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Cultural Landscapes in the Central American Region: Analysis of the Legal Framework for Protection and Management

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Abstract: The eight member countries of the Central American Integration System (SICA)—Belize, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, Panama, and the Dominican Republic—are signatories to the Convention for the Protection of World Heritage and the Convention on Biological Diversity. Both binding international instruments use the terms ‘cultural landscape’ and ‘protected landscape’, respectively. For this reason, the environmental/natural and cultural legislation of the SICA region has been analyzed to identify the legal frameworks that allow for the declaration of the categories mentioned above for the protection of landscapes. In five of the eight SICA member states, 38 ‘protected landscapes’ were found to exist under environmental law. No designation has been reported for cultural legislation in this region. In addition, the designations and management plans for ‘protected landscapes’ were reviewed, and it was noted that most of them were similar in denomination, but their protection objectives were not aligned with the binding instruments from which they were derived. Thus, we conclude that, given the particular natural and cultural wealth of the SICA region, it is necessary to identify and map landscapes and establish common guidelines for managing them to foster harmony between nature and mankind and according to the international conventions’ objectives.

Keywords: cultural landscape; protected landscape; Central America; SICA; international conventions



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1. Introduction

The eight countries that belong to the Central American Integration System (SICA)—Belize, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, Panamá, and the Dominican Republic—are characterized by high levels of biodiversity and rich cultural spaces. The variety of ecosystems, such as tropical rainforests, dry forests, mangroves, mountains, and marine and coastal ones, contributes to the region’s abundant diversity of flora and fauna [1]. Furthermore, ancient indigenous civilizations and the influence of Spanish colonialism have left unique cultural legacies in each of these countries [2]. The combination of bio-geological and cultural diversity makes the SICA region an area of complex interactions that are mutually influential over time.

Despite its ecological and cultural wealth, the region’s biodiversity and natural areas are under significant pressure. Economic and demographic changes have transformed many areas (even protected areas), mainly for agricultural purposes, including the cultivation of export crops like palm oil, coffee, and bananas, as well as unplanned urban expansion [3]. Consequently, the region has experienced deforestation, habitat destruction, and biodiversity loss [4], among other damages. While all nations have established various protected areas, the size, management, and effectiveness of protection vary among countries. Some regions of the SICA countries have a patchwork of remnants of protected areas [5]. In contrast, others still have sizable forest areas, such as Peten in Guatemala,

Gracias a Dios in Honduras, the autonomous region of the Caribbean in Nicaragua, and the Darien region of Panama.

The governments of Central America and the Dominican Republic are committed to protecting the region's natural areas on land and the sea, biodiversity, and cultural landscapes. As signatories of the Convention on Biological Diversity, the SICA countries have established numerous protected areas, some of which hold global significance [3]. It must be said that the Protected Areas Systems in Central American countries are still evolving in terms of coverage and institutional arrangements, and cultural landscapes¹ are still underrepresented.

This research aims to analyze the legal framework for cultural landscapes in the member countries of the SICA system. This legal framework is critical in guiding the decision-making process to preserve the region's remaining significant natural and cultural (tangible and intangible) resources and their associated values and eco-services. An understanding and analysis of current national laws and regulations related to binding international conventions help in the identification and implementation of policies that support ecosystem goods and services, protect protected areas, encourage sustainable development, and preserve local communities' cultural heritage and identity.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Study Area

The countries included in the study are members of the Central American Integration System (SICA). In 1991, with the signing of the Tegucigalpa Protocol, the highest legal framework for Central American integration, the SICA was defined as an economic-political community. Among its objectives is the promotion, in a harmonious and balanced manner, of the sustainable economic, social, cultural, and political development of its member states and the region as a whole [6]. Up till now, its member states are, in alphabetical order, Belize, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, Panama, and the Dominican Republic.

Since the SICA region's member nations have similar opportunities and difficulties, we may compare their regulatory regimes through a shared policy framework. This is why we have decided to concentrate on this region. Therefore, we can develop a common proposal for improvements based on this supranational framework.

Most of the 'cultural landscape' research is concentrated in Europe, where large and more diverse stands of 'cultural landscapes' are located [7]. Less is known about these 'cultural and protected landscapes' in Central America and the Dominican Republic.

Found in the intertropical zone, the region acts as a bridge between the Americas and is rich in wildlife and indigenous peoples. This natural and cultural wealth is reflected in the 19 properties of the SICA region inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List (Figure 1 and Table 1).

Among them, 37% (seven sites) are natural areas (National Parks or Biospheric Areas), 32% (six sites) are cultural areas that belong to the archaeological category, 26% (five sites) are historic urban complexes or colonial fortifications, and 5% (one site) are mixed areas.

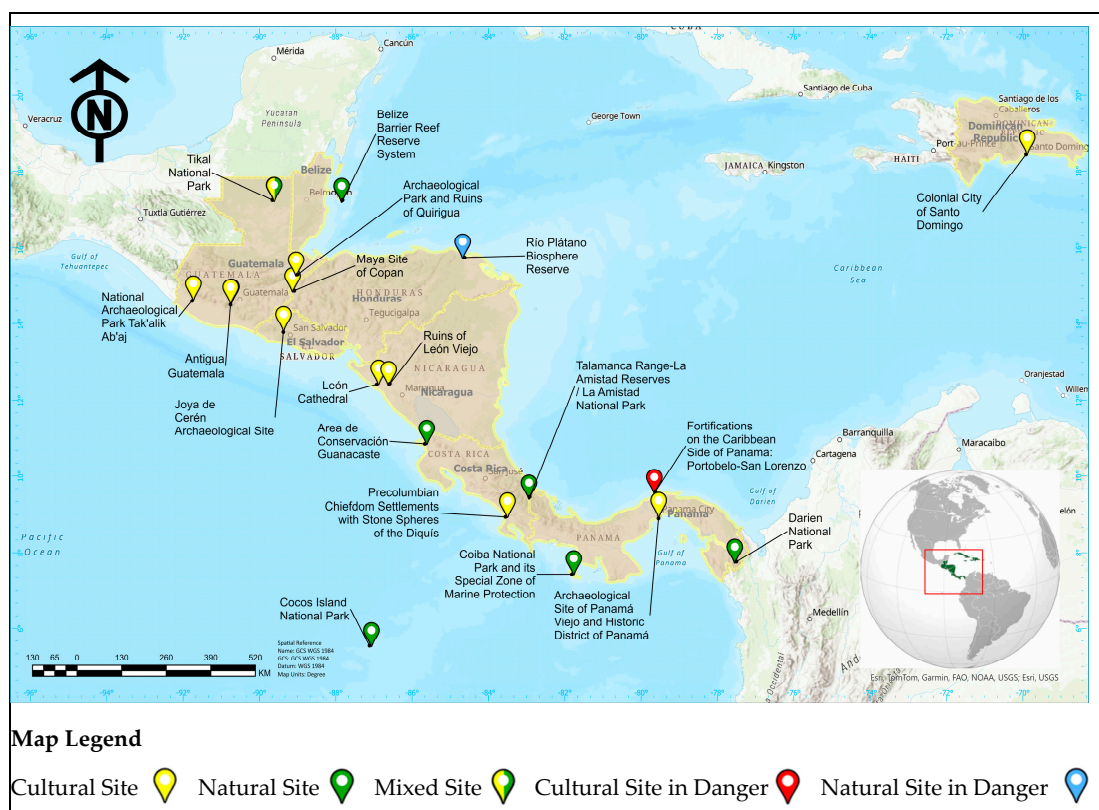


Figure 1. UNESCO World Heritage sites in the SICA Region. The authors prepared it through open data from the UNESCO World Heritage Centre [8].

Table 1. Type of heritage assets including the UNESCO World Heritage sites in SICA countries.

Type of Heritage/Number of Sites	Country and Property
Natural site (7)	Belize: Belize Barrier Reef Reserve System (1996)
	Costa Rica: Cocos Island National Park (1997), Talamancas Range-La Amistad Reserves/La Amistad transboundary National Park (1983), Área de Conservación Guanacaste (1999)
Historic Urban Complex (3)	Honduras: Río Plátano Biosphere Reserve (1982)
	Panamá: Darien National Park (1981), Coiba National Park and its Special Zone of Marine Protection (2005), (1983) Talamancas Range-La Amistad Reserves/La Amistad transboundary National Park
	Guatemala: Antigua Guatemala (1979)
Archaeological remains (6)	Panamá: Archaeological Site of Panamá Viejo and Historic District of Panamá (1997)
	Dominican Republic: Ciudad Colonial de Santo Domingo (1990)
	Costa Rica: Pre-Columbian Chiefdom Settlements with Stone Spheres of the Diquís (2014)
Historical Monument (2)	El Salvador: Joya de Cerén Archaeological Site (1993)
	Guatemala: Archaeological Park and Ruins of Quirigua (1981), National Archaeological Park Tak'alik Ab'aj (2023)
Mixed Heritage	Honduras: Maya Site of Copan (1980)
	Nicaragua: Ruins of León Viejo (2000)
	Nicaragua: León Cathedral (2011)
	Panamá: Fortifications on the Caribbean Side of Panamá: Portobelo-San Lorenzo (1980)
	Guatemala: Tikal National Park (1979)

2.2. Assessment of Data

This study was systematically conducted and involved a review of the academic papers and technical documents from official international institutions like UNESCO and IUCN.

The review's main goal was to fully understand the definition, conceptualization, and related management objectives of the international frameworks for the 'cultural landscape' and 'protected landscape' categories. Additionally, the study analyzed the documents that put into practice the international agreements related to this topic, such as the Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention and Guidelines for Applying Protected Area Management Categories.

In addition, the environmental and cultural laws that are currently in place in the SICA member states have been examined in order to understand the globally recognized standards for classifying and preserving 'cultural landscapes' and 'protected landscapes'. This information has been organized based on a scheme that allows for a consistent and simple comparison of the categorizations and regulations applied to landscapes in each country of the region. In Table 2, the national legislation of each SICA member state concerning environmental and cultural laws is the subject of a detailed review.

Table 2. National natural and cultural legislations of SICA countries.

Country	Cultural Law	Environmental Law
Belize	Belize National Cultural Heritage Preservation Act, 2017 [9].	Belize National Protected Areas System Act, 2015 [10].
Costa Rica	Law on National Archaeological Heritage of Costa Rica, 1981 (<i>Ley sobre Patrimonio Nacional Arqueológico de Costa Rica</i> , 1981) [11]. Law on Historical and Architectural Heritage of Costa Rica, 1995 (<i>Ley de Patrimonio Histórico Arquitectónico, Costa Rica</i>) [12].	Regulations to the Biodiversity Law, 2008 (<i>Reglamento a la Ley de Biodiversidad de Costa Rica</i> , 2008) [13].
El Salvador	Special Law for the Protection of Cultural Heritage of El Salvador, 2014 (<i>Ley Especial de Protección al Patrimonio Cultural de El Salvador</i> , 2014) [14].	Law on Protected Natural Areas of El Salvador, 2005 (<i>Ley de Áreas Naturales Protegidas de El Salvador</i> , 2005) [15].
Guatemala	Law for the Protection of the Cultural Heritage of the Nation Guatemala, 1997. (<i>Ley para la Protección del Patrimonio Cultural de la Nación Guatemala</i> , 1997) [16].	Regulations of the Guatemalan Law on Protected Areas, 1990 (<i>Reglamento de la Ley de Áreas Protegidas de Guatemala</i> , 1990) [17].
Honduras	Law for the Protection of the Cultural Heritage of the Nation Honduras, 1997 (<i>Ley para la Protección del Patrimonio Cultural de la Nación Honduras</i> , 1997) [18].	Regulations of the National System of Protected Areas of Honduras, 1999 (<i>Reglamento del Sistema Nacional de Áreas Protegidas de Honduras</i> , 1999) [19].
Nicaragua	Law for the Protection of the Cultural Heritage of the Nation Nicaragua, 1982 (<i>Ley de Protección al Patrimonio Cultural de la Nación</i> , 1982) [20].	Regulations on Protected Areas in Nicaragua, 2007 (<i>Reglamento de Áreas Protegidas de Nicaragua</i> , 2007) [21].
Panama	General Cultural Law of Panama, 2020 (<i>Ley General de Cultural de Panamá</i> , 2020) [22].	Resolution No. J-D, 09-94 for creating the National System of Protected Areas of Panama, 1994 (<i>Resolución No. J-D, 09-94, de creación del Sistema Nacional de Áreas Protegidas de Panamá</i> , 1994) [23].
Dominican Republic	Regulations on the Office of Cultural Heritage, 1969 (<i>Reglamento sobre la Oficina de Patrimonio Cultural</i> , 1969) [24].	Sectoral Law No. 202.04 on Protected Areas of the Dominican Republic, 2004 (<i>Ley Sectorial No. 202.04 de Áreas Protegidas de República Dominicana</i> , 2004) [25].

To evaluate the extent of the management and safeguarding efforts dedicated to the 'cultural and/or protected landscapes' in each country, an initial identification and examination of the international and regional conventions and agreements about protective measures encompassing these territorial assets have been conducted to ascertain the ones each country have endorsed or approved. To identify each of these countries' designated landscapes, we thoroughly reviewed the national environmental and cultural legislation and executive or legislative declarations. This review was carried out by performing Google searches and accessing management plans of these protected areas.

If a management plan was not found on the website of the environmental or cultural authority, a thorough online search was conducted. If no management plan was identified during the search, it was inferred that it either did not exist or was not accessible to

the public. Web searches were employed to ascertain the statements and management plans for each protected area. The management plans for the ‘protected landscapes’ were obtained and examined using the specified keywords “protected landscape”, “landscape management plan”, and explicitly focused on references related to the management of cultural landscapes. This review used the latest management plans, which are generally formulated for five years in the region. For some areas, the management period had often elapsed, yet we presumed that the current management strategies were the continued implementation of the latest plans.

The territorial area, geographical location, and management methods of ‘protected landscapes’ were extracted from the Protected Planet website, a reliable data source about globally protected areas. This information was used to formulate the mapping of this investigation.

3. Conceptual Framework

Protecting landscapes is critical for preserving environmental and cultural heritage, which is important for sustainable development and cultural identity [26]. Frameworks for landscape conservation consider the anthropological and ecological aspects through international treaties and conventions. Organizations such as UNESCO place a high value on landscapes’ aesthetics, biodiversity, and cultural relevance; they also encourage community participation in these efforts by supporting their protection [27]. These policies aim to balance preservation with development, highlighting how landscape features enhance the quality of life and promote sustainable practices in the long term. This section explains how legal definitions and international criteria for protecting landscapes have evolved, underscoring their relevance for sustainable progress and cultural preservation.

The term “landscape” is used in various disciplines and, accordingly, has different meanings. Landscape is broadly defined as a viewshed of a scenic prospect (natural, urban, rural, etc.). It includes the components (biotic and abiotic), dynamic processes that give life to scenery, and human interactions and uses that can be perceived. Specific management challenges, such as integrating multiple perspectives and approaches, dealing with numerous levels of organization, and managing complex spatial-temporal patterns and uncertainties, can be identified by viewing the landscape as a spatial social-ecological system [28].

The recognition of the landscape perspective, acknowledging the cultural, natural, and scenic values of rural areas, where it is still possible to find ecosystem goods and services alongside human activities, emerged in the context of natural heritage protection in 1978 with the IUCN’s first Protected Areas System [29]. This system included categories considering cultural aspects and human activities, such as ‘protected landscape’, ‘anthropological reserve’, and ‘multiple use management area’. The ‘protected landscape’ category initially focused on aesthetic qualities and intensive management for recreation and tourism.

In 1994, the IUCN updated this system with six categories for protected areas. Within that categorization, a ‘protected landscape’ (Category V) is defined as “an area where the interaction of people and nature over time has produced distinct character with significant aesthetic, ecological, and cultural value, often with high biodiversity” [29]. Management goals include maintaining environmental and cultural values through sustainable practices. The update also emphasized the importance of local communities’ involvement in the management process, recognizing that sustainable practices must be culturally relevant and socially inclusive [30]. The objectives of the new paradigm, encompassing Categories V and VI, are to manage the social and economic objectives in addition to conservation and recreation; help meet the needs of local people; establish scientific, financial, and cultural reasons; value wilderness for its natural and cultural importance; and include landscape restoration and rehabilitation [31]. This adaptability makes it easier to integrate conservation goals with the socio-economic needs of local populations.

Additionally, the 1994 system’s focus was on landscape-scale conservation, highlighting the importance of considering entire ecosystems and human activities rather than

isolating small patches of vegetation. This broader perspective is essential for addressing complex environmental challenges such as climate change, habitat fragmentation, and biodiversity loss. By fostering a more integrated approach, the IUCN's 'protected landscape' category supports resilience and adaptive management strategies essential for long-term sustainability [32].

The IUCN's system was considered during Durban's 2003 World Parks Congress. The Durban Accord embraced a novel framework for protected areas, ensuring fair and balanced integration with the concerns and welfare of all affected individuals. The Accord commended the achievements in conservation made by the Indigenous peoples and expressed apprehension regarding the insufficient acknowledgment, safeguarding, and regard for their endeavors [33]. The statement emphasized the importance of actively engaging indigenous communities in establishing and managing protected areas and justly and unbiasedly including them in decision-making processes. The Accord also mandated that the Conference of Parties of the CBD should guarantee the complete involvement of the Indigenous peoples and local communities in creating and administering protected areas. Furthermore, it advocated for establishing protected areas that span national borders to benefit the communities that are divided by these borders. It also urged national authorities to assess conservation efforts and facilitate meaningful involvement of the Indigenous peoples, local communities, and other stakeholders in conservation activities [33]. This endorsement underscored the global recognition of the interconnectedness between biodiversity conservation and cultural heritage preservation [34].

This IUCN categorization system was supported in international law by the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) at the VII Conference of the Parties to the CBD held in Kuala Lumpur in 2004. This decision made the Protected Areas System binding for the CBD's signatory states [32].

Alongside IUCN's system, UNESCO developed the concept of 'cultural landscape' to identify heritage sites with natural and cultural attributes that give universally exceptional value to an asset. Heritage sites were initially classified as either cultural or natural categories by the World Heritage Convention. However, in 1987, it introduced 'mixed sites' and, in 1992, it further expanded to include 'cultural landscapes'. This allowed for the nomination of sites that reflect the combined works of humans and nature, recognizing their historical and cultural significance. Consequently, at its 16th session in Santa Fe, USA, in 1992, the World Heritage Committee acknowledged this as "a recognition of new forms of the non-monumental cultural heritage of different cultures and, correlatively, of associated beliefs and traditions".

The World Heritage Convention was the first international legal instrument to recognize and protect 'cultural landscapes' [35,36]. The Operational Guidelines for Implementing the World Heritage Convention (hereafter Operational Guidelines) of 1994 already included 'cultural landscape' as a protection category. According to UNESCO, "these landscapes illustrate the evolution of human society and its settlements over time, conditioned by the physical constraints and/or opportunities presented by the natural environment and by successive social, economic, and cultural forces, both external and internal" [37]. Since 1992, the signatories to this Convention have been aware of their responsibility to identify and delineate this new cultural heritage category. However, the concept of cultural landscape is not explicitly stated in the Convention itself but in the Operational Guidelines, which implement it.

In 2000, the ICOMOS Charter on Cultural Landscapes recognized 'cultural landscapes' as a significant aspect of cultural heritage for the first time, underscoring their importance in understanding the historical and cultural narratives of different regions [38]. This signaled a shift towards a more inclusive heritage conservation approach, integrating natural and human-made elements. Including 'cultural landscapes' has allowed for a deeper understanding of heritage, encompassing the physical and cultural interactions that shape these environments and vice versa.

Other frameworks for landscape protection include the European Landscape Convention and the FAO's Globally Important Agricultural Heritage Systems—GIAHS. These frameworks have evolved to incorporate broader definitions and more comprehensive protection measures. Adopted in 2000, the European Landscape Convention is the only international instrument focused on landscapes. It emphasizes the importance of landscapes to human surroundings, local cultures, and cultural identity, applying to natural, rural, urban, and peri-urban areas and promoting quality of life through landscape conservation [39]. Unlike the UNESCO framework, this Convention recognizes exceptional and ordinary values in landscapes that are critical for human well-being.

Established by the FAO in 2002, GIAHS aims to conserve traditional agricultural knowledge systems, their landscapes, biodiversity, and cultures [40]. Although it is not linked to a formal convention, this initiative requires the participation and consent of relevant communities. Conceptually, similar to 'cultural landscape' and 'protected landscape', GIAHS is an initiative for sites proposed by the FAO member countries, emphasizing effective community participation and prior informed consent. Like the UNESCO World Heritage nominations, proposed GIAHS sites must be globally significant.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Landscapes in Cultural Legislation

The concept of 'cultural landscapes' was a central topic at a regional meeting of experts on Cultural Landscapes in Central America, which occurred in San José, Costa Rica, in 2000. The conference, organized by UNESCO, concluded that Central America and Mexico's deep cultural roots and unique geographical location have resulted in a remarkable diversity of agroecosystems. This diversity reflects the wide range of cultures that have historically converged in this region, making it one of the world's richest cultural territories. As a result, UNESCO proposed identifying 'cultural landscapes' in this region with outstanding universal values for inclusion on the World Heritage List [37]; however, 'cultural landscapes' from the Central American region have not been included in the UNESCO World Heritage List.

The regulations on 'cultural heritage' in the countries of the SICA region align with the classifications of immovable tangible cultural heritage as outlined by the World Heritage Convention in 1972. Each country's national regulations categorize cultural heritage into distinct types, including monuments, sites, places, architectural, or archaeological ensembles, and cultural landscapes. Specific regulations have been further developed and organized into sub-categories to ensure the comprehensive protection and management of cultural heritage.

The category of 'cultural landscape' as established in the 1994 Operational Guidelines is recognized only in the legislation of Guatemala [16] and Panama [22]. Moreover, despite the inclusion of this category in the national heritage regulatory frameworks of these two countries, no cultural landscape has been designated under the national regulations in these or any other SICA countries. Notably, Tikal National Park (Guatemala) was inscribed on the World Heritage List in 1979 as a 'mixed natural and cultural World Heritage Site' based on the cultural criteria (iii, iv) and natural criteria (ix, x) [41]². Although Tikal's criteria are among the most frequently used in 'cultural landscape' nominations in Latin America and the Caribbean [42], its designation occurred before the UNESCO 'cultural landscape' category was established.

This research also reveals that the protection in SICA countries' legislation is often limited to the specific site or asset of cultural value, excluding the broader cultural context and its tangible and intangible elements contributing to the site's significance. This approach is not particular to the SICA region; in other contexts, it has been reinforced that the strategies for the protection and promotion of 'cultural landscapes' are concentrated only on their material cultural elements, separated from their immaterial existence, or even from the natural environment in which they are placed [43]. Furthermore, these legislations

lack comprehensive regulations [44], resulting in insufficient systematic categorization, protection, and management of ‘cultural landscapes’ in the SICA region.

Table 3 presents an overview of the laws governing ‘cultural heritage’ in each SICA country, detailing the sub-categories recognized by their national regulations. The table illustrates that all SICA countries recognize monuments, architectural/archaeological ensembles, and sites/places within their cultural heritage regulations, ensuring comprehensive coverage. The legislation dates range from 1969 (Dominican Republic) to 2020 (Panama), indicating ongoing updates and reforms to address contemporary needs and standards. Despite variations in the dates and specific laws, there is a unified approach towards categorizing and protecting cultural heritage across the SICA region. This reflects a regional commitment to preserving cultural heritage in line with the international standards set by UNESCO.

Table 3. UNESCO cultural heritage sub-categories by country according to national cultural legislation.

Country	UNESCO Cultural Heritage Sub-Categories			
	‘Monument’	‘Architectural/Archaeological Ensemble’	‘Site/Place’	‘Cultural Landscape’
Belize [9]:	X	X	X	
Costa Rica [11,13]:	X	X	X	
El Salvador [14]:	X	X	X	
Guatemala [16]:	X	X	X	X
Honduras [18]:	X	X	X	
Nicaragua [20]:	X	X	X	
Panama [22]:	X	X	X	X
Dominican Rep. [24]:	X	X	X	

4.2. Landscapes in Environmental and Natural Resources Legislation

Regarding the natural area regulations, and taking as a reference the Category V ‘protected landscape/seascape’ of the IUCN Protected Areas System (1994), it is observed that the legislations of Belize, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Panama, and the Dominican Republic have incorporated this system, whereas Costa Rica, Guatemala, and Honduras present other similar or equivalent categories. Table 4 provides a comparative analysis of the regulatory frameworks and protection figures for natural heritage in the SICA countries. Almost all the SICA countries have implemented a wide range of IUCN categories, from strict nature reserves to areas with sustainable resource use. This reflects a comprehensive commitment to environmental conservation. Remarkably, Guatemala covers several categories but lacks implementation in the strictest protection category (Ia and Ib). Overall, including diverse protection categories across these nations highlights their dedication to preserving biodiversity, promoting sustainable use, and addressing specific regional conservation needs.

In Figure 2, the 38 areas designated under the different sub-categories of ‘protected landscape terrestrial/marine’ in the countries of the SICA region are identified under the natural area legislation.

The distinction between terrestrial and marine landscapes is not included in the legal declaration instrument for the 38 landscapes assessed. Consequently, a thorough review of their management plans was performed to differentiate the types of landscapes. In Table 5, 31 terrestrial and 7 coastal-marine landscapes have been identified. In Nicaragua, one area was designated as a ‘protected terrestrial landscape’ and one as a ‘protected marine landscape’, whereas El Salvador has 14 areas designated as ‘protected terrestrial landscapes’. In the Dominican Republic, 17 sites are recognized among the three sub-categories of ‘protected landscape’ mentioned above, with 13 terrestrial and 4 coastal-marine. Panama

has four declarations of ‘protected landscape’, two terrestrial and two coastal-marine. In Honduras, an ‘anthropological reserve’ has been identified, with characteristics similar to those of a ‘protected terrestrial landscape’.

Table 4. Regulations and protection categories for the natural heritage of the SICA countries according to the IUCN System of protected areas.

Country	IUCN Protected Areas Categories					
	Category Ia y Ib—‘Strict Nature Reserve’ and ‘Wilderness Area’	Category II—‘National Park’	Category III—‘Natural Monument or Feature’	Category IV—‘Habitat/Species Management Area’	Category V—‘Protected Landscape/Seascape’	Category VI—‘Protected Area with Sustainable Use of Natural Resources’
Belize [10]:	X	X	X	X	X	X
Costa Rica [13]:	X	X	X	X	‘marine management area’	X
El Salvador [15]:	X	X	X	X	X	X
Guatemala [17]:	Not Reported	X	X	X	‘natural recreational area, regional park, routes and scenic routes’	X
Honduras [19]:	X	X	X	X	‘anthropological reserve’	X
Nicaragua [21]:	X	X	X	X	X	X
Panamá [23]:	X	X	X	X	X	X
Dominican Republic [25]:	X	X	X	X	X	X

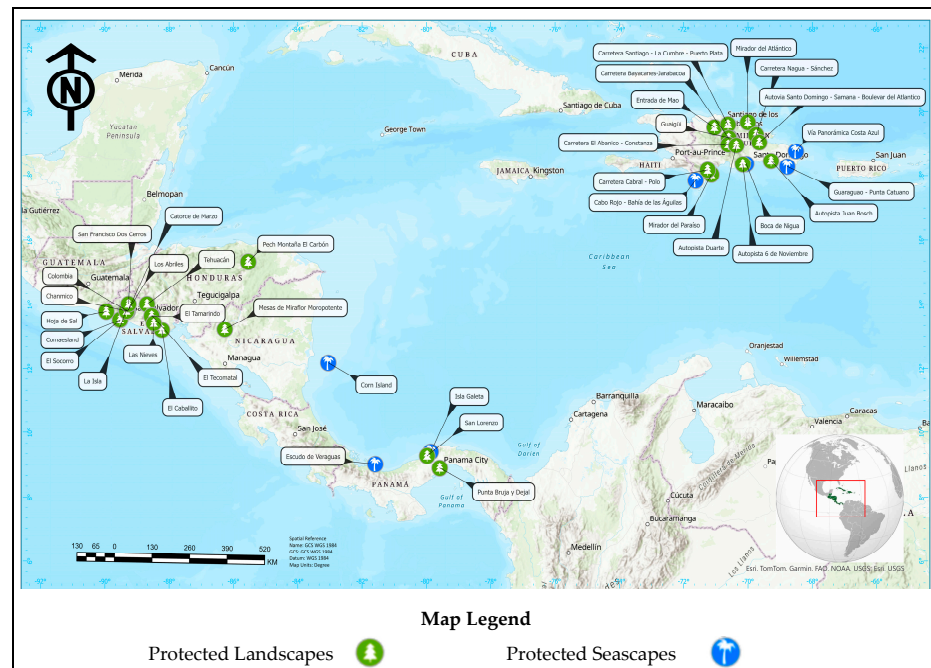


Figure 2. Designated ‘protected landscapes’ in SICA countries under IUCN category V. Source: Own elaboration with data from ProtectedPlanet.net [45].

Table 5. ‘Protected landscapes’ in SICA countries designated under IUCN sub-categories V.

Country/Number of Designations	Category	Management Objectives	Designated Sites (Area)
El Salvador (14)	‘Protected landscape’	Biodiversity management in fishing and tourism activities in marine coastal ecosystems.	Comaesland (0.63 km ²), El Socorro (0.39 km ²).
		Maintain traditional practices of production and use of resources with sustainability criteria.	Catorce de Marzo (0.43 km ²), Chanmico (4.56 km ²), Colombia (1.82 km ²), La Isla (0.52 km ²), Los Abriles (2.33 km ²), Tehuacán (0.7 km ²).
		Preserve and increase the structure and ecological function of spaces degraded by anthropization processes.	El Caballito (15.27 km ²), El Tamarindo (3.24 km ²), El Tecomatal (10.29 km ²), Hoja de Sal (15.26 km ²), Las Nieves Porción 21 (8.99 km ²), San Francisco Dos Cerros (2.66 km ²).
Honduras (1)	‘Anthropological reserve’	Maintain traditional indigenous practices of production and use of resources with sustainability criteria.	Reserva Antropológica y Forestal Pech Montaña del Carbón (340.4 km ²).
Nicaragua (2)	‘Protected Seascape’	Preserve and increase the structure and ecological function of spaces degraded by anthropization processes.	Corn Island (6847.52 km ²).
	‘Protected landscape’	Preserve and increase the structure and ecological function of spaces degraded by anthropization processes.	Mesas de Miraflor-Moropotente (467.96 km ²).
Panama (4)	‘Protected landscape’	Maintain traditional indigenous practices of production and use of resources with sustainability criteria.	Paisaje Protegido Escudo de Veraguas–Dego (422.50 km ²).
		Preserve existing natural scenic beauty and/or develop activities for leisure purposes.	Paisaje Protegido Isla Galeta (5.8 km ²), Paisaje Protegido Punta Bruja y Manglares de Dejal (0.75 km ²), Paisaje Protegido San Lorenzo (121.45 km ²).
Dominican Republic (17)	‘National recreation area’	Preserve existing natural scenic beauty and/or develop activities for leisure purposes.	Cabo Rojo—Bahía de las Águilas (79.08 km ²), Boca de Nigua (5.82 km ²), Guaigui (33.84 km ²), Guaraguao-Punta Catuano (18.34 km ²).
	‘Ecological corridor’	Preserve existing natural scenic beauty and/or develop activities for leisure purposes.	Autopista 6 de Noviembre (3.65 km ²), Autopista Duarte (10.35 km ²), Autopista Juan Bosch (3.65 km ²).
	‘Scenic route’	Preserve existing natural scenic beauty and/or develop activities for leisure purposes.	Autovia Santo Domingo-Sanama-Boulevard del Atlántico (93.29 km ²), Carretera Bayacames-Jarabacoa (16.69 km ²), Carretera Cabral-Polo (10.16 km ²), Carretera de Santiago-La Cumbre-Puerto Plata (20.77 km ²), Carretera El Abanico-Constanza (32.20 km ²), Carretera Nagua-Sánchez (16.85 km ²), Costa Azul (19.06 km ²), Entrada de Mao (54.37 km ²), Mirador Atlántico (11.19 km ²), Mirador del Paraíso (21.86 km ²).

Source: Own elaboration with data from Google searches and the environmental authorities of each country in the SICA region.

The Dominican Republic has the most ‘protected landscape’ designations, with 17 in the sub-categories of ‘national recreation area’, ‘ecological corridor’, and ‘scenic road’. Although this country has adopted the 1994 IUCN categorization system with the category of ‘protected landscape’, the purposes and objects of the declaration for these sites are incompatible with the concept of the chosen protected area as they are aligned with the 1978 system, which is more focused on scenic beauty and/or the development of leisure activities. It should be noted that the widespread adoption of this category is consistent with the country’s main economic activity, where the tourism sector accounted for 15.3% of GDP by 2023 [46]. As a result, it is possible to conclude that the use of this category directly impacts the country’s economy. The lack of ‘protected landscapes’ in Belize, Guatemala, and Costa Rica is striking due to the number of visitors and the significant contribution of the tourism sector to their GDPs [47].

Guatemala does not include category V of the 1994 IUCN (‘protected terrestrial/marine landscape’) in its natural protection categories; however, it did create a category called ‘natural recreational area, regional park, scenic routes, and roads’, which emphasizes scenic values. This category does not conceptually define the interaction of man and nature in the territory, so it is more closely related to the former 1978 IUCN System, which is based on scenery and enjoyment. It should also be noted that Guatemala’s Governmental Agreement No. 759-90, which defines natural area protection categories, was drafted in 1990 before the CBD adopted the IUCN System in 1994.

Costa Rica and Honduras have not included the ‘protected landscape’ category into the Protected Areas System. Nonetheless, they have established the ‘marine management area’ and ‘anthropological reserve’ categories, respectively, which, in their conceptual definitions, include characteristics of the 1994 IUCN definition of ‘protected landscape’, such as “in a harmonious balance between human activities and the natural environment”. Honduras has an ‘anthropological reserve’ (Reserva Antropológica y Forestal Pech Montaña del Carbón). Costa Rica has ‘marine management areas’, yet current declared areas under this category have protection and management objectives that differ from the concept of a ‘protected landscape’. For this study, Costa Rican marine management areas were not taken into consideration.

Table 6 details the management objectives in the 38 ‘protected landscape/seascape’ declarations identified within the five SICA countries, with categories aligned with the definition of ‘protected landscape’ adopted by the CBD.

Table 6. Classification of the general objectives of landscape declarations in SICA countries.

	General Preservation/Management Objective	‘Protected Landscape’	‘Protected Seascape’	Total
(a)	Preserve the existing natural scenic beauty and/or develop activities for leisure purposes.	15	5	20
(b)	Biodiversity management in fishing and tourism activities in marine coastal ecosystems.	2		2
(c)	Preserve and increase the structure and ecological function of spaces degraded by anthropization processes.	7	1	8
(d)	Maintain traditional indigenous practices of production and use of resources with sustainability criteria.	1	1	2
(e)	Maintain traditional practices of production and use of resources with sustainability criteria.	6		6
	Total	31	7	38

Source: Own elaboration based on the declarations of protected areas, management plans or similar in the countries of the SICA region.

Among the SICA countries, there are 38 'protected landscape' designations, with 53% (20 sites) dedicated to preserving scenic beauty and/or developing recreation and leisure activities. These objectives are derived from the first IUCN categorization system of 1978, which is now obsolete and does not correspond to the current 1992 IUCN System adopted by the CBD in 2004. While not required, these qualities are considered desirable in the current system. As a result, legislation should be updated at both the denominational and conceptual levels to align with international objectives, criteria, and frameworks.

Only 21% (eight sites) of the 'protected landscape' declarations identified in the legislation for the protection of natural areas in Central America align with the essential protection objectives of the original international framework, specifically to preserve and improve the ecological structure and function of spaces degraded by human processes. While these declarations aim to restore ecosystem services in areas with high human intervention, they do not seek to achieve harmony between human activities and the natural environment being restored. Consequently, it often needs to be clarified what territorial assets are being protected and what management objectives are being used to conserve the area.

Additionally, 5% (two sites) of the declarations address biodiversity management in fishing and tourism activities in coastal marine ecosystems. This conservation objective aligns more closely with category VI 'protected area with sustainable use of natural resources', which focuses on protecting natural ecosystems and ecological processes through nature conservation and promoting sustainable natural resource use. It does not emphasize the interrelationship between human activities and land and sea use, indicating a need for conceptual revision.

Of the 38 mentioned 'protected landscape' designations, 21% (8 sites) aim to preserve traditional and/or indigenous production and resource use practices while adhering to the sustainability criteria. These goals align most closely with UNESCO's definition of a 'cultural landscape', which refers to traditional land or sea use forms that reflect a culture and man's interaction with his natural surroundings. The values of a cultural ecosystem include spiritual and religious, cultural heritage-related, and educational, resulting from the ability to perform tourism- and recreation-related functions, building a sense of space, becoming a source of artistic inspiration, and serving as a social hub. These values all influence the potential for providing cultural ecosystem services [48].

However, it should be noted that in the SICA countries, only two 'protected landscapes' have been identified with the explicit presence of Indigenous groups in the designation, namely Panama's Protected Landscape Escudo de Veraguas–Deگو, and Honduras' Pech Montaña del Carbon Anthropological and Forest Reserve. These landscapes are governed by Indigenous groups that follow customary law, while the relevant national authority or agency oversees governance in the remaining protected landscapes. Given that 63 Indigenous peoples occupy and use 38% (202,017 km²) of Central America's total territory (522,000 km²), it is surprising that Indigenous peoples are not more involved in the designation and management of 'protected landscapes'. As the community rediscovers elements of their cultural identities connected to the place, it is a crucial component of actively protecting an area where the locals themselves acknowledge its importance [49].

Among these 38 'protected landscapes' identified, 47% (18 sites) have or have had a management plan, 45% (17 sites) lack a management instrument, and 8% (3 sites) have unavailable information. Of the 18 'protected landscapes' with management plans, only 1 is reported to be current/updated, 16 are outdated, and 1 lacks specific information. Weak governance is evident as most 'protected landscapes' lack the necessary management tools to achieve their goals and guide managers. Establishing defined duties and responsibilities for all parties involved and creating the ideal environment for resource distribution are crucial for making 'cultural landscapes' and 'protected landscapes' more resilient [50]. Furthermore, landscapes with management plans often address the biotic and abiotic components and human activities separately, without integrating these aspects into a comprehensive landscape action program.

Most of the ‘protected landscapes’ identified lack a buffer zone, accounting for 68% (26 sites) of the total area declared. Only 32% (nine sites) have declared a core and buffer zone. According to UNESCO’s Operational Guidelines for 2019, buffer zones are legally and/or customarily restricted to reinforce the safety of the protected area [37]. The IUCN also considers buffer zones relevant where human intervention is more intensive. Transition or buffer zones reduce the negative effects of human activities in the surrounding areas while allowing the local communities to participate in conservation efforts. On the other hand, the core zone must incorporate all the attributes that confer value to the protected area and guarantee the integrity and/or authenticity of the asset.

The ‘protected landscapes’ in the SICA region span from 0.15 km² to 6847.52 km², with an average of 229.65 km². However, statistical analysis revealed that 97% of the data fell within one standard deviation (1093.471 km²), resulting in an average area of 50.79 km² when considering only consistent data. El Salvador has an average land area of 4.79 km², Honduras is 340.4 km², Nicaragua is 467.96 km², Panama is 137.63 km², and the Dominican Republic is 26.68 km². While a trend cannot be determined due to significant differences between countries, the data are more homogeneous within each country. El Salvador has smaller ‘protected landscapes’ with comprehensive management plans, whereas the Dominican Republic also has small ‘protected landscapes’, but they lack management plans. Honduras and Nicaragua have large ‘protected landscapes’ with management plans. For the SICA region, the resources and capacities of national environmental authorities play a more critical role than the territorial expansion size of a protected landscape.

‘Protected landscapes’ cover 1.89% of the total protected areas in the SICA region, or 8727.06 km². By country, ‘protected landscapes’ cover 2.75% of the land in El Salvador, 0.93% in Honduras, 20.79% in Nicaragua, 0.49% in Panama, and 0.76% in the Dominican Republic. This means that 98.11% of protected areas in the SICA region are classified under categories with less human interaction, focusing more on environmental preservation (Table 7).

Table 7. Percentage of the territorial extension of ‘protected landscapes’ in the total protected areas by country.

Country	Number of ‘Protected Landscapes’	‘Protected Landscape’ (km ²)	Total Terrestrial and Marine Protected Areas (km ²)	Territorial Extension of ‘Protected Landscapes’ Divided by the Total Number of Protected Areas
Belize	0	0	12,366.00	0%
Costa Rica	0	0	180,523.00	0%
El Salvador	14	67.11	2444.00	2.75%
Guatemala	0	0	23,070.00	0%
Honduras	1	340.4	36,638.00	0.93%
Nicaragua	2	7315.48	35,182.00	20.79%
Panama	4	550.5	112,979.00	0.49%
Dominican Republic	17	453.57	59,582.00	0.76%
Total	38	8727.06	462,784.00	1.89%

Source: Own elaboration with data from ProtectedPlanet.net [42].

5. Conclusions

As defined by international conventions, the concepts of ‘cultural landscapes’ and ‘protected landscapes’ mark a significant shift from traditional heritage protection. They encompass vast areas where human and natural interactions create valuable tangible and intangible heritage components. However, international conventions promoting the safety of landscapes lack explicit guidelines for applying and managing these categories, leading to inconsistencies across national legislation as there is no unanimous definition of ‘cultural landscapes’ or ‘protected landscapes’. Consequently, an international conceptual review

and standardization are critical to ensuring these landscapes' effective protection and management.

According to the UNESCO approach, the innovative concept of 'cultural landscape' includes large functional territories where human and natural actions have harmoniously evolved. Yet, due to their ever-changing nature, it is difficult to establish evaluation and monitoring standards as well as geographic limits, which are vital for planners, jurists, and researchers.

Some similarities exist between the UNESCO 'cultural landscape' and the IUCN 'protected landscape' categories, particularly the emphasis on human–nature interaction. Yet the following significant differences remain: 'Protected landscapes' prioritize the natural environment, biodiversity conservation, and ecosystem integrity, whereas 'cultural landscapes' focus on human history, cultural traditions, and social values. UNESCO requires outstanding universal value (OUV) for recognition, unlike the IUCN category, which allows for broader assessments.

The transposition of international landscape categories into national legislation often distorts their essence to fit specific contexts. Evidence shows that international categories of landscape protection are rarely implemented at the national level due to a lack of conceptual clarity or instrumentalization in international conventions. All SICA countries are signatories to the World Heritage Convention and the Convention on Biological Diversity. However, Central America is underrepresented on the World Heritage List as no 'cultural landscapes' listed. The 'cultural landscape' category is only enshrined in the legislation of Guatemala and Panama, but there is no territory in these countries applying this category.

The biotic component of 'cultural landscapes' is the least understood or detailed. According to the Operational Guidelines, this component is crucial for maintaining biological diversity. To achieve this purpose, the declarations of 'cultural landscapes' and 'protected landscapes' should include protection objectives for supporting and regulating ecosystem goods and services, which provide habitats and promote interconnectivity for biodiversity.

Landscape protection has seen greater support in natural area regulations, reflecting the adoption of IUCN Category V 'protected landscape/seascapes'. Five of the eight SICA countries have incorporated this category into their legislation, designating 38 areas. However, these designations often focus on preserving scenic beauty and leisure activities, reflecting an outdated conceptualization. Most Central American countries struggle to update their legislation to match international frameworks on 'protected landscapes/seascapes'. In the SICA region, this IUCN management category occupies 1.89% of the protected area, indicating that 98.11% of protected areas have an environmental focus with less human interaction.

The resources and capacities of national environmental authorities play a more critical role in developing and implementing management plans for 'protected landscapes' in SICA than the size of these 'protected landscapes' themselves. Management plans are dynamic tools necessary for the conservation and sustainable management of natural and cultural resources. Considering that 47% (18 sites) of the assessed landscapes lack up-to-date management plans, and the others that have management plans do not comprehensively integrate biotic, abiotic, and anthropic factors; SICA should encourage community initiatives to fill the gap for the 45% (17 sites) without a management tool. Such initiatives should aim to include a more holistic methodology regarding the components and factors comprising a protected landscape system.

Most of the 'protected landscapes' identified lack a buffer zone (68%, 26 sites). Buffer zones are essential for reducing the negative effects of human activities and allowing local communities to participate in conservation efforts. Dynamic and functional landscapes require the appropriate management and monitoring within clear legal boundaries that seek harmony between nature and human activities.

The UNESCO definition of "harmonious development between man and nature" must be clearly defined, considering the combined evolutionary character of the physical environment and the society that inhabits it. Likewise, a definition for maintaining the

biological diversity of the territory is also essential. Research is needed to achieve the following: (i) identify and assess landscape characteristics and the forces transforming them; (ii) assess the contributions of ‘cultural landscapes’ to the environment, economy, and society; (iii) propose effective adaptive management and monitoring systems; and (iv) understand the role of ‘cultural and protected landscapes’ in ecosystem goods and service maintenance. Additionally, it is recommended to urgently generate a global conceptual review of the landscape protection category to address the current planetary crisis, with the participation of all international organizations that issue protection categories. This review should consider the diverse patrimonial elements (natural, cultural, immovable, movable, and immaterial), variable sizes, and different territorial scales, as well as the conservation status of biodiversity elements.

Protecting Central America’s ‘cultural landscapes’ and ‘protected landscapes’ could help ensure the environmental and social sustainability of many territories by increasing support for traditional rural practices and local communities, particularly those associated with the Indigenous people. SICA governments should promote the identification and protection of landscapes related to indigenous peoples, considering that they contain the greatest natural and cultural wealth of the region. Furthermore, according to the results of this research, these areas represent only 5% (two sites) of the ‘protected landscapes’, and these are the areas that the UNESCO Regional Conference of Experts recommended in 2000 to identify in order to include them in the Indicative Lists of the countries, with the intention of eventually nominating them for inclusion on the UNESCO World Heritage List.

However, there is a need to explore the region to identify potential landscapes by mapping their location and assessing their potential to sustain harmonious relations between mankind and nature. This suggested review should not only be commended to consultative organizations like UNESCO (ICOMOS and IUCN), but it should also be enriched with regional inputs from institutional bodies such as SICA’s technical secretariats—Central American Educational and Cultural Coordination (CECC in Spanish), and the Central American Commission for Environment and Development (CCAD in Spanish). This is due to the fact that the National Environmental and Cultural Authorities in the region have a budget deficit and a low technical response [43]. For this reason, these technical bodies could establish intra-regional cooperation regulations and agreements that systematically seek to integrate and strengthen these authorities, as well as their management and operational models. The participation of regional technical bodies is crucial for managing natural and cultural heritage in an adequate manner, aligned with the cultural and natural reality of Central America.

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Notes

- ¹ In this paper, the term landscape refers to both landscapes and seascapes.
- ² Criterium **iii**: to bear a unique or at least exceptional testimony to a cultural tradition or to a civilization that is living or which has disappeared. Criterium **iv**: to be an outstanding example of a type of building, architectural or technological ensemble or landscape that illustrates (a) significant stage(s) in human history. Criterium **ix**: to be outstanding examples representing significant ongoing ecological and biological processes in the evolution and development of terrestrial, freshwater, coastal, and marine ecosystems and communities of plants and animals. Criterium **x**: to contain the most important and significant natural habitats for in-situ conservation of biological diversity, including those containing threatened species of outstanding universal value from the point of view of science or conservation.

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