

Abby Lodge
Sustainable Ecotourism: The Galapagos Balance

In 1992, worldwide nature tourism generated \$12 billion and travel agencies reported that high on their list of “hot spots” are places where endangered or vanishing species can be found. Clientele want to do more than relax by the pool in a sunny location; they want to contribute something to a place, take away a special memory, or enhance their education. Tour providers and hotels are responding to pressure to be environmentally conscientious in many ways. Tour companies organizing travel in the Galapagos provide information on the Charles Darwin Foundation and help solicit contributions for science and conservation in the Islands. In Ecuador, managed use of the Galapagos National Park led to an agreement between the Charles Darwin Foundation for the Galapagos and the Republic of Ecuador to establish a research station in the Islands that provides a scientific basis for conservation by the Servicio Parque Nacional Galapagos.

Guides in the Galapagos are on every ship. They keep visitors on defined paths, give daily briefings, and accompany them on-site to explain and expand the experience. The ecotourist, in Galapagos as elsewhere, comes away from the visit with a greater grasp of environmental issues and dedication to conservation. I genuinely believe this is true, especially if parents bring their kids to places that educate about conservation, our planet, and so on, because those kids will grow up with an understanding and curiosity about this world and will hopefully pass it on to their children.

I also like how this article brought up things that were also mentioned in the book we had to read over the summer, *Ecuador's Environmental Revolutions*, such as the Debt-for-Nature swaps and when the Galapagos National Park Service advised the government of Ecuador to close the harvest of sea cucumbers and riots occurred shortly after. I then found it comical when the article stated that “the nature traveler spends more money (about \$1,000 in two weeks) in a country than the recreational traveler,” because I’m really hoping we won’t spend an extra one thousand dollars on the trip.

The article continued with specifically the Galapagos Situation. Since the advent of organized tourism in the mid-1960s, the number of tourists has increased from 4,500 in 1970 to 26,000 in 1987 and to 41,000 in 1991. By and large the main impact of tourists to the almost sixty visitor sites in the Islands is some damage to geological features, trail wear at most of the sites, and some erosion. There are also reports of floating trash from tour ships and plastics which have strangled sea lions and seabirds.

Ecotourism has brought with it increasing damage and threats from exotic species introductions, human population growth, and extraction of resources for export markets. Immigration from the mainland of Ecuador has increased as the tourism-based economy has grown and outstripped even the capital city of Quito as a high-income area. However, some of these new immigrants are attracted to the Galapagos to exploit its marine resources for export to the mainland and to the Asian food markets – which run the risk of overharvesting and causing the population of these significant marine species to crash.

Sustainable ecotourism has been practiced for more than twenty years in the Galapagos with relative success and it is clear from the Galapagos example that sustainable ecotourism requires a balance between conservation and development.