



The Galapagos

Managing tourism in the Galapagos islands

(Opening to music playing)

David Robinson

When Charles Darwin landed on the Galapagos Island in 1835 they were barely inhabited, but today things are very different. Over the last quarter century, the permanent population has grown rapidly, from 5000 in 1980 to over 25,000 today. This has caused problems for the National Park Service who want to preserve the unique character of the islands.

Michael Bliemsrieder, Head of Galapagos National Park Service

Increase in population size is a problem. For example here in Santa Cruz in Porta Eura, where we are now, there is no more space. The last areas were given away already to immigrants during the last four or five months so people are living already at the borderline of the park.

David Robinson

In addition to the local population, over 150,000 tourists visit the Galapagos every year. And the numbers keep on growing.

Tourism on the Galapagos is tightly controlled by the park service. Some islands are totally closed off. Wardens supervise visitors at all times within the park zone. But there's such interest in these islands that the tourists keep on coming.

Chantal Blanton, Director Charles Darwin Research Station

I think Galapagos should be important as a tourist area, because one of the major purposes of protecting Galapagos is for conservation and for education and it's very difficult for people to understand the problems that are occurring in Galapagos or in a protected area such as this, if they can't actually come here and see it with their own eyes. The problem from tourism isn't so much the tourist interaction with the organisms. What is more of a concern is all the people that tourism as an ancillary activity bring to the islands and that is a concern, because the islands can not support large number of people.

David Robinson

So far the park service and its supporters have managed to keep the big hotel chains the huge cruise ships at bay but the competing pressures of maintaining the island's unique heritage and simultaneously allowing the local population to develop economically will always require delicate handling.

Life on the Galapagos can be difficult but nevertheless scientists and conservationists regard it as a privilege to work there.

Michael Bliemsrieder, Head of Galapagos National Park Service

There are plenty of problems and plenty of difficult situations and plenty of frustrations. But there are also plenty of rewards and success and things you can say 'well I helped to do this'. I am getting an ulcer and things like that. I am getting sick sometimes because of the problems. But well that's part of the job. I mean I prefer to be here instead of sitting at a desk at the main office in Quito.

Chantal Blanton, Director Charles Darwin Research Station

Number one here is conservation. Number one here is this continuing to be not a museum, and not a verbarium. It's a living laboratory of evolution.

David Robinson

In the decade since Darwin's visit the fame of the Galapagos has spread around the world. Much more is known about its natural history but there is still much more work to be done.

Darwin's comments still hold true. It really is a remarkable and curious place.