The national tourist in Galapagos: Practices and perceptions of the environment

Verenitse Valencia¹ and Christophe Grenier²,³

¹Pontificia Universidad Católica del Ecuador-Quito, ²Charles Darwin Foundation, ³University of Nantes

Introduction

For many years Galapagos was an expensive destination for Ecuadorian tourists and few were able to visit. Consequently, many Ecuadorian tourists opted to visit other destinations such as Columbia or Peru. However, over the last ten years, more Ecuadorian tourists traveled to Galapagos because of low-cost travel packages. Between 1998 and 2009, the number of Ecuadorian visitors increased from 14,440 (22% of all visitors) to 56,766 (35%). According to the official data of the Galapagos National Park (GNP), national tourism has increased by an average of 17% per year. Although the data on national tourists can be misleading, since many Ecuadorians travel to Galapagos for reasons other than tourism, the increase in visits by Ecuadorians is indisputable.

The objectives of this study were to determine:

1) How the Galapagos product is sold to national tourists;

2) The profile of the Ecuadorian tourist in Galapagos, and

3) The behavior of national tourists and their perceptions of the Galapagos environment.
Methods

This study was based on different types of information collected during 2009:

1) Surveys of the tourist agencies in Quito on Amazonas, Naciones Unidas, 6 de Diciembre and Colón Avenues (N=34);

2) Surveys of national tourists in the Baltra Airport as they prepared to leave Galapagos, in April-May 2009 (N=314);

3) Surveys of tourists staying at five hotels in Puerto Ayora that serve large numbers of national tourists, in December 2009 (N=146);

4) Field observations at tourist visitor sites in and around Santa Cruz;

5) Surveys and interviews with naturalist guides (N=54);

6) Semi-structured interviews with individuals involved in tourism and local tourist operations, September-November 2009, and

7) Official data of the GNP for 2009.

This information was used to evaluate the dynamics of national tourism in Galapagos, including perceptions, behavior, and practices of the tourists.

Results

Commercialization network

The main concentration of national tourist agencies is found in Ecuador’s three major cities: Quito (36%), Guayaquil (20%), and Cuenca (6%). The remaining 38% are distributed throughout the country. All of the agencies offer Galapagos as the principal destination within Ecuador. For the last 15 years, Galapagos has been the primary tourism destination that Ecuador sells to the world (Gylbert, 1995).

Currently five travel agencies/tour operators market Galapagos tours directly to Ecuadorian tourists as well as through intermediary travel agencies (Figure 1).

Of the 34 tourist travel agencies surveyed in Quito, four reported selling their own tourism packages primarily to foreign tourists, while national tourists average about 26% of their clientele. The remaining 30 travel agencies reported that national clients average 19% of their business, and that they focus on selling tourism packages from five major Galapagos operators: Islas de Fuego, Ninfa, Puerta al Sol, Promovijes, and Sevitur.

Figure 1. Marketing network for Galapagos tourism products at the national level, based on interviews (number indicated by “N”).
These five tour operators capture 80% of the national market. They work directly with five hotels in Galapagos (Fiesta, Ninfa, Tortuga Bay, Lobo de Mar, and Palmeras), which are owned by the same family. Owners of tourism permits tend to maintain their business as an association within their own family so that the tourism activities, even on the continent, remain in the hands of galapagueños who now reside outside the archipelago or under the administration of some other relative. Based on the information obtained from these five hotels, two of the owners live in Galapagos and three in continental Ecuador. Two of them currently represent Galapagos in the national Congress.

National demand for Galapagos tourism packages is more focused on comfort and cost, rather than on itineraries. Some travel agencies prefer to sell packages offered by Islas de Fuego and Ninfa, due to the better services offered by these operators.

Profile and seasonality of the national tourist

The study identified two important segments within the national market: those who travel to Galapagos on family vacations and groups of school children, generally between the ages of 10-12 years old. The peak season for national tourists in Galapagos is August (almost 4000 visitors), while the lowest numbers arrive in November (2000 visitors; Figure 2). Throughout the rest of the year, the number of national visitors remains above 2000 per month. The largest number of school children visit between April and July, when schools of the Andes region organize end-of-year trips.

Surveys were used to develop a profile of adult national tourists who visit Galapagos and to compare that profile with foreign tourists (Table 1). The typical Ecuadorian tourist in Galapagos is young (21-29 years of age) compared to foreign tourists, 25% of whom are over 60 years old. The monthly income of national tourists is much less than that of their foreign counterparts, which may explain the difference in time spent in the islands. Most national tourists stay on land (89%), while most foreign tourists travel aboard tour boats (72%). Of the national tourists who stay on land, 78% stay primarily in Santa Cruz. Only 66% of the foreign tourists who indicated they spent at least one night on land stay in Santa Cruz. Twenty-five percent of foreign visitors who spend nights on the inhabited islands have been to Isabela compared to only 15% of national tourists. San Cristóbal, although visited less often in general, attracts more foreign than national tourists.
tourists. Also, foreign tourists in Galapagos participate in more international tourism, with 80% reporting that they had visited three or more foreign countries in the last three years, compared to 18% of Ecuadorian visitors.

Table 1. General aspects of the profile of national and foreign tourists according to the most representative categories.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Profile of the tourist</th>
<th>National Tourist</th>
<th>Value (%)</th>
<th>Foreign Tourist</th>
<th>Value (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Most frequent age of respondents (mode)</td>
<td>21-30</td>
<td>29.6</td>
<td>Over 60 years</td>
<td>23.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Most represented occupation</td>
<td>Professionals</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>Retired</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Most frequent monthly salary (mode)</td>
<td>US$1000-2000</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>US$5001-10,000</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Most frequent length of stay in the islands (mode)</td>
<td>Land</td>
<td>4 nights</td>
<td>Onboard tourist boat</td>
<td>6 nights</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Most frequent type of lodging</td>
<td>Hotel</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>Onboard tourist boat</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Most frequent number of nights on land (mode)</td>
<td>6 nights</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>4 nights</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Island where the majority of the nights were spent</td>
<td>Santa Cruz 78%</td>
<td>San Cristóbal 4%</td>
<td>Isabela 15%</td>
<td>Floreana 3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Most frequently used internal transport</td>
<td>Taxi</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Bus</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Most frequent tourism outside Ecuador</td>
<td>Has visited 3 or more countries since 2007</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Has visited 3 or more countries since 2007</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Geographic Footprint Project, interviews with tourists who were leaving the islands in the Baltra airport in April-May 2009 (national tourists, N=314; foreign tourists, N=598).

Tour packages

The tour packages offered to Ecuadorian tourists by the five main operators are from three to four nights, include visits to the same sites on Santa Cruz (Figure 3), and range from US$460 to US$750. Longer packages (more than five days) and packages that include other destinations (Isabela, Santa Fe, or Floreana, for example) are available, but they are generally too expensive for the majority of national tourists.

The common visitor sites for national tourists include several designated for “recreational use” (Las Grietas, Tortuga Bay, Garrapatero, etc.), private sites (El Chato and Primicias), and GNP visitor sites that are accessible by bus (Los Gemelos and the Charles Darwin Research Station). These sites are also frequented by international tourists and by the local population. In general national tourists do not visit the more pristine sites of Galapagos.

Locally-based tourism operations in Santa Cruz 1 make use of hotels, day tours, bay tours, restaurants, and discotheques, offering a product specifically targeted to Ecuadorian families and groups of school children.

1The hotels of Santa Cruz have been much more successful than those on other islands. Over time, Santa Cruz has become the economic and tourism center of the archipelago. Prior to organized tourism, Puerto Ayora had only two or three hotels of which Hotel Galapagos was the largest. In 1991, of the 26 hotels and 880 beds in the islands, 16 hotels and 492 beds (56% of the total capacity) were located in Santa Cruz. By 2006, the number of beds in Puerto Ayora had doubled to 990 (Epler, 2007).
The average income of national tourists visiting Galapagos is relatively high by Ecuadorian standards and tour operators have created a product that is suited to their economic profile. However, the relatively low cost of these packages limits the kind of activities and itineraries offered. Shorter itineraries make it difficult to observe the more natural and remote parts of Galapagos. This limited travel reduces their expectations and experiences in the islands and in part explains the consequences of this kind of tourism in the insular environment.

A responsible tourist?

The reasons tourists visit Galapagos determine their behavior in the islands and directly influence the way they interact with the environment. Asked about their principal reason for visiting Galapagos, 28% of national tourists responded “to experience the natural world of the archipelago,” 25% indicated for “tourism and rest,” and 17% “to know my country.” This indicates that although 28% visit Galapagos to experience nature, most do not; national tourism in Galapagos tends to occur in a social environment among family and friends, predisposing the visitor to give less priority to learning about the natural history and conservation of the islands. Why, then, is Galapagos important to national tourists?

General behavior and reactions of national tourists were documented through direct observation at various visitor sites. Many demonstrated disinterest, lack of information about what they were experiencing, and made rapid visits to the site. During hikes, many paid more attention to taking photos with family members than photos of landscapes or animals, demonstrating greater interest recording social interactions than wildlife. However, their interactions with the environment do seem to have an impact. Some travelers commented, “Thanks to the guides I learned about recycling and am going to begin to adopt better conservation practices.” It is possible that the visitors had not thought much about these practices prior to the visit, but in Galapagos they were required to follow them.

When national tourists were asked, “What are the most important criteria for tourism in Galapagos?” the
most frequent responses were “low-impact tourism” and “a conservation conscience.” They also indicated that comfort and international food were not important considerations. But these statements were contradicted by the observations of guides and other responses from the tourists, with 80% indicating that they preferred lodging with air conditioning and television. On a related note, Grenier (2008) indicated that the energy consumption of hotels increased 54% between 2006 and 2008.

When asked their opinions about various aspects of the towns of Galapagos, their perceptions of Puerto Ayora (where nearly 80% of Ecuadorians stay when in the islands) were generally positive. Safety within the city was the most appreciated factor, as it is for residents of Puerto Ayora, which reflects the importance, real or perceived, of violence and delinquency in day-to-day life on the mainland.

National tourists also have a positive opinion of the urban landscapes of Galapagos. However, national tourists, much like foreign tourists, don’t really know Puerto Ayora beyond Charles Darwin Avenue (which runs along the coast) and adjacent streets, although they arrive in town via Baltra Avenue. The positive opinion that national tourists expressed for the urban landscape of Puerto Ayora could be interpreted as liking something that is familiar to them—their own urban landscapes on the continent.

Similarly, national tourists generally did not express negative opinions regarding human impacts at the visitor sites, such as pollution, noise, construction, or harassment of wildlife. The manner in which they visit Galapagos tends to keep them in an urban mindset, even when they are at a visitor site, with a large number of people (perhaps the only complaint of national tourists), cell phones with music playing during their walks, etc.

The image of the tourist

Tourism professionals in Galapagos were also surveyed to determine how they perceive national tourists. Fifty-four naturalist guides of the GNP participated in the survey (96% of respondents were Ecuadorian). Some of the questions focused on how national tourists perceive Galapagos. Nearly 40% responded “as a recreation site – sun and beach” (Table 2). According to these guides, the Ecuadorian tourist does not demonstrate much respect for nature or a conservationist culture, and few are interested in the scientific aspects of Galapagos.
When asked what activities most interest national tourists, the guides replied taking photos, swimming, and buying souvenirs, in that order. They also indicated that national visitors pay less attention to observing tortoises, birds, and marine species.

According to the guides, one of the important reasons for national tourists to visit Galapagos (“to know my country”) helps to explain their behavior in the islands. One guide stated that “the sense of ownership results in specific behaviors in many national tourists. Since Galapagos is part of Ecuador, they feel that the islands belong to them and they can do as they please, including walking off designated paths and littering. There is a lack of respect for nature in the culture. They think that being Ecuadorian gives them the right to behave as they do in their city of origin.”

According to guides interviewed, about 35% of national visitors are aware of the uniqueness of Galapagos as a destination but this awareness does not seem to influence their behavior. When asked if interests and reactions differed between national tourists and foreign tourists, 66% of the guides indicated that foreign visitors respect the National Park rules and are interested in conservation and scientific research; their level of knowledge about Galapagos is greater than national tourists and thus they have a great deal of interest in the nature of Galapagos. According to one local operator, “Ecuadorian tourists generally look for ‘the good, the beautiful and the inexpensive’. They are demanding and complicated. They demand a lot and give little.” Generally, operators fulfill the expectations of tourists with low cost products that have made Galapagos a popular destination for Ecuadorians rather than an exclusive one.

Table 2. Opinion of naturalist guides on how the national tourists perceive Galapagos.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>How they perceive the Galapagos destination</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>No.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Scientific research laboratory</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unique place in the world</td>
<td>26.4</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Place for recreation (sun and beach)</td>
<td>39.6</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NA</td>
<td>30.2</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Conclusion

Recent growth in national tourism in Galapagos can be attributed to increased availability of all-inclusive tour packages designed specifically for the national market. While these products respond to the demands of this market, they provide limited opportunities to get to know the unique wildlife and landscapes of Galapagos.

The image national visitors develop about Galapagos during four nights and five days in Santa Cruz is skewed and incomplete. National tourists feel that tour operators meet their expectations, but this is because they do not have sufficient information about Galapagos prior to their trip.

The national tourist who comes to Galapagos does not demand much information from guides and does not appear to be particularly committed to the environment. They are motivated more by a desire to visit a special part of Ecuador, than to get to know the natural world of Galapagos.

The islands should be used as an instrument for environmental education for Ecuadorian nationals—especially considering that groups of Ecuadorian school children form one of the most important segments of the national market. Land-based tour packages should be designed in ways that foster learning and changes in the mindset among national visitors.

It is critical to better adapt this type of tourism to the insular environment. National tourists should know much more about Galapagos prior to their visit. This information should be taught in primary and secondary schools and shared through publications and advertisements that better reflect the archipelago’s uniqueness.

A change in both vision and management is needed to improve national tourism in Galapagos. The product offered to nationals is low quality and does not promote environmental responsibility. Currently the product is not adequately regulated.