

## Galapagos Ecotourism

by Walt Anderson

The “Enchanted Isles,” lying 600 miles off the coast of Ecuador, are justly known as a “test site for theories of evolution and ecotourism” (Honey 2008). At the time of Darwin’s short visit in 1835, the remote islands had already felt the impacts of human exploitation (specifically the harvest of vast numbers of giant tortoises for food and the introduction of goats, pigs, rats, cats, and plants that had enormous ecological impacts). The destiny of the islands could have been one of progressive extinctions as have occurred on many island ecosystems around the world. Instead, in 1959 (the centennial year of the publication of Darwin’s *Origin of Species*), Ecuador designated 97% of the archipelago as a national park, with human settlement limited to the other 3%. The Charles Darwin Foundation was established the same year, and in 1964, the Charles Darwin Research Station (CDRS) began operations. The park and the station have worked closely together on research, education, and management ever since.

In 1986 and 1998, the Ecuadorian government established a huge marine reserve around the islands. UNESCO designated the islands and the marine reserve World Heritage status in 1979 and 2001 respectively. In response to sometimes violent conflicts between commercial fishermen from mainland Ecuador and proponents of the park (e.g., local residents, conservation groups, the tourism industry), the government passed the 1998 Special Law for the Galapagos that provided participatory management among various stakeholders and a system of allocation of park entrance fees that is a model of community-based conservation (history summarized in Honey 2008).

Apparently because of the archipelago’s long isolation and lack of major predators, Galapagos animals tend to be extraordinarily tolerant (“tame”) in the presence of humans. This made them vulnerable to exploitation in the early years, but it also created an Edenic impression of a land of innocence, where boobies, frigatebirds, marine iguanas, even hawks and warblers lived with no fear or distrust of humans. This is the great draw of the Galapagos for tourism.

Tourism officially began in 1969 when a ship carrying 59 passengers arrived in the Galapagos (Honey 2008). That pioneering trip was organized through Lindblad Travel and two Ecuadorian companies, Metropolitan Touring and Turismundial. There was close coordination with CDRS and the national park, and from the start, there was attention to sensitivity to wildlife and the physical environment.

Tourism growth was gradual at first but expanded rapidly in the 1980s and thereafter. Tourism was one of the drivers of rapid population growth, as a number of Ecuadorians moved to the islands to cash in on the tourism bonanza. Soloman (2017) reports that currently there are about 25,000 residents and 220,000 visitors per year, numbers that provide significant management challenges. Though regulations are strict, it is impossible to enforce them consistently given the dispersed nature of the islands. Tourists and scientists are often the ones who discover and report violations, but abuses continue.

The rapid growth of both tourism and outside impacts (e.g., illegal fishing) began to threaten the park to the extent that President Correa of Ecuador in April of 2007 declared Emergency Decree 207 for immediate planning and conservation actions (Galapagos Conservancy 2017). Shortly thereafter, Watson and Cruz (2007) described the major risks to the archipelago, and that was followed in June 2007 by the World Heritage Committee adding the Galapagos to UNESCO’s List of World Heritage in Danger.

There was rapid response to this designation; tourism stakeholders recognized that significant steps needed to be taken to heed this stern warning. As a result of actions taken, the World Heritage Committee took the Galapagos off the danger list in 2010.

The government of Ecuador has encouraged domestic tourism (unlike many countries that favor foreigners over locals). Airline flights and park entrance fees are lowest for Galapagos residents, low for mainland Ecuador visitors, and higher for foreigners. While this is promising in terms of social justice, it has resulted in two different classes of tourism. Much of the domestic visitation involves staying in hotels on shore and taking day excursions by boat. Those visitors typically spend less time than foreign visitors on tour ships ("floating hotels"), and the quality of the day boats, interpretation, and safety tends to be lower, while impacts to wildlife on the close visitation sites can be higher. On the other hand, the higher-end tour vessels typically conform better to safety and environmental standards (most are certified by one or more organizations), have the better educated guides, and develop deeper visitor relationships relevant to conservation. However, they also return a lower percentage of visitation revenue to the park and local people.

The tourism industry has long been involved in trying to control the quality of their operations and to resist unsustainable practices by others not involved in the industry (e.g., commercial fishermen from the mainland). Honey (2008) mentions the following: Ecuadorian Ecotourism Association (ASEC), founded in 1991 and among the first national ecotourism organizations; Association of Galapagos Tour Operators (ASOGAL), founded in 1992; International Galápagos Tour Operators Association (IGTOA), founded in 1995 and a key force in lobbying for the 1998 Special Law; Cámara de Turismo de Galápagos (CAPTURGAL), founded in 1996 and responsible for a "green" certification program for products by Galapagos residents; Asociación de Armadores Turismo de Galápagos (ADATUR) founded in 2003; and Conservación y Desarrollo (CyD), founded in 1992 and initiator of the Smart Voyager certification program for tour boats. Each organization has a niche and contributes to various components of ecotourism, though coordination among them all could be improved. There is also a variety of NGO's deeply invested in conservation, education, and ecotourism projects in the Galapagos (e.g., World Wildlife Fund, Galapagos Conservancy). IGTOA (2017) since 1997 has provided more than \$600,000 toward conservation and education projects in the Galapagos; this includes supporting biosecurity (preventing introduction of invasive organisms and diseases), combating invasive species already present, assisting the park service in efforts to reduce illegal fishing, and providing education and professional development opportunities for residents.

There is general agreement that the tightly regulated tourism industry in the Galapagos has little significant direct effect on wildlife behavior or numbers, even though there are some instances of skirting the rules, and increasing numbers of tourists will certainly strain the system. Indirect effects related to greater human numbers (e.g., invasive species, overfishing) are of greater concern, and stakeholders in tourism have joined in conservation efforts to reduce those impacts. Climate change linked to human activities (not ecotourism per se) is a significant threat to wildlife populations in the Galapagos, and management will have to adapt to new realities (Soloman 2017). The government of Ecuador, the national park, the Darwin Station, and various NGO's all need to work toward a balance that reflects the aspirations of true ecotourism.

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