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Articles

## Ecotourism and Nature Finance: Can the Brazilian hotel sector become a real force for the conservation of the Amazon?

02/12/2025 Put **Stefanie Kaiser**



At the COP held in Belém this year, one message emerged in virtually every forum: Brazil needs new economic models that make its ecosystems more valuable standing than transformed for other uses.

Hotels are already adopting practices such as waste reduction, rational use of water and energy, and the choice of more sustainable materials to lessen negative impacts. However, in isolation, these actions do not yet generate a truly positive contribution to the landscape.

The proposal here is different: to treat nature conservation as an economic activity, moving beyond simply managing carbon footprints to generate value that keeps forests standing. This movement is aligned with the evolution of the nature reporting agenda, which is shifting its focus from solely focusing on risks to also recognizing opportunities.

This is where nature finance comes in: mechanisms that channel real resources to keep forests intact. And tourism is one of the few sectors where there is already concrete demand and a willingness to pay for nature, simply as nature.

I work in the nature-based solutions sector, which seeks to attract private investment to protect and restore ecosystems. The Amazon is an example of a premium ecosystem: unique, essential for the global climate, and under threat. NbS projects generate carbon credits, but COP made it clear that carbon alone will not meet Brazil's conservation needs.

The process is slow, technical, and complex, and for communities that already carry out daily protection work, this is even more challenging.

While carbon flows remain uncertain, the demand for experiences in natural environments is growing rapidly in tourism. Travelers seek silence, authenticity, wilderness, cultural depth, and a sense of originality and connection.

These desires have only grown stronger in a world saturated with stimuli. What began with backpackers now encompasses high-end tourism, where revenue per guest is high, even with low volume. It is precisely at this point that tourism can become a key piece in the conservation equation.

The question is: is tourism, in fact, sitting at the table where nature-based financial models for the Amazon are being designed?

## **The value of unspoiled nature for the traveler and what makes Brazil unique.**

Brazil still possesses something that many countries have already lost: vast, interconnected, and culturally vibrant ecosystems.

Specialized tour operators seek experiences that provide immersion in preserved natural landscapes, connection with traditional knowledge, trails, waterfalls and wildlife observation without crowds, well-being linked to nature, authentic narratives, participation in regenerative activities and truly rare experiences.

Countries like Costa Rica have built entire economies around this type of tourism, but they are already beginning to face signs of saturation.

In the premium segment, pristine ecosystems have become a true luxury attribute. Just like trekking with gorillas in Rwanda or expeditions in the Himalayas, the value lies precisely in their rarity.

Brazil can offer its own version of this: living, biodiverse forests, culturally rich and remote enough to provide a genuine experience of discovery.

## Beyond carbon: the complementary role of tourism

When well-planned, tourism generates direct and immediate revenue for conservation areas. Unlike carbon credits, it does not depend on complex methodologies or international markets. It can work in conjunction with carbon financing and the bioeconomy, reinforcing the viability of standing forests.

Tourism also offers an important advantage: visitors become ambassadors for a non-extractive model. By experiencing firsthand how conservation happens, they help reinforce the credibility of nature-based solutions.

The question is: how can the hotel industry contribute without causing harm or cultural distortions?

Carbon-focused projects play an important role in establishing safeguards, monitoring, and community participation. However, this does not entirely eliminate the economic pressure for land conversion.

In conservation areas, communities already develop agroforestry systems, bioeconomy products, cultural experiences, and community-based tourism. In high-integrity projects, these activities are not a complement, but an essential component for enabling long-term conservation.

According to the new Equitable Earth standard—part of a more recent generation of standards that integrate carbon, biodiversity, and social impact—tourism can complement conservation projects when it is structured to reinforce existing incentives for keeping forests standing. As Thibault Sorret, co-founder and CEO of Equitable Earth, states: “Ecotourism can be compatible with high-quality carbon projects when it strengthens, rather than replaces, the incentive to keep forests standing.”

To achieve this, it is essential to ensure high-integrity safeguards. According to Equitable Earth (EE), models that combine carbon revenues and tourism must demonstrate:

- Clear governance free from conflicts of interest, with Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC) and fair benefit sharing;
- Robust baselines and monitoring systems, including continuous assessment of tourism impacts;
- Management of leakage and persistence risks, ensuring that tourism does not reduce the additionality of the project.

This is where tourism can strengthen what already exists. The hotel sector can enhance community initiatives, especially when collaboration

begins as early as the landscape planning phase.

When communities define the core experiences and the hotel contributes logistics, visibility, co-investment, and quality assurance, tourism reinforces local governance rather than replacing it.

As researcher Dr. Monique Vanni, from the NbS Brazil Alliance and Wildlife Works, points out: "Tourism only works when communities drive the narrative and define what is shared. When tourism is designed from the outside, it becomes extraction."

For hotels, the role is one of support, not leadership.

Ecotourism also reinforces nature-based solutions: by giving visibility to conservation areas, it increases confidence in high-integrity forestry projects and helps unlock the carbon credit market.

## What can hotels and investors do now?

Most hotels already operate in areas with a strong natural presence. The opportunity lies in aligning these experiences with conservation and community leadership.

- ✓ Collaborating on territorial planning and management: Hotels can participate in area planning, co-create management models, support ecological corridors, and integrate tourism value into the territory.
- ✓ Supporting community-based tourism: By prioritizing the purchase of local products, supporting logistics and training, co-creating itineraries, and opening marketing channels, hotels strengthen community businesses. This is not about marketing partnerships, but real partnerships.
- ✓ Integrating guests into the conservation narrative: Hotels can offer guided tours, tell local stories, showcase research and restoration initiatives, and adopt partner projects. High-integrity carbon credits can be incorporated as part of the experience.
- ✓ Joining nature finance coalitions: By 2025, alliances between developers, funders, companies, and community organizations will be consolidated. Tourism needs to be present from the beginning of these articulations.
- ✓ Working with recognized conservation partners: The example of Inkaterra in Peru is emblematic. In addition to operating hotels in the Amazon, the organization maintains the Asociación Inkaterra, dedicated to conservation in Madre de Dios. This entity raises funds for research, connects sustainable timber producers, promotes bioeconomy and tourism initiatives, always focusing on natural capital. They work with universities and organizations such as The Nature Conservancy and Conservation International to create biodiversity inventories and guide

the integrated use of the landscape. They have already attracted investment to expand sustainable activities and develop new hotels.



## **The challenges and why they matter.**

For this to work in practice, the challenges must be acknowledged:

- Regulatory complexity in protected areas and indigenous lands;
- Licensing requirements;
- Access and infrastructure limitations;
- Risk of cultural distortions;
- Need for fair benefit sharing;
- Avoiding extractive tourism models.

And above all, remember that in the Amazon, everything begins with relationships. Communities are not "hosts." They are partners in the landscape.

## **A more collaborative vision for the Amazon.**

Imagine a hotel not as an isolated bubble, but as a bridge between the territory and those who visit it:

- Guests explore the surroundings with local guides;
- Communities take on leadership roles;
- Conservation projects provide stability to the landscape;
- Products and experiences flow organically into the hotel;
- Research and monitoring become a visible part of the experience;
- Narratives are born from those who live in the territory.

This model already exists in some specific initiatives. The challenge now is to increase the value generated, not the number of visitors.

## **What can the hotel industry do from now on?**

- Build long-term partnerships with communities;
- Participate in the initial design of conservation landscapes;
- Integrate conservation projects into the brand identity;
- Incorporate community products and services into hotel operations;
- Offer guests concrete ways to support forestry projects;
- Integrate coalitions that are shaping nature finance in Brazil;
- Co-create experiences anchored in local culture and ecological integrity.

When the hotel industry helps generate value to keep the forest standing, it ceases to be merely a beneficiary of Brazil's beauty and becomes an active part in building its future.

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