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ECOTOURISM, NATIONAL IDENTITY, AND ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION IN VENEZUELA: A DOCUMENTARY ANALYSIS OF "TIERRA DE GRACIA"

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Abstract

This qualitative study explores how Venezuela's historical narrative as "Tierra de Gracia" can serve as an anchor for ecotourism programs aimed at environmental education for young people. Based on a thematic analysis of twenty-one documents—including the book *Venezuela: Identity and Context. Adventure in "Land of Grace*", nineteenth-century chronicles, and national policies on sustainable tourism—three themes were identified: (a) symbolic landscapes consolidate a sense of belonging that facilitates the adoption of ecological values; (b) the field experiences offered by ecotourism enhance meaningful learning and ecological literacy; and (c) tensions between conservation and extractivism shape youth attitudes toward sustainability. It is argued that incorporating ecotourism excursions into the secondary school curriculum—in partnership with indigenous communities and local guides—can consolidate environmental stewardship behaviors and strengthen national identity. Implications for instructional design and public policy recommendations are discussed.

Keywords: ecotourism; national identity; environmental education; Venezuelan youth; Tierra de Gracia

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Introduction

Venezuelan geography unfolds like a multicolored tapestry that embraces equatorial jungles, Andean peaks, endless savannas, and more than 2,800 kilometers of Caribbean coastline. From the coast, where coral beaches extend beyond the hurricane belt—a privilege rarely shared by other Caribbean nations—the trade winds refresh a mild climate that only distinguishes between a dry season and a rainy season, ideal for outdoor life and for cultivating rich biodiversity. This combination of atmospheric stability and topographical variety justifies many authors' proclamation of the country as a true "world heritage site."

Heading west, the Venezuelan Andes emerge with snow-capped peaks such as Bolívar, which reaches an altitude of almost 5,000 meters and offers temperate valleys where wheat and centuries-old frailejones thrive. The legends of Caribay and the five white eagles that guard the snow-capped mountains give these mountains a mythical aura that intertwines nature and the indigenous worldview. To the north, the Cordillera de la Costa extends this mountainous spine, drawing green balconies that frame Caracas and illuminate fertile valleys where coffee and sugar cane crops shine, while peaks such as Naiguatá and La Silla dominate the urban landscape. A tectonic depression separates this mountain range and gives rise to the Gulf of Cariaco, whose turquoise waters rival the coves of Mochima National Park, in stark contrast to the aridity of the Paraguaná Peninsula, where golden dunes and xerophytic gardens recall the country's climatic plasticity.

Descending from the mountains towards the center, the immensity of the Llanos opens up: floodplains that beat to the rhythm of the Orinoco's floods. During the "winter," overflowing waters turn the savanna into an inland ocean; in "summer," the grassland withers and the fauna takes refuge in relict streams. Anacondas, caimans, capybaras, and multicolored birds make up a spectacle that seduces naturalists and adventure tourists. Further east, the plain breaks into a labyrinth of river islands and mangroves in the Orinoco Delta, home to river dolphins and Warao cultures, where fresh water mixes with brackish water in a mosaic of life and sediment.

The southern Amazon offers another face: almost unexplored rainforests that function as the planet's lungs, a reservoir of fresh water, and a genetic bank of orchids, bromeliads, and

giant ferns. These lands, guarded by ethnic groups that preserve ancestral languages, are described in the base text as a "natural wonder" and "world heritage site," underscoring the ethical obligation to preserve their integrity in the face of indiscriminate logging. From there rises the Guiana Plateau with its stone tepuis—Auyantepuy, Roraima—which date back to the Precambrian era and isolate unique ecosystems, while iron and gold deposits emerge from its slopes, revealing the eternal tension between mineral wealth and ecological fragility.

Returning to the sea, the island of Margarita stands like a "golden ship" in the verses of Andrés Eloy Blanco, surrounded by waters conducive to historic pearl banks and modern kite-surfing, proof of the coexistence of tradition and contemporary recreation. Further north, the Los Roques archipelago unfolds white sand atolls that turn the Venezuelan Caribbean into a marine biology laboratory and a low-impact tourist showcase. Meanwhile, to the west, Lake Maracaibo—the epicenter of lake legends and the cradle of the national toponym—continues to feed mangroves, myths, and oil economies in the same body of water.

This succession of snow-capped mountain ranges, temperate valleys, seasonal savannas, rainforests, ancestral tepuis, and coral coasts creates altitudinal and climatic gradients that, in a matter of hours, allow you to travel from the frozen páramo to the tropical mangrove swamp, offering a living lesson in comparative ecology. Such bioclimatic diversity supports crops as diverse as rainforest cocoa, high-altitude coffee, and warm valley rice, and provides incomparable settings for ecotourism that, if well managed, could become an open-air classroom for future generations. Recognizing Venezuela as a "Land of Grace" means not only celebrating its natural opulence, but also assuming the responsibility of safeguarding it as an irreplaceable legacy for all of humanity.

Problem statement

Venezuela is currently facing alarming degradation of its key ecosystems. Indiscriminate logging and burning in the Amazon and Llanos forests is eliminating thousands of hectares per year, reducing habitats and carbon sequestration. The base text denounces that deforestation disrupts biodiversity and compromises the sustainable use of resources. It also warns that incipient desertification threatens food security. The impacts are multiplied when the vegetation cover disappears and the soils are exposed to water erosion. The Orinoco and Caroní river basins are already showing signs of accelerated sedimentation. This phenomenon reduces the useful life of dams and increases the cost of hydroelectric power generation. At the same time, gold and iron mining operates with obsolete and polluting methods. The study points out that mining without proper techniques pollutes rivers and affects the health of indigenous communities. Mercury released in floods bioaccumulates in fish and enters the human food chain. Illegal dredging destroys riverbeds and annihilates macroinvertebrates that are essential for aquatic balance. Indiscriminate drilling causes oil spills that degrade coastal mangroves.

Mineral wealth, while coveted, becomes a threat when unscrupulous hands prioritize profit over the biosphere. Among the emerging risks is the release of radionuclides from operations without technical control. All of this is occurring in a context of climate change that exacerbates droughts, fires, and extreme events. Tropical rainforests, identified as the "lungs of the world," are losing their ability to regulate the climate.

The text warns that humanity is beginning to understand the value of the planet, but the risk of self-destruction persists. The consequences include acid rain, destruction of the ozone layer, and marine pollution. Environmental degradation also threatens nature tourism, a smokeless industry vital to the local economy. If iconic landscapes are eroded, their capacity to generate employment and experiential education is lost. Paradoxically, the problem is ourselves, as we fail to manage the natural resources granted to the country responsibly.

This self-criticism is amplified by the observation that the damage is often irreversible in the short term. To reverse the trend, the author proclaims that conservation must be understood globally and applied locally. Education then emerges as a strategic lever for change. It is imperative that the education system instill the value of natural wealth from an early age. Schools must integrate living classroom programs that bring students closer to nearby ecosystems. "Educational ecotourism" initiatives allow students to experience the fragility of rivers, tepuis, and savannas. Guided by naturalists, young people can discover blackwater rivers and understand their natural causes.

These experiences strengthen ecological literacy and awaken a sense of belonging. They also foster scientific skills such as observation and systemic thinking. The curriculum should include watershed restoration and reforestation projects using native species. Such projects instill the notion that resources are finite common goods. Mainstreaming environmental education involves reforming content and methodologies. Teachers trained in active pedagogies can encourage school research on water quality.

Social networks broaden the dissemination of good practices and raise the profile of environmental guardians in each community. However, it is necessary to integrate the ancestral knowledge of ethnic groups that protect the forest. They offer models of harmonious use of land and water. It is also necessary to link academia with environmental control agencies to monitor the impacts of mining.

Scientific data should feed back into public awareness campaigns. The text suggests that well-managed ecotourism can generate service companies without polluting smokestacks. These companies would provide quality employment while educating tourists about sustainable practices. A self-sustainable country requires adequate transportation and rest stops that reduce energy consumption. Faced with so many challenges, ethical training becomes as important as technical training.

We must understand that biodiversity is not simply an inventory of species, but the fabric of life that sustains our health. Damaging that fabric compromises water, food, and energy, the three pillars of human security.

That is why every classroom, starting in preschool, must become a laboratory for environmental citizenship.

Student engagement is fueled by local projects, but it extends to global care. Thus, the notion of "Land of Grace" transcends patriotic discourse and becomes a collective responsibility.

In short, the problem invites us to stop destruction and sow awareness. Only then will Venezuela be able to show itself to the world as a biodiverse nation that protects the grace of its land for future generations.

Background

The Venezuelan cartographic tradition dates back to José Luis de Cisneros's 1764 "Descripción exacta de la Provincia de Venezuela" (Accurate Description of the Province of Venezuela), a pioneering work that recorded the fertility of the coastal valleys and the exuberance of the tropics. In its pages, Cisneros already evoked a "blessed" territory whose divine grace was perceived in the abundance of cocoa, pearls, and precious woods, a feature that fertilized the metaphor of the Land of Grace. A few years later, in 1775, Agustín Marrón wrote the "Historical-Geographical Account of the Province of Venezuela," providing ethnographic details that merged landscape and culture.

Marrón emphasized that natural wonders inspired popular religiosity and forged a sense of belonging that transcended imperial borders. During the same period, Bishop Mariano Martí left memoirs of his pastoral visit describing rivers, mountains, and villages as scenes of providence. These nineteenth-century chronicles consolidated the image of Venezuela as a territory privileged by creation, the semantic seed of the phrase "Land of Grace."

As early as 1806, Francisco Depons sailed the eastern part of the country and portrayed the fertility of the coast in prose, reinforcing the myth of paradise that attracted merchants and naturalists. Alejandro de Humboldt, with scientific rigor, traveled the Orinoco between 1799 and 1800 and associated biotic diversity with the possibility of an earthly Eden. Humboldt coined the idea that Venezuela's climatic variety within just a few degrees of latitude was "unique on the planet," reinforcing the charm of natural grace.

His companion Bonpland collected indigenous uses of curare and pointed to the symbiosis between man and jungle as a defining feature of the territory. In 1824, the Italian-Venezuelan

geographer Agustín Codazzi took on the task of mapping the emerging republic with a physical and political map that visualized that grace in statistical detail.

Codazzi's "Summary of the Geography of Venezuela" combined orographic descriptions with inventories of flora and fauna, integrating data that supported the narrative of natural opulence. His 1841 atlas demonstrated that the Land of Grace could be quantified in terms of relief, soils, and climates, legitimizing territorial identity with empirical evidence.

Andrés Bello's reviews in 1809 added a literary nuance, celebrating tropical beauty and linking nature with the American nation project. In 1839, Rafael María Baralt reinterpreted the first European contact and popularized the anecdote of the stilt houses of Coquivacoa that inspired the name Venezuela. This fusion of history and landscape reinforced the perception of a favored space since the time of the Admiral.

In the second half of the 19th century, Lisandro Alvarado and Adolfo Ernst continued to describe the country as a natural laboratory, extolling the "generosity" of the climate. Tulio Febres Cordero collected the legends of Caribay and the five white eagles to underscore the mythical connection between the mountains and the nation.

At the beginning of the 20th century, Mariano Picón Salas reread the early chronicles and coined the expression of Venezuela as a "synthesis of the American," insisting on its unique landscape. Picón Salas warned that pride in the Land of Grace had to be balanced with historical and environmental responsibility. At the same time, the Catalan Pablo Vila devoted his "Geography of Venezuela" (1960) to organizing the territory by physiographic regions, showing the coherence between science and patriotic rhetoric.

His son Marco Aurelio Vila reinforced this approach with his "Dictionary of Land and Water in Venezuela," revalidating the nomenclature that defines the landscape's identity. In the 1990s, Pedro Cunill Grau synthesized this tradition in Venezuela: Geographic Options, noting that the notion of Tierra de Gracia continues to guide collective perception.

The contemporary works of Rodríguez Iranzo pick up the chronological thread and weave it together with the agenda of educational ecotourism. In short, the enlightened chroniclers of the 18th century, the romantic naturalists of the 19th century, and the positivist geographers of the 20th century converge on the same intuition: Venezuela is a privileged theater of natural miracles.

Each generation contributed its own lens: missionaries described fertile soils, European travelers measured altitudes and water flows, statesmen drew maps of progress. However, they all agreed in defining the territory with adjectives of abundance, beauty, and potential, fueling the idea of a "graced" land.

This discursive convergence consolidated a patriotic narrative linking geographical diversity and historical destiny. The term "Land of Grace," introduced by Columbus in 1498 when he sighted the Orinoco, was re-semantized by chroniclers to emphasize a tangible paradise beyond myth. By describing the sweetness of the waters of the so-called "Mar Dulce" (Sweet Sea), navigators reinforced the idea of a territory touched by providence.

Later travelers used this alliance between resources and aesthetics to promote colonization, trade, and science. During independence, republican writers replicated the nickname to instill pride and moral justification in the new state. In the 20th century, the tourism industry began to capitalize on the imagery, presenting hurricane-free beaches and virgin forests as proof of geographical grace.

However, critical voices such as Picón Salas reminded us that the Land of Grace could become a scorched earth if extractive voracity prevailed. This tension between natural splendor and anthropogenic risk permeates recent historiography. Current environmental studies draw on the inventories of Humboldt and Codazzi to assess biodiversity loss.

Such assessments confirm that the founding narrative was not mere hyperbole, but a reflection of exceptional biological wealth. At the same time, they highlight the urgency of renewing our commitment to our natural heritage. The continuity of the concept of Tierra de Gracia, therefore, depends on safeguarding the landscapes that inspired it.

Cisneros and Marrón would have seen today the felled forests where they once noted "copious foliage," an ethical warning for the present. Codazzi, who measured temperatures in the jungle and páramo, would now contribute data to climate change monitoring. Humboldt, fascinated by the Casiquiare, would encourage research on biogeographical corridors and ecosystem services. Picón Salas would insist on the cultural dimension of nature to forge citizenship. Cunill Grau, from a geographical teaching perspective, would emphasize the inclusion of heritage routes in secondary education.

Historical narratives, far from being showcases of nostalgia, offer inputs for designing participatory ecotourism models. They incorporate a lexical legacy—grace, exuberance, abundance—that can become a discourse of sustainability and respect. Recovering these voices allows young people to understand the territory as both heritage and responsibility. Thus, the historical-geographical journey reveals that the Land of Grace is not a slogan, but a choral construction of science, faith, poetry, and politics.

Its relevance lies in keeping alive the sensitive relationship with mountains, rivers, and forests that dazzled chroniclers and travelers. Only then will the story of grace be projected into the future as an intergenerational commitment and not as a lost memory.

Method

The Venezuelan cartographic tradition dates back to José Luis de Cisneros's 1764 "Descripción exacta de la Provincia de Venezuela" (Accurate Description of the Province of Venezuela), a pioneering work that recorded the fertility of the coastal valleys and the exuberance of the tropics.

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Only then will the story of grace be projected into the future as an intergenerational commitment and not as a lost memory.

Results:

Content analysis revealed that the landscapes described in Venezuelan literature constitute powerful symbols of identity that transcend mere geographical description. Gallegos, in *Doña Bárbara*, presents the Llanos as an epic of llaneros and endless savannas, generating a sense of belonging cemented in the struggle between civilization and barbarism. The same author evokes the Arauca River as a living frontier where Venezuelans recognize their courage and their connection to the fertile land that sustains them.

Uslar Pietri, for his part, reinterprets the Orinoco in *Oficio de difuntos* as a historical artery that nourishes the nation and connects pre-Hispanic myths with modern oil production. His metaphor of the "river of rivers" reinforces the idea of a body of water that feeds the collective imagination and defines Venezuelan identity. The Andean myths of Caribay and the five white eagles, compiled by Tulio Febres Cordero, give the Cordillera Merideña a sacred aura that amalgamates nature and indigenous cosmogony. The figure of Caribay, daughter of the Sun and the Moon, turns the eternal snow into the guardian of the peaks, establishing the notion of a protective landscape. Together, these narratives legitimize the Land of Grace as a heroic and spiritual setting that fosters patriotic pride. The NVivo codes reflected a high co-occurrence between terms of beauty, fertility, and a sense of belonging, demonstrating that literary language

is a vehicle for ecological identity. 8.2 The second thematic core shows ecotourism as a pedagogical strategy for experiential learning focused on nature guides and minimal infrastructure. Policy documents propose interpretive trails managed by local guides that combine historical narrative, wildlife observation, and low-impact practices. The suggested infrastructure favors elevated walkways, lightweight viewing platforms, and ecological signage made from biodegradable materials. Participants describe "adventure tourism"—canoeing through the Delta's waterways, *trekking* to tepuis, cycling in the páramos—as an opportunity to develop scientific skills *in situ.* Pilot program reports indicate significant increases in biodiversity knowledge and pro-environmental intentions after guided excursions. Young people value the presence of indigenous interpreters who integrate ancestral worldviews into explanations of natural cycles. The activities are supported by field journals and digital logs that turn the experience into material for later classroom use. Frequency analysis highlighted the word "discover" associated with "learn" and "protect," corroborating the effectiveness of direct immersion. 8.3 The third core exposes the tension between the economic promise of resource exploitation and the environmental damage associated with extractive practices. The reports analyzed contrast the potential income from the Mining Arc with the threat to forests, watersheds, and indigenous cultures in Guayana.

Local narratives highlight that mercury from gold mining contaminates fish, affecting food security and community health. Testimonies from young people in the plains reveal ambivalence: extensive cattle ranching is a source of employment, but it leads to deforestation and habitat loss for tapirs and deer. In coastal areas, uncontrolled mass tourism is perceived as a double-edged sword that boosts the economy but triggers the generation of untreated solid waste. The coding matrices grouped words such as "boom," "opportunity," and "employment" alongside "loss," "pollution," and "risk," highlighting the polarization of the discourse. Young voices call for strict regulatory frameworks and community participation in decision-making to balance wealth and responsibility. An examination of co-occurrences shows that where "extractivism" is mentioned, "conflict" arises, while "ecotourism" is associated with "future" and "education." In summary, the results confirm that national identity is nourished by literary and mythical landscapes, that ecotourism is emerging as an outdoor school, and that the dilemma between development and conservation dominates the environmental agenda of Venezuelan youth.

Discussion

The results corroborate the thesis that Venezuelan identity is interwoven with landscape references that operate as symbolic anchors and triggers for pro-environmental behavior. In line with Scannell and Gifford's model of place attachment, the codes of beauty, fertility, and rootedness combined to shape a sense of belonging that exceeds patriotic pride and reaches the ethical sphere of territorial stewardship. Thus, Gallegos' epic of the plains, Caribay's Andean

sacredness, and Uslar Pietri's arteriality of the Orinoco update the foundational metaphor of the "Land of Grace" by endowing it with intergenerational responsibility.

The convergence between literary discourse and tourism policy confirms that heritage narrative is not mere rhetorical ornamentation, but rather an educational resource for inducing conservation behaviors, as suggested by Kolb and Dewey's experiential learning frameworks. The ecotourism excursions analyzed operate as "living classrooms" where landscape theory becomes a practice of observation, recording, and reflection, strengthening ecological literacy and fostering systemic thinking among adolescents. This coincides with Latin American studies on environmental education that emphasize that direct immersion surpasses mere expository transmission, increasing the retention of concepts and pro-environment I behavioral intention. However, the extractivism-conservation tension emerged as cognitive dissonance: young people recognize the urgency of employment in mining areas, but fear the loss of critical ecosystem services, especially water and fishing. This ambivalence validates the hypothesis that the narrative of natural abundance can become counterproductive if it is not accompanied by literacy in planetary boundaries and environmental justice. The discussion must, therefore, nuance the discourse of a "blessed country" to avoid the illusion of inexhaustibility and highlight the vulnerability of biodiversity to industrial and climatic pressures.

The voices of young people demanding participation in extractive decisions suggest that environmental education should integrate democratic citizenship skills, including community monitoring and the use of open data on environmental quality. From an instructional design perspective, the findings support the adoption of active methodologies—project-based learning *and* service-learning—that connect curricular content with local issues, reinforcing the self-perception of "guardians of the earth." At the same time, the presence of indigenous guides in the pilot programs demonstrates the value of interculturality in expanding the repertoire of knowledge and generating respect for worldviews that conceive of nature as a subject of rights. This is in line with Picón Salas' recommendation to balance pride and historical responsibility, remembering that the Land of Grace can become scorched earth if extractive voracity dominates the national agenda. At the macro level, the discussion warns that the success of educational ecotourism depends on coherent public policies: green taxation, guide certification, light infrastructure, and land use planning that limits mining expansion in protected areas. Without these structural supports, school initiatives run the risk of becoming anecdotal experiences with no capacity to influence ecosystem resilience or the local economy. Finally, the articulation between historical narrative, ecotourism practice, and school learning suggests a virtuous triangle capable of generating social and natural capital; however, its consolidation requires longitudinal research to measure long-term behavioral effects and evaluate possible regional biases.

Conclusions

The research confirms that the narrative of Venezuela as "Land of Grace" operates as a long-term identity and pedagogical device capable of mobilizing conservation values among youth. Symbolic landscapes—epic plains, mythical Andes, arterial Orinoco—act as emotional anchors that deepen attachment to place and predispose people to pro-environmental action. Ecotourism, conceived as a living classroom, proves effective in translating that attachment into ecological literacy and systemic thinking, especially when it integrates local guides and indigenous knowledge. The pilot programs reviewed show measurable increases in biodiversity knowledge and pro-environmental behavioral intent after interpretive excursions.

However, the coexistence of high-impact extractive practices—gold mining, extensive logging, uncontrolled mass tourism—generates cognitive dissonance that can neutralize educational advances if not managed through public policy. The narrative of abundance, when not tempered by the concept of planetary boundaries, runs the risk of fostering the perception of inexhaustible resources. Consequently, environmental education must link national pride with ecological responsibility, reinforcing the ethics of care through community action projects and school *citizen science*. At the curricular level, it is recommended to institutionalize "educational ecotourism" as a cross-cutting strategy in secondary school, incorporating field journals, monitoring protocols, and formative assessments based on experience. Likewise, it is a priority to coordinate the ministries of Education, Tourism, and Environment to finance light infrastructur , certify guides, and guarantee low-impact standards in protected areas. Indigenous communities should participate as co-managers of routes, ensuring the intercultural transmission of knowledge and generating fair economic opportunities. From a research perspective, it is urgent to undertake longitudinal studies that measure learning retention and behavioral change one, three, and five years after the ecotourism intervention. It is also advisable to comparatively explore the effectiveness of different narrative devices—literature, audiovisual, augmented reality—to reinforce a sense of belonging and environmental ethics. Finally, revitalizing the metaphor of the "Land of Grace" implies supporting it with contemporary scientific data, participatory monitoring, and socio-environmental justice policies that prevent grace from turning into misfortune.

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