable strategy.

A particularly innovative aspect of this study is its consideration of psychosocial impacts and carrying capacity in tourism planning, focusing on social cohesion and cultural sustainability rather than traditional economic indicators. This analysis addresses tensions between Indigenous heritage

as a national symbol and local perceptions, emphasizing the need to strengthen connections between communities and cultural assets.

The research also challenges the current institutional management model, advocating for more flexible regulations to facilitate community co-participation in decision-making and resource commercialization. Strategic alliances between institutions, communities, and private actors under a collaborative governance framework that integrates diverse perspectives and knowledge are recommended.

Another innovative aspect of this study is the revaluation of previously invisible archaeological resources, highlighting their potential to enrich the Route's historical narrative and provide a distinctive value to the tourism product. This perspective aligns with a holistic view of heritage that combines cultural, natural, and social resources to deliver an integrated and sustainable tourism experience.

Finally, the study underscores the importance of progressing toward more democratic and participatory governance capable of overcoming the limitations of traditional models. This approach not only supports heritage conservation but also contributes to the sociocultural and economic well-being of local communities, fully integrating them into territorial and tourism planning.

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Notes

- ¹ The first site inscribed on the World Heritage List was Chichén Itzá, in 1988.
- ² Traditional cultural heritage management refers to the administration and conservation of heritage sites under the exclusive responsibility of official government institutions. This approach typically focuses on the material and aesthetic protection of heritage, following a hierarchical decision-making structure. On the other hand, the new approach to cultural heritage management recognizes the fundamental role of communities and social actors in the processes of identifying, managing, and valuing their heritage through the application of a participatory methodology. This approach goes beyond physical and aesthetic preservation, encompassing the traditions, practices, and cultural meanings that give identity to each site (Morero, 2025).
- ³ PAMAC (*Plan de acción para el patrimonio mundial en México y América Central*), created by the World Heritage Committee (UNESCO, 2018) during its latest meeting, proposes a series of measures and mechanisms necessary for the proper management and conservation of the numerous archaeological resources in the State of Mexico.
- ⁴ With its amendments and additions, along with other federal laws and regulations.
- ⁵ It is important to clarify that entry to the archaeological site is governed by INAH regulations (Xcaret, 2024).
- ⁶ INAH, Sistema Único de Registro Público de Monumentos y Zonas Arqueológicas e Históricas (2021).
- ⁷ The renovation of the interior and the new museography of the Tihosuco Museum raises questions about the impact of these changes on the museum's identity and function. While the updates aim to modernize and attract a broader audience, the shift in focus away from the narrative of the Caste War should prompt a process of monitoring its potential impacts on the identity and social cohesion of the communities.
- ⁸ It is important to clarify that there is no charge for admission to the archaeological exhibition; instead, it is included as part of the botanical garden tour, which does require a fee.
- ⁹ At present, those business initiatives are no longer legally constituted.
- ¹⁰ Recent declarations, such as the designation of the Tihosuco center as a historical monument zone and the institutionalization of the commemoration of the Guerra de Castas, have generated resistance from the local population. Residents displayed banners, graffiti, and organized a committee to express their dissent to authorities (NOTICARIBE, 2029). Additionally, the “#AquíSoy” program SEDETUR (2022), part of *Viajemos por Quintana Roo* project, incorporated Tihosuco and Sacalaca as a commemorative route for the 171st Anniversary. However, this generated discontent among locals as state-contracted transportation and guides excluded the community, and free site entry provided no economic benefit to the area (Chan, personal communication, 2021).

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