

Strategies to Promote Tourism in the Metropolitan Region of the Vale do Rio Cuiabá (RMVRC) for Local Development

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ABSTRACT

The objective of this study is to analyze the economic and sociocultural impact of tourism in the Metropolitan Region of the Cuiabá River Valley (RMVRC), highlighting how sustainable practices can enhance these benefits. The relevance of the topic is related to the growing importance of tourism as a catalyst for local development, especially in regions rich in cultural and natural heritage, such as Cuiabá. The methodology adopted includes a literature review and case analysis of the RMVRC, complemented by economic, social and environmental data, enabling a broad understanding of regional tourism dynamics. The results indicate that, despite the vast tourism potential, the region faces significant challenges in infrastructure and environmental management, especially with regard to sustainability. However, the research identified promising opportunities, such as the promotion of ecotourism and the development of cultural and gastronomic itineraries, which can strengthen tourist attractiveness. The conclusion highlights the need for an integrated approach, involving public-private partnerships, professional training, promotion of sustainable tourism and improvement of infrastructure, aiming to transform the RMVRC into a competitive and sustainable tourist destination.

Keywords: Sustainable tourism. Regional development. Ecotourism.

1 INTRODUCTION

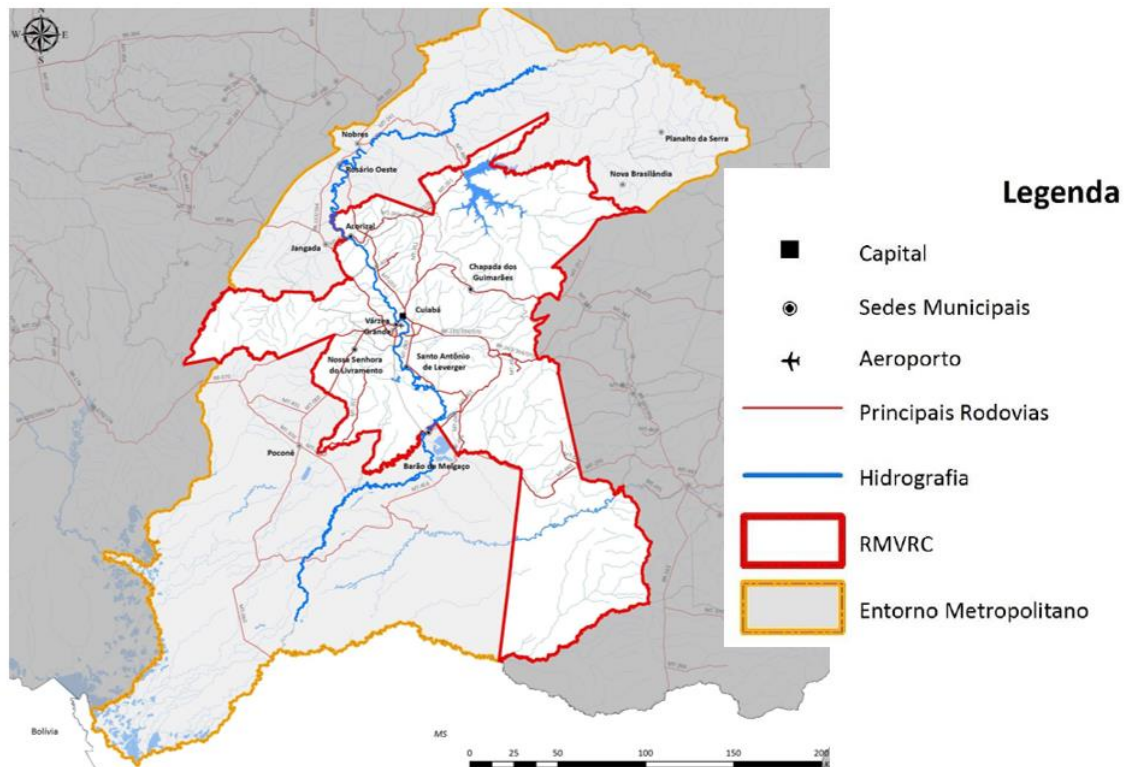
Tourism has consolidated itself as an essential strategic tool for local development, acting both as an economic engine and as a social and cultural transforming agent for host communities. This study aims to analyze the role of tourism in the development of the metropolitan region of the Vale do Rio Cuiabá (RMVRC), which, despite its vast tourism potential, faces significant challenges in establishing itself as a prominent tourist destination in the national context.

The objective of this article is to specifically investigate the economic and sociocultural impact of tourism in Cuiabá and its region, with a focus on how the city can integrate sustainable strategies to maximize these benefits. The analysis is guided by the need to understand how sustainable practices can be implemented to create an environment that benefits both visitors and local and regional residents.

The justification for this study is based on the growing importance of tourism as a catalyst for the development of the local and regional economy. As in other localities, in Cuiabá, tourism can play an important role in diversifying the economy, preserving cultural and natural heritage, and improving the population's quality of life. The city's strategic location at the geodesic center of South America and its proximity to important tourist destinations, such as the Pantanal—the world's largest continuous floodplain, with 140,000 km² in Brazilian territory—Nobres (Bom Jardim), home to the enchanted aquarium and several crystal-clear rivers suitable for tubing, and Chapada dos Guimarães, whose waterfalls and caves attract many tourists, reinforce the need for an integrated approach that values the region's tourism potential. Cuiabá's privileged geographical position can and should be strategically leveraged to drive development and position Cuiabá as a sustainable and competitive tourism center.

From this perspective, the methodology adopted in this study includes a review of the existing literature on tourism and local and regional development, complemented by a critical analysis of case studies in the metropolitan region of the Vale do Rio Cuiabá (RMVRC), spatially defined by Figure 1.

Figure 1 - Metropolitan Region of the Vale do Rio Cuiabá (RMVRC)



Source: Agência de Desenvolvimento da Região Metropolitana do Vale do Rio Cuiabá, 2017.

Documentary research encompasses the analysis of economic, social, and environmental data, as well as previous studies that explore the impact of tourism in similar regions. This approach provides a comprehensive understanding of the tourism dynamics available in the region, allowing for the identification of practices and policies that can be applied for the sustainable development of the sector.

The relevance of this study is amplified by the growing demand for development strategies that align economic growth with sustainability. In a global context where tourism is increasingly associated with environmental preservation and respect for local cultures, it is urgent to analyze the best strategies for integrating this region into tourism development policies and new destinations, aiming to explore the specific potential and challenges of this locality, and to discuss tourism's role as an agent of local and regional development in Brazil.

In summary, this study seeks to offer an integrated view of tourism in the Cuiabá region, highlighting practices that can transform challenges into opportunities and promote local development in a sustainable and inclusive manner. In the end, it is hoped that the presented conclusions will serve as a basis for the formulation of public policies and management strategies that reinforce the role of tourism as one of the pillars of development in this region.

2 TOURISM AND LOCAL AND REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Tourism is widely recognized as a powerful tool for local and regional development, significantly contributing to the economic, social, and cultural dynamism of host communities. As addressed by several scholars, tourism is a complex phenomenon that goes beyond the mere act of traveling, encompassing a series of interactions and impacts that can profoundly modify the receiving localities.

From an economic perspective, tourism can generate jobs and income, promoting the growth of various sectors of the local and regional economy, such as hospitality, gastronomy, commerce, and services, while stimulating new businesses and diversifying the local economy, reducing dependence on traditional sectors (Osmainschi, 2017). By attracting investments in infrastructure and services, tourism can also create more attractive environments by establishing new businesses and creating new job opportunities.

In the socio-cultural dimension, tourism plays a crucial role in valuing and preserving cultural and natural heritage. By fostering the recognition of local and regional identity, tourism can strengthen the sense of belonging among residents, encouraging the preservation of traditions, customs, and historical monuments. According to Ashworth and Page (2011), tourist cities often use their cultural assets as a form of differentiation and attraction for visitors, which can lead to the revitalization of urban areas and the creation of new cultural and leisure spaces. This cultural appreciation not only benefits tourists but also enriches the experience of residents, who come to experience the cultural elements of their community more intensely and consciously.

Another relevant aspect is the potential of tourism to promote environmental sustainability. When well planned and managed, tourism can act as a means of environmental conservation, encouraging sustainable practices. The creation of parks and reserves, the development of ecotourism, and the environmental education of visitors are some of the strategies that can be employed to ensure that tourism contributes to environmental conservation rather than posing a threat to it. This sustainable approach is essential to ensure that tourism development is beneficial in the

long term, avoiding the degradation of natural resources, which are often the main attraction for visitors.

To maximize the benefits of tourism in local development, it is essential to have integrated planning that involves all agents involved in the proposal, including local governments, entrepreneurs, communities, and tourists. The integration of tourism with other public policies, such as urban planning, transportation, health, and education, is fundamental to creating synergies that enhance the positive impacts of tourism (Judd, 2003). Moreover, planning should be sustainability-oriented, ensuring that tourism growth does not compromise the natural and cultural resources essential to the attractiveness of destinations.

3 ROLE OF CITIES IN TOURISM

When properly prepared, cities play a central role in tourism, serving both as primary destinations and as connection points linking tourists to other regions. With urbanization and the concentration of tourism infrastructure, such as hotels, restaurants, convention centers, and cultural attractions, cities become the epicenters of modern tourism. They also function as microcosms of cultural diversity, offering a range of experiences that cater to different market segments, from business tourism to entertainment and cultural tourism.

In this context, best practices show that tourist attractions are planned according to the capacity of each urban structure, aiming to meet visitors' needs satisfactorily, not only with necessary services but also by expanding leisure activities and events. Diversifying options is one way to prolong tourists' stay within a specific municipal or regional area, increasing revenue for the public treasury and generating favorable financial results for the tourism industry.

According to Glaeser (2011), cities, as centers of innovation and cultural production, become particularly attractive to tourists seeking unique and diverse experiences. This infrastructure, which includes transportation, accommodations, and leisure facilities, not only makes tourists' stays easier but also drives regional economic development by creating jobs and stimulating related economic sectors.

Moreover, cities with potential can transform into cultural tourism destinations by leveraging their historical, architectural, and cultural assets. Edwards et al. (2008) assert that the cultural wealth of cities, including museums, galleries, theaters, and cultural events, is one of the main attractions for tourists. Cities like Paris, Rome, and New York exemplify how cultural heritage can position a destination on the global stage. The preservation and promotion of these cultural resources not only attract tourists but also play a vital role in preserving cultural identity and educating residents and visitors about the value of this heritage.

The diversity of experiences offered by cities is another crucial factor for tourism. Hayllar et al. (2008) discuss how the multiplicity of available options, ranging from shopping and gastronomy tourism to events and business tourism, transforms cities into ideal destinations for tourists with varied interests. This diversity not only identifies the city as a tourist destination but also tends to extend visitors' stays, generating more revenue and contributing to the development of the local and regional economy.

Urban planning, in turn, is fundamental to the competitiveness of cities as tourist destinations. Effective planning that integrates tourism with urban development can create a more welcoming and accessible environment for tourists, as well as improve residents' quality of life. Sassen (2001) highlights that global cities attract tourists due to their world-class infrastructure and international reputation. The integration of tourist areas with the rest of the city and the creation of new public and cultural spaces are strategies that can significantly increase a city's competitiveness in the global tourism market.

4 POTENTIAL OF THE METROPOLITAN REGION OF THE VALE DO RIO CUIABÁ (RMVRC) FOR TOURISM

The metropolitan region of the Vale do Rio Cuiabá (RMVRC), specifically Cuiabá, has vast potential for tourism development, supported by its rich cultural, historical, and natural heritage. Located at the geodesic center of South America, the city is strategically positioned as a gateway to important tourist destinations such as the Pantanal, Nobres (Bom Jardim), and Chapada dos Guimarães. Leveraging this potential could transform Cuiabá into one of Brazil's leading tourist destinations, driving the region's economic and social development.

Over the past ten years, tourism in Cuiabá, the capital of Mato Grosso state, has experienced significant growth, driven by a series of economic, social, and structural factors. The period between 2013 and 2023 was marked by important events and investments that solidified the city as an emerging tourism hub.

In 2014, Cuiabá was one of the host cities for the FIFA World Cup, which had an immediate positive impact on local tourism, despite various issues related to resource and project management. This event led to significant infrastructure investments, such as the modernization of Marechal Rondon International Airport, improvements in the hotel network, and urban mobility (SANTOS et al., 2016). These advances not only increased the city's tourist reception capacity but also gave it a profile as a tourist city for both domestic and international visitors.

In the following years, the tourism flow continued to grow, particularly in the business and event tourism segments, driven by the expansion of the local and regional economy and the hosting of large-scale fairs and congresses.

According to Sedec (2024),

The tourism in Mato Grosso generated R\$ 91.7 million in ICMS (Goods and Services Tax) and R\$ 41.5 million in ISSQN (municipal taxes) in 2023. This amount reflects the growth of the sector in the state. Compared to 2022, ICMS revenue increased by 25.1%, and ISSQN revenue by 39%, according to data from the State Secretariat of Economic Development's Tourism Observatory, based on information from the State Department of Finance (Sefaz), Municipal Finance and Tourism Departments.

Ecotourism and adventure tourism also gained prominence due to Cuiabá's proximity to Chapada dos Guimarães, a city that has become a starting point for tourists interested in exploring natural areas. This trend has fostered the development of integrated itineraries that combine cultural and gastronomic experiences in the city before heading to natural attractions (ALCÂNTARA, 2023).

Despite the growth, tourism in this region has also faced challenges, particularly related to sustainability and natural resource management. According to Ribeiro et al. (2023), tourism growth in the Pantanal region, combined with climate change, has highlighted the need for more sustainable tourism practices and greater integration between urban and environmental development policies.

In 2017, tourism in Mato Grosso was strongly driven by fishing activities, which involved 8,620 professional and artisanal fishers. Artisanal fishing, in particular, plays a significant role in the social, political, economic, and environmental spheres of local and regional communities. This activity is marked by several peculiar characteristics: it is predominantly carried out by men, many of whom have low education levels, with more than 50% having not completed elementary school, and some having no formal education at all. On average, these fishers earn around R\$ 1,100 per month, a livelihood that can be supplemented by other activities such as boat piloting, bait collection, construction work, and social benefits (Ribeiro et al., 2023).

From this perspective of valuing traditional and local activities, cultural tourism emerges as a complementary economic development opportunity for the low-skilled labor force of Mato Grosso. Cuiabá is home to significant historical and cultural heritage that can be harnessed to attract tourists interested in this segment of tourism. The city's historic center, with its colonial houses, churches, and squares, bears witness to the rich heritage of Brazil's colonial and imperial periods. The revitalization and promotion of these spaces can transform the city into an attractive destination for tourists seeking an immersion in regional history and culture.

According to Edwards et al. (2008), the appreciation of urban cultural heritage is essential for the development of tourist destinations that offer authentic and meaningful experiences. Investment in the preservation of these sites, combined with cultural tourism projects, can not only attract visitors but also strengthen residents' cultural identity and promote local and regional tradition and pride.

Cultural events and traditional festivals in Cuiabá represent another important tourist attraction. The Festa de São Benedito, for example, celebrates Afro-Brazilian traditions and is one of the oldest and most traditional popular festivals in the city. It offers a unique opportunity for tourists to experience an authentic religious expression of local culture. According to Richards and Palmer (2010), cultural events are a powerful tool for tourism development, as they create an additional motivation to visit the destination while also contributing to the cultural sustainability of the host community.

Cuiabá's proximity to the Pantanal, Nobres (Bom Jardim), and Chapada dos Guimarães places the city in a privileged position for the development of nature tourism and ecotourism. Ecotourism, as outlined by Weaver (2001), is a modality that promotes environmental conservation and the well-being of local populations, being particularly relevant in regions like Mato Grosso, where natural wealth is one of the main attractions. By developing ecotourism programs and tourist routes that connect Cuiabá to these natural areas, the city can position itself as an ecotourism hub in Brazil, attracting tourists interested in sustainable experiences and wildlife observation.

Cuiabá's cuisine, rich in flavors and influences from Indigenous, African, and Portuguese cultures, is another highlight that can be explored to attract tourists. Typical dishes like *mojica de pintado*, *pacu assado*, and *furrundu* are traditional delicacies that offer visitors a unique gastronomic experience. According to Hjalager and Richards (2002), gastronomy is an important element of local tourism, capable of creating an emotional connection between the tourist and the hosts. Investing in the promotion of Cuiabá's cuisine, by creating food events and partnerships with local restaurants or showcasing Cuiabá's typical cuisine at events outside the state or abroad, can help solidify the city's image as a differentiated gastronomic tourism destination.

Based on the existing tourism potential in Cuiabá, strengthened by its rich cultural, historical, and natural heritage, any support for events or the creation of specific itineraries for the region will boost this regional tourism and align it with the national tourism industry, which is expanding and always in need of new itineraries and destinations. To maximize this potential, public sector support is essential in attracting regional and national events that consider sustainability, the appreciation of cultural heritage, and the strengthening of local traditions.

4.1 Challenges and Opportunities in the Metropolitan Region of the Vale do Rio Cuiabá (RMVRC)

Although it has vast tourism potential, Cuiabá faces significant challenges that must be overcome for the city to establish itself as a prominent destination. These challenges, however, also pave the way for various development opportunities which, if properly utilized, could transform the city into a sustainable and economically viable tourism hub.

One of the main challenges is related to tourism and urban infrastructure. Despite recent advancements, the city still requires significant improvements in the modernization and expansion of its basic infrastructure, such as transportation, health services, security, and, above all, the quality of public spaces, in addition to the limited availability of beds and good services in mid-range hotels (three-star hotels). If deficiencies in urban public transportation pose obstacles and make it difficult for tourists to access the main attractions, hotel services are inadequate due to a lack of basic training, language skills, and insufficient recognition of receptive tourism professionals, both in the city and in neighboring regions such as the Pantanal, Nobres (Bom Jardim), and Chapada dos Guimarães. Transportation infrastructure, coupled with better approaches to welcoming tourists, both in terms of professional knowledge and language skills, is crucial for competitiveness in the selection of tourist destinations by travel agents.

Beyond basic infrastructure, sustainability and environmental management emerge as significant challenges. Cuiabá's proximity to fragile ecosystems, such as the Pantanal, requires a careful approach and deep ecological knowledge to prevent environmental degradation. In addition to the need for improvements in urban management, poorly managed tourism can compromise the natural resources that form the basis of the region's tourism potential and attractiveness. Therefore, finding a balance between the quality of urban infrastructure, economic development, and environmental preservation is essential. This issue necessarily involves the strategic adoption of a plan to rehabilitate local and regional infrastructure, integrated with sustainable tourism policies that promote the conservation of natural resources and the engagement of local and regional communities. Together, these efforts will mobilize public authorities and motivate communities to demand essential actions to ensure that tourism contributes positively to the local economy without compromising the environment (Butler, 1980).

Despite these challenges, it is important to note that Cuiabá has significant opportunities to boost its economic development through tourism. One such opportunity is the expansion of event and business tourism, taking advantage of the

city's strategic location in Brazil's Midwest region. Investments in infrastructure and event hosting, combined with promoting the city as a business destination, can attract a diverse audience and generate substantial revenue. Business tourism, when combined with other forms of tourism, such as cultural and leisure tourism, has the potential to leverage the local economy (Judd, 2003).

Active participation by local communities in tourism planning and management can ensure that the economic benefits are widely distributed and that sustainable tourism practices are adopted. Empowering the local population, supporting entrepreneurship, and creating mechanisms that allow citizens to directly participate in tourism-related decision-making are strategies that can ensure the sector's long-term success in the region.

Thus, Cuiabá finds itself at a turning point where challenges, if addressed with planning and innovation, can be transformed into opportunities to build a sustainable and prosperous future in tourism.

4.2 Strategies for Tourism Development in Cuiabá

For Cuiabá to fully harness its tourism potential, it is essential to adopt a strategic approach that integrates local resources with tourist demands, promoting sustainability, innovation, and social inclusion. This approach must involve both the public and private sectors, along with the active participation of the local community, thus forming the foundation for sustainable tourism growth in the city.

One of the pillars of this approach is the promotion of public-private partnerships (PPPs), which play a crucial role in mobilizing the financial and technical resources necessary to improve Cuiabá's tourism infrastructure. These partnerships not only facilitate the revitalization of the historic center and the development of new attractions, but also ensure that tourism development aligns with public sustainability and inclusion goals, as highlighted by Bramwell and Lane (2000).

Once infrastructure improvements are completed, the next step should focus on strengthening tourism marketing to position Cuiabá as a diverse destination on the national and international stage. According to Kotler, Haider, and Rein (1993), a destination's image is a key factor in tourists' choices. Therefore, creating a unique tourism identity that highlights the city's cultural heritage, gastronomy, and natural beauty makes it possible to attract visitors more effectively. This marketing strategy should include digital campaigns and participation in regional, national, and international fairs to increase Cuiabá's visibility and attract a more diverse audience.

The diversification of tourism products, in turn, capitalizes on the potential established by marketing and improved infrastructure, offering new experiences that

combine the region's cultural heritage with its natural beauty. According to Richards and Wilson (2006), the development of innovative tourism products and creative experiences can add value and increase destination competitiveness. In Cuiabá, the creation of themed itineraries can enhance the region's positive image, providing visitors with a rich and differentiated tourism offering, capable of attracting new audiences and extending tourist stays.

As Pine and Gilmore (1999) explain, the experience economy is a powerful force in contemporary tourism, where personalized and memorable experiences are highly valued by consumers. In Cuiabá, the creation of immersive experiences, such as culinary workshops and ecotourism activities, not only expands the tourism offering but also strengthens cultural identity and the bond between tourists and the city.

However, it is crucial that all these initiatives are conducted sustainably. The promotion of sustainable tourism ensures that development does not compromise the natural and cultural resources that make the Metropolitan Region of the Vale do Rio Cuiabá (RMVRC) an attractive destination.

Weaver (2006) emphasizes that sustainable tourism not only protects the environment but also contributes to the economic and social development of local communities. Ecological practices in hotels and restaurants, as well as environmental certifications for tour operators, naturally integrate with other strategies, ensuring that tourism growth occurs in harmony with environmental preservation.

This harmony is enhanced by the creation of an integrated tourism network connecting Cuiabá to other regional tourist destinations, such as the Pantanal, Nobres (Bom Jardim), and Chapada dos Guimarães. The World Tourism Organization (WTO, 2007) highlights that connectivity between tourist destinations can increase regional attractiveness and generate economic benefits for all areas involved. By connecting these tourist spots, Cuiabá offers a more complete tourism experience, benefiting both tourists and the local economy.

Participation in the national and international tourism trade facilitates the direction of tourists to prepared destinations while also extending visitors' stays in the region, strengthening the facilities that are part of the tourism product infrastructure and increasing capital flow to both municipal treasuries and participants in the tourism trade.

To support all these initiatives, the use of technology and digital innovation is essential. Buhalis and Law (2008) argue that technology plays a crucial role in transforming tourism, from the trip planning phase to destination experiences. In Cuiabá, the implementation of mobile apps, interactive digital guides, and online booking systems not only modernizes the tourist experience but also enhances other

strategies, making it easier for tourists to access the city's diverse and sustainable offerings.

For these strategies to achieve full success, it is vital to invest in the training of professionals who operate in various areas of the receptive services. Baum (2007) emphasizes that workforce qualification in tourism is essential to ensure competitiveness among tour operators, travel agencies, tour guides, and other professionals working in the destination to provide high-quality services. Continuous training and retraining of tourism sector workers ensure that the services offered are of high quality and raise the standard of tourism services in Cuiabá. Moreover, integrating tourism with urban development policies, as argued by Hall (2008), is fundamental for creating synergies between tourism and other sectors, promoting sustainable growth that benefits both residents and visitors.

The strategies for tourism development in the Metropolitan Region of the Vale do Rio Cuiabá (RMVRC) interweave and complement each other, creating a virtuous cycle where infrastructure, innovation, sustainability, and social inclusion connect and build a promising and balanced future for regional tourism.

5 CONCLUSION

The analysis of tourism in the Metropolitan Region of the Vale do Rio Cuiabá (RMVRC) reveals that this activity has the potential to be a key component of the economic, social, and environmental development engine for the city. However, this potential will only be fully realized if the municipality focuses on specific strategies and practices that awaken the tourism trade to the particularities of the RMVRC.

A crucial aspect is the modernization of infrastructure, which includes improving public transportation, enhancing air connectivity between Cuiabá and other parts of the country and the world, and providing quality airport services, along with the revitalization of historic areas that are fundamental to making Cuiabá more attractive. Creating partnerships between the government and the private sector can facilitate these advancements and ensure that improvements are implemented efficiently and sustainably.

Furthermore, it is important to promote sustainable tourism practices that preserve the region's natural and cultural resources. This includes implementing policies that encourage the responsible use of environmental resources, adopting ecological practices in tourism businesses, and engaging the local community in the vital role of environmental conservation. This balance between tourism development and quality of life is essential to ensure the longevity of the sector.

Diversifying the tourism offerings must also be a priority, supported by investments in new itineraries that combine cultural, gastronomic, and ecological experiences, giving Cuiabá a unique profile in the tourism market and attracting various types of visitors. Additionally, the creation of themed events and festivals can help position the city as a vibrant and dynamic destination.

To ensure the success of these strategies, it is essential to train tourism professionals regularly, offering workshops and training focused on service quality. The use of technology and sustainable management can raise the standard of services offered and improve the tourist experience.

Therefore, it is recommended that tourism managers in Cuiabá adopt an integrated approach involving the active participation of the local community, the use of technological innovations, and the creation of public policies aligned with the sector's needs. Collaboration among all stakeholders is crucial to transforming challenges into opportunities and building a prosperous and sustainable future for tourism in Cuiabá.

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