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# CULTURAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL INDICATORS OF THE “MAGICAL TOWNS” OF SOUTHEASTERN MEXICO

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## ABSTRACT

The “Magical Towns” program was promoted by the Ministry of Tourism (SECTUR) since 2001 for towns and villages with tourist activity feasibility. A study was conducted to define the cultural and environmental categories and indicators in the “magical towns” of southeastern Mexico. The study was conducted in the “magical towns” of Chiapas, Campeche, Yucatán, Quintana Roo, and Oaxaca during the years 2024-2025. This research reviewed two research methods: First, a qualitative study based on the elements of phenomenology was conducted using tools based on in-depth interviews with key informants. The necessary information was collected to identify and define the main categories of environment and culture with Atlas.ti software. The analysis of qualitative information confirmed the elements of the environment and culture variables in the magical towns of the five Mexican states contemplated in this study. The survey was conducted during the periods of May to July 2024 and December 2024 - March 2025. Data collection was subject to access conditions, but mainly to the situation of insecurity and local conflicts presented by the communities included in the study. The results made it possible to define the environmental and cultural elements of tourism that define tourism in the “magical towns”.

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**KEYWORDS:** Culture, Environmental, Magical Towns, Community Worldview.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Globally, tourism represents one of the most competitive economic activities. The data reported by (SECTUR, Ministry of Tourism, 2024) through the Statistical Compendium of Tourism (2024), indicates 42 million foreign visitors coming to Mexico, with an economic impact of 30 billion dollars, contributing 8.5% to the National Gross Domestic Product.

The statistics have shown that tourism represents one of the main activities generating employment and foreign exchange for Mexico. (SECTUR Ministry of Tourism of Mexico, 2024). Although sun and beach conventional tourism predominates, the cultural and environmental tourism segment is growing on demand due to sustainable tourism trends. Sustainable tourism is the option for various activities that mostly require natural environments and coexistence with local inhabitants.

Due to the cultural diversity and natural wealth of the country, the national program of "magical towns" was created to distinguish cultural tourist destinations. At the time of the study, 177 "magical towns" were recognized in Mexican territory. The most representative "Magical Towns" of the Mayan and Zapotec cultures are located in the southeastern Mexican states of Campeche, Chiapas, Oaxaca, Quintana Roo, and Yucatán.

The national program of magical towns, according to the Ministry of Tourism (SECTUR, 2025), seeks to protect traditions, architecture, gastronomy, and artistic expressions that distinguish each town by fostering local economic development, promoting sustainability, improving tourism infrastructure and services, and promoting the towns for international positioning.

In Mexico, there are problems in observing the effect of official programs to promote tourism in communities due to the exploitation of the natural environment without considering the deterioration and implications in the culture of the inhabitants in the communities, contrary to what could be aspired to as an objective of the program.

To date, there is no mechanism in place to evaluate and regulate tourism offerings to prevent environmental and cultural impacts on the communities designated as "Magical Towns". Therefore, to better understand the issue, we reviewed the current state of research on studies conducted within the national Magical Towns program.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Several studies on magical towns can be found in the available literature García, Rojas and García.

(2014), In Cuitzeo del Porvenir, Michoacán, they found that the program can generate phenomena that distort the cultural and environmental structure. Regarding this, Ruiz de León (2019), found that, in seven "magical towns" in the state of Jalisco, residents do not perceive the application of tourism resources to the protection and preservation of natural and cultural attractions.

The results for Ibarra & Velarde (2016), show that in the towns of Cosaltzao and Cosalazo in the state of Sinaloa, it was observed that the inhabitants believe that the designation of "magical town" alters cultural festivities due to the arrival of mass tourism. Montero (2021), observed cultural transformation in Tepoztlán through the implementation of the program.

Velázquez & Bautista (2021), In Huasca de Ocampo, found that the program does not provide resources to preserve culture, but it does provide resources to promote campaigns. For Vásquez (2022), In the nine magical towns of the state of Michoacán, he observed that very few actions are promoted that favor the care of the environment.

Besides, Hoyos y Hernández (2008) found that there is a proposal for zoning with actions for the protection and conservation of natural areas in Tepoztlán and Valle de Bravo in the State of Mexico. At the national level, for Fernández (2016) the implementation of the program has served to rehabilitate the architectural environment and recover spaces, but the revaluation of cultural heritage is not lacking. Regarding this, Flores, Pérez and Cruz (2022) conclude that the program's planning has not shown any responsiveness to the problems they have been facing.

Similar programs in other countries, such as the Whampoa Ancient Village community (WAV) located in the east of Haizhu District, Guangzhou have been analyzed about the implications of tourism in ancient villages (Wang, Jiang, & Xu, 2021). In a comparative study of 50 communities participating in the "Most Beautiful Villages in China" program, Chunliu, Javed y Dequiang (2019) found that the rural tourism development model, with its integration of production, village, and landscape, accounts for sustainable development.

In Spain, Albarrán and Pianassi (2022) found similarities and particularities between the programs "The Most Beautiful Villages of Spain" and "The Authentic Villages of Argentina" to promote the territoriality of tourism by taking advantage of heritage.

Studying the criteria for integrating communities as part of tourism promotion can show different

effects on cultural preservation and environmental protection. At an international level, the examples contained in the studies by (Wang, Jiang, & Xu, 2021) and (Chunliu, Javed , & Dequiang, 2019), demonstrate that this type of tourism program can only bring benefits through the integration of local production, village inhabitants, and the landscape.

With regard to Spain and Argentina, the programs coincide that allow tourism to take advantage of the heritage. Regarding studies of "Magical Towns" in Mexico, a notable coincidence is observed in the non-inclusion of actions for the conservation of culture and the natural environment. Therefore, the objective was set to define the cultural and environmental indicators that define the "Magical Towns" located in southeastern Mexico.

### 3. METHODOLOGY

The study was conducted under a combination of qualitative analysis with phenomenological tools and quantitative analysis. It was carried out through a procedure that allowed two research methods

guided towards the consolidation of a methodology to identify categories and define indicators to evaluate tourism activities in the "Magical Towns" in the states of Campeche, Chiapas, Oaxaca, Quintana Roo and Yucatán.

The definition of the culture and environment categories was a short-term stage in which the process of transforming qualitative categories into quantitative indicators was monitored. The qualitative process lasted six months and involved conducting in-depth interviews with key informants. The information processing for the qualitative analysis was performed with Atlas.ti software, with which the main categories of culture and environment were identified and defined based on the worldview of the inhabitants of the communities designated as "magical towns" where the study was carried out.

Based on the categories identified in the qualitative analysis process, an operational framework was constructed with the definition of the indicators for each of the categories as shown in Table No. 1.

*Table 1: Operational Chart of Variables for Culture and Environment Identified in Magical Towns of Southeastern Mexico.*

VARIABLES	CATEGORIES	INDICATORS
Culture	Own culture Cultural adaptation for tourism "Magical Town" guidelines Worldview	Ancestral Customs Traditional Knowledge Traditional Organization Traditional Medicine Traditional Food Traditional Clothing Designation of new positions Incorporation of modern elements into traditional cuisine Adaptation of traditional medicine Adaptation of internal regulations Traditional Values Festivals Earth - human relationship Sense of belonging
Environment	Conservation Prevention Care	Respect Coexistence Protection Reforestation Forest Trails Signage Brigades Watchtowers Guide Training Surveillance Damage repair Fines Waste management Regulations Commissions Evaluation

In table 1: The categories and indicators for the Culture and Environment variables, identified

through in-depth interviews with key figures in communities in Campeche, Chiapas, Oaxaca,

Quintana Roo, and Yucatán, are presented. Source: Prepared using data from the interviews.

**The categories for the culture variable were defined conceptually as follows:**

**Own Culture:** It was defined by six indicators (Traditional Knowledge, Traditional Organization, Traditional Medicine, Traditional Food, Traditional Clothing and Ancestral Customs). This category showcased the main elements of the culture that defines the worldview of indigenous communities and that determines their identity as a magical people.

They explain traditional knowledge as the heritage preserved through oral tradition that shapes their identity. They define traditional organization by positions, but also by the authority gained through community service. They practice traditional medicine, which persists despite modern medicine. Their traditional cuisine incorporates original ingredients and recipes. They wear traditional clothing that identifies them, and they share ancestral customs that unite them.

**Cultural adaptation for tourism "Magical Town" guidelines:** With four indicators (Designation of New Positions, Incorporation of Modern Elements into Traditional Cuisine, Adaptation to Traditional Medicine, Adaptation to Internal Regulations). In this category they identified the changes that the presence of visitors has forced upon their own culture due to the designation of "magical town" guidelines.

The incorporation of positions refers to the designation of community members to attend to visitors and carry out activities during their stay. The incorporation of modern elements into traditional cuisine refers to preparing food with new utensils, appliances, and other items to serve visitors. Adaptation to traditional medicine refers to sharing their medicinal practices with visitors, primarily by demonstrating them and, in some cases, accepting their participation. Adaptation to internal regulations refers to changes in their rules to allow for coexistence with visitors.

**Worldview.** With four indicators (Traditional Values, Festivals, Earth - human relationship and Sense of belonging). It reflects the cultural elements that the inhabitants consider basic for the permanence of their culture despite the arrival of visitors and that they consider vital for their permanence as native peoples.

This is the deepest category with which the inhabitants explain their cultural identity. Traditional values are expressed through respect for authority, ancestors, elders, and pride in their

identity, rooted in a deep connection to their own culture and reflected in their actions. Festivals reflect the syncretism of their own beliefs and the Catholic religion, expressing their joy and happiness, which is very important in their worldview.

Their relationship with the land is one of the most profound expressions of their identity, explaining their origins and their respect for Mother Earth as the provider of food and shelter. A strong sense of belonging is also essential; they identify as part of the family, the community in which they feel safe.

**The categories of the environment variable were defined by:**

**Conservation.** With five indicators (Respect, Coexistence, Protection, Reforestation, Forest Trails). In this category they express the actions they have taken to protect their land from the presence of visitors.

The conservation for these communities begins with respect for nature – for everything found on the land they inhabit, such as water, trees, and animals – and is therefore an expression of respect for what is there. It involves living in harmony with nature to avoid disturbances, protection established within their traditional organization, reforestation as an integral part of their culture to renew the forest, and established forest trails to manage visitor access.

**Prevention.** With four indicators (Signage, Brigades, Watchtowers, Guide Training). This category defines the actions that have been implemented in response to the presence of visitors. Signage: The placement of advertisements, banners, and, in some cases, rules to inform visitors. Brigades: This refers to the formation of community members and members of civil organizations for training in first aid and emergency services. Watchtowers: To ensure the safety of visitors and respect for community regulations, according to the community surveillance operation perspective. Guide Training: For the participation of community members in tourism activities.

**Care.** With seven indicators (Surveillance, Damage Repair, Fines, Waste Management, Regulations, Commissions. Evaluation). This category reflects the changes made in communities to regulate visitor activities.

Surveillance is part of the established responsibilities in the communities, but these have been extended to include the duration of visitors' stays. Damage repair has been included as part of the regulations to reduce negative impacts from visitors. Fines have been included as a measure to regulate the visitors' behavior.

For waste management, actions have been

established such as prohibiting the entry of PET bottles or the installation of trash receptacles in natural areas. These communities have regulations outlining permitted and prohibited activities. Committees are formed to organize visitor services, surveillance, and security. An evaluation of tourism activities in the "Magical Town" is also conducted.

As a result of operationalizing the categories of environment and culture, a questionnaire with 65 items was designed. It was piloted with twenty-five subjects, all of whom are involved in tourism activities in communities designated as "Magical Towns". The data were analyzed for the validity test

of the questionnaire using principal component factor analysis.

The results showed inconsistency in eight items, so the wording was reviewed and a second intervention was carried out with the key informants. The questionnaire was refined. The pilot results allowed us to obtain the cumulative variance and estimate the sample size. The sample design was based on data regarding the characteristics of the population documented in the statistics of the Mexican Ministry of Tourism. (Tourism, 2024), The method used to conduct the survey is shown in Table No. 2.

**Table 2: Design Of the Sample of Inhabitants of the Magical Towns in the States of Campeche, Chiapas, Oaxaca, Quintana Roo and Yucatán Mexico.**

State	Magical towns	Applied questionnaires
Campeche	4	12
Chiapas	5	14
Oaxaca	5	14
Quintana Roo	5	13
Yucatán	6	16
	25	69

Source: Own Elaboration.

The communities where the survey was conducted were: Campeche (Palizada, Isla Aguada, Candelaria, Tenabo y Hopelchen). Chiapas (San Cristóbal de las Casas, Chiapa de corso, Comitán de Domínguez, Palenque y Ocozocoautla). Oaxaca (Mazunte, Capulálpam de Méndez, Mitla, Huautla de Jiménez, San Pedro y San Pablo Teposcolula y Santa Catarina Juquila). Quintana Roo (Tulum, Bacalar, Isla Mujeres, Cozumel, Felipe Carrillo Puerto). Yucatán (Izamal, Valladolid, Maní, Sisal, Motul, Tekax y Espita) (Tourism, 2024).

As previously mentioned, the quantitative analysis stage began as soon as the qualitative data was obtained in terms of categories. Indicators were defined for each category to structure a questionnaire for evaluating the two variables. A pilot study was conducted, followed by expert validation. Using the pilot results, factor analysis was performed to test the instrument's validity and estimate variance. After calculating and designing the sample, the survey was administered to sixty-nine participants, and a reliability test was conducted, resulting in a Cronbach's alpha of 85.

#### 4. RESULTS

The results showed a total of 22 indicators with

the validation of the 14 indicators proposed for the categories of the Culture Variable: Own Culture with six indicators (Traditional Knowledge, Traditional Organization, Traditional Medicine, Traditional Food, Traditional Clothing and Ancestral Customs), Adaptation with four indicators (Designation of New Positions, Incorporation of Modern Elements into Traditional Cuisine, Adaptation to Traditional Medicine. Adaptation to Internal Regulations) and Worldview with four indicators (Traditional Values, Festivals, Relationship human-earth, Sense of Belonging).

However, for the Environment variable, only 8 of the 15 proposed indicators were validated. For the Conservation category, three indicators were validated (Protection, Coexistence, Reforestation), but the following indicators were not validated: Respect, Protection, and Forest Trails. For the Prevention category, two indicators were validated (Brigades and Watchtowers), but the following indicators were not validated: Signage and Guide Training. For the Care category, three indicators were validated (Surveillance, Damage Repair, Waste Management), but the following indicators were not validated: Fines, Regulations, Commissions, and Evaluation. The results can be seen in Table 3.

**Table 3: Indicators Of Culture and Environment Categories in Magical Towns of Southeastern Mexico.**

Categories	Indicators	Mean	SD
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Own Culture Cultural adaptation for tourism "Magical Town" guidelines Worldview	Traditional Knowledge (6)	4.94	0.723
	Traditional Organization	4.65	0.821
	Traditional Medicine	4.25	0.478
	Traditional Food	3.60	0.378
	Traditional Clothing	4.16	0.213
	Ancestral Customs	3.18	0.854
	Designation of new positions (4)	3.23	0.742
	Incorporation of modern elements into traditional cuisine	4.39	0.638
	Adaptation of traditional medicine	3.28	0.825
	Adaptation of internal regulations	3.59	0.369
	Traditional Values (4)	4.29	0.259
	Festivals	3.89	0.358
	Relationship human-earth	4.59	0.259
	Sense of belonging	4.69	0.356
	Conservation Prevention Care	Protection (3)	4.96
Coexistence		4.93	0.839
Reforestation		4.98	0.823
Brigades (2)		4.68	0.568
Watchtowers		4.59	0.698
Surveillance (3)		4.58	0.458
Damage Repair		4.69	0.358
Waste Management		4.59	0.458

In Table 3. The results of the analysis of the 22 indicators of the observed cultural and environmental variables are presented. The categories and indicators that allow for a framework to be developed are examined, defining the indicators for evaluating tourism in "Pueblos Mágicos" (Magical Towns) within indigenous communities. Source: Own elaboration.

As the results show, the culture variable, with its categories and indicators, demonstrated greater reliability compared to the environment variable, for which seven indicators were not validated. The results highlight that, in the Magical Towns reviewed

in this study, cultural aspects are considered essential for awarding the designation, while environmental elements receive less attention.

However, by applying a review of the results in a sample of five of the twenty-five magical towns initially analyzed, with the questionnaire and a verification table, the resulting information was integrated into a database that facilitated the analysis, systematization and the objective result shown for the recognition as a magical town with cultural and environmental indicators, which are shown in Table 4.

Table 4: Review of Indicators and Categories of the Culture and Environment Elements in Five Magical Towns of Southeastern Mexico.

MAGIC TOWN	VARIABLE/INDICATOR	ADDITION	%	INDEX
I Palizada (Campeche)	Culture 4,4,4	12	85.72	72.72
	Environment 1,1,2	4	50.00	Medio
II Chiapa de corso (Chiapas)	Culture 3,4,4	11	78.57	81.81
	Environment 3,2,2	7	87.50	Alto
III Capulálpam de Méndez (Oaxaca)	Culture 4,3,5	12	85.71	86.36
	Environment 3,2,2	7	87.50	Alto
IV Felipe Carrillo Puerto (Quintana Roo)	Culture 1,1,1	3	21.43	45.45
	Environment 3,2,2	7	87.50	Bajo
V Motul (Yucatán)	Culture 4,4,4	12	85.71	81.81
	Environment 2,2,2	6	75.00	Alto

Source: Own Elaboration.

It was found that towns located in indigenous communities such as Palizada in Campeche (85.72%), Chiapa de Corso in Chiapas (78.57%), Capulálpam de Méndez in Oaxaca (85.71%) and Motul in Yucatán (85.71%), showed high averages in the presence of cultural indicators, compared to Felipe Carrillo Puerto in Quintana Roo, an urban community of recent foundation, (21.43%) which showed the lowest percentage.

Regarding environmental indicators, there is less

presence. However, the "Magical Towns" in indigenous communities stand out again: Palizada in Campeche (50.00%), Chiapa de Corzo in Chiapas (89.75%), Capulálpam de Méndez in Oaxaca (87.50%), Motul in Yucatán (75.00%), and Felipe Carrillo Puerto in Quintana Roo (87.50%), for exception.

As can be seen, the results of this research provide a procedure for evaluating cultural and natural elements in the "Magical Towns" of southeastern

Mexico. Furthermore, a procedure is proposed for observing the conservation of culture and the environment in these towns. The procedure is based on establishing and testing indicators and evaluating them to determine the level of inclusion of cultural and environmental elements.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

Based on the results, a procedure is proposed for diagnosing the cultural and environmental indicators present in the "magical towns" in indigenous communities to counteract the negative effects of tourism caused by the designation.

As shown in the results, culture and environment can define a construct from the worldview of communities that preserve what they call their own culture and by observing the efforts they make to adapt to the modernity demanded by the presence of tourism based on the designation of magical town.

The results can complement previous research, which has not considered the study of cultural and environmental indicators in destinations designated as "Magical Towns". Nor has the difference between those established in indigenous communities and those in urban areas been analyzed.

Because of previous studies such as that of García, Rojas and García (2014), who found that the program can generate phenomena that distort the cultural and environmental structure, our results can contribute to understanding the phenomenon from the indigenous worldview and explain what Ruíz de León mentions (2019), why the inhabitants do not perceive the application of tourism resources in the protection and preservation of natural and cultural attractions.

The results contrast with those of Ibarra and Velarde (2016), because the inhabitants believe that the "Magical Town" designation disrupts cultural festivities due to the influx of mass tourism; this may be because the study was not conducted in indigenous communities, as is the case in Montero. (2021), who found cultural transformation in Tepoztlán through the implementation of the program.

In this regard, Velázquez and Bautista (2021), found that the program does not provide resources to preserve culture, but it does provide resources to design promotional campaigns and Vásquez (2022), in the nine magical towns of the state of Michoacán, observed that very few actions are promoted that favor the care of the environment; his studies did not consider the community worldview because he focuses on the benefit that the program should provide and not on the knowledge of the

communities themselves.

Regarding the environment for Hoyos and Hernández (2008), Conservation efforts in natural areas are unclear in Tepoztlán and at the national level according to Fernández (2016). Although the program has served to rehabilitate the architectural environment and recover spaces, the revaluation of cultural heritage is not lacking. About this, Flores, Pérez y Cruz (2022), conclude that the program's planning has not shown any responsiveness to the problems they face.

As observed in previous studies, the results are not focused on the various impacts of the Magical Town program with an overall approach; however, there is a lack of studies that integrate aspects of the culture from the worldview of the communities and work on qualitative indicators before quantifying them.

Observing the results of similar programs in other countries in the comparative study in 50 communities of the program "China's Most Beautiful Villages", Chunliu, Javed and Deqiang (2019) in which they show how the integration of production, village and landscape accounts for sustainable development. In Spain, Albarrán and Pianassi (2022), They found similarities and particularities between the programs "The Most Beautiful Villages of Spain" and "The Authentic Villages of Argentina" to promote the territoriality of tourism by leveraging heritage, which coincides with our results.

Finally, the results can contribute to the study of Magical Towns from the perspective of native stakeholders and provide evidence from the inhabitants' worldview, thus integrating their own experiences for cultural conservation and environmental stewardship. As shown in the results of the evaluation system test and in the destinations included in this study, there are destinations designated as "Magical Towns" that exhibit cultural and environmental indicators that can be preserved by considering their worldview, structured around their traditional knowledge.

The procedures tested in this research propose a new criterion for analyzing culture and the environment. It is observed that the "Magical Towns" (Magical Towns) program cannot truly be considered as such without incorporating the cultural and environmental worldview with the participation of community members, and especially with the preservation of ancestral culture.

This study proposes a new definition of culture and the environment in Magical Towns and similar programs worldwide, one that allows visitors to experience a culturally rich "Magical Towns" with

natural attractions, a form of tourism that meets the three key pillars of sustainability: care for the natural environment; respect for and conservation of cultural aspects; and ensuring that the benefits of tourism services reach the local inhabitants. By monitoring compliance with the requirements for the "Magical Town" designation, and particularly with the worldview of indigenous communities, we

contribute to environmental conservation and cultural preservation in a natural way, through the presence and participation of the inhabitants of these communities. This system can guarantee the continued existence of the elements that characterize a tourism industry capable of competing with other cultural destinations worldwide.

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