



Tourism in Galapagos: a strong growth trend¹

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The Galapagos Islands have experienced accelerated development driven by rapid growth in tourism and population. This rapid growth is increasingly putting a variety of strains on local resources and municipalities. The increased likelihood of introducing new invasive species, a result of population growth, has long-term implications for both conservation and human health. Key indicators for population and tourism in Galapagos confirm the rapid rate of growth (Table 1).

Tourism is closely related to population growth, creating higher demand for services and products, which in turn increases the risk of introducing invasive species.

Table 1. Key growth indicators for population and tourism in Galapagos.

Average annual population growth rate (1990-1998)	6.4 %
Average annual increase in visitors (1981-2005)	9 %
Average annual increase in hotel beds (1991-2005)	4.8 %
Average annual increase in vessel berths (1991-2005)	72 %
Average annual rate of growth in tourism (1990-2005)	14 %

Source: Epler, 2007¹

Note:

* Number of vessel berths equals the total number of legal berths as defined in tourism permits issued by the Galapagos National Park.

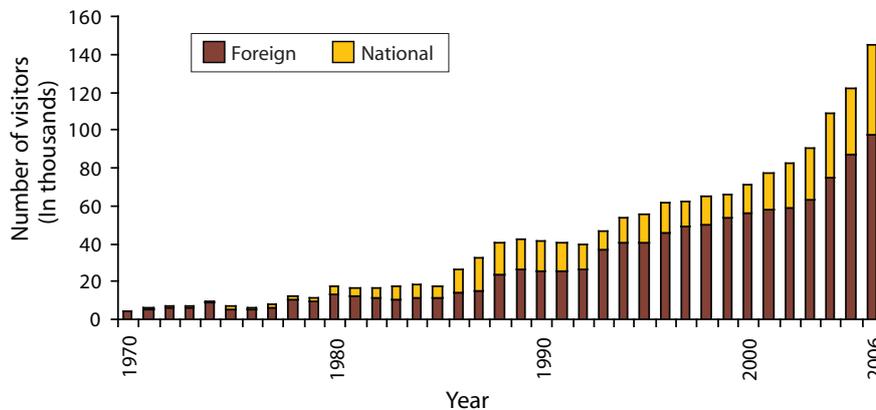
One of the highest growth rates in South America

From 2005 to 2006, Galapagos experienced a 13.1% growth in the number of international visitors. This is much higher than the average for South America (3.0%) and is in striking contrast to the decline in the number of international visitors to the country of Ecuador (-2.2%)². The only countries in the Americas with a higher percent increase in international visitors than the Galapagos National Park were Panama (20.1%), El Salvador (17.4%), Guatemala (14.2%), and Jamaica (13.5%)².

How many tourists arrive each year?

The annual number of tourists visiting Galapagos has risen from approximately 18,000 in 1985, to 41,000 in 1990, to nearly 72,000 in 2000, to almost double that in 2006 (Fig. 1). The annual growth rate in the number of tourists from 2000 to 2006 was 14%³. If that rate continues, there will be more than 500,000 tourists visiting Galapagos ten years from now.

Figure 1. Number of visitors to the Galapagos National Park, 1970-2006



Source: Galapagos National Park database

Santa Cruz: the center of development

Between 1974 and 1980, tourism began to expand in earnest. The industry was clearly the driving force behind an emerging economy and its growth began to dictate the rate and types of change that occurred in Galapagos. Santa Cruz quickly blossomed into the industry hub due to its geographic location near the center of the archipelago, its proximity to the airport on Baltra, and the presence of the Charles Darwin Research Station and the headquarters of the Galapagos National Park.

The “floating hotel” model of tourism advocated by conservationists prevailed. Tourists were housed on vessels and were allowed relatively brief visits to designated sites within the National Park, accompanied by knowledgeable, trained guides; a practice that continues today. Commercial flights to Galapagos began in 1963, and for many years there were no more than two flights per week. Today there are as many as seven flights per day.

Astute entrepreneurs began to offer a wider range of services catering to more diverse income groups. Greater emphasis was placed on expanding land-based facilities rather than on the more expensive and ecologically sensitive “floating hotel” model of tourism. New tourist-related activities, such as bay and snorkeling tours, kayaking, land-based diving, visits to the highlands, camping, and horseback riding, were developed based on market demand, with little or no planning. Revenues from tourism finally began to fill the pockets of resident entrepreneurs. This transition triggered the economic boom that many residents had long sought and others had feared.

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Tourism on San Cristóbal

Prior to tourism, San Cristóbal, the provincial capital, boasted 49% of the archipelago’s inhabitants. Government and fisheries were the main economic activities. In the 1970s, when Santa Cruz emerged as the center of tourism, its population surpassed that of San Cristóbal. With the construction of the airport near the port town of Puerto Baquerizo Moreno in 1986, funds started to flow into building new hotels, tourist shops, restaurants, a museum, and better infrastructure. Within a few years of the opening of the airport, tourism replaced government as the largest employer. Fearing that land would be bought up and developed by outsiders, the municipality and townspeople called for tourism with a local base. However, by the late 1990s, the growth rate of San Cristóbal’s economy began to fizzle, while Santa Cruz continued to thrive.

Tourism on Isabela and Floreana

Isabela and Floreana have the smallest populations and, until recently, had little involvement with tourism. Isabela’s population was mainly involved in fishing

and farming. There were no significant attempts to develop tourism there until the 1990s. Since then tourism infrastructure projects have been undertaken and local residents have begun to receive training for work in tourism. A third airport capable of handling small planes that fly between the islands was inaugurated on Isabela in 1996. Its impact on local tourism was minimal. However, life on the island may change when the recently renovated airport finally meets all of the technical requirements for commercial flights from the continent. Details and dates are as yet unclear, but it is expected that small 50-70-passenger airplanes will begin scheduled flights between the mainland and Isabela, perhaps as soon as 2008.

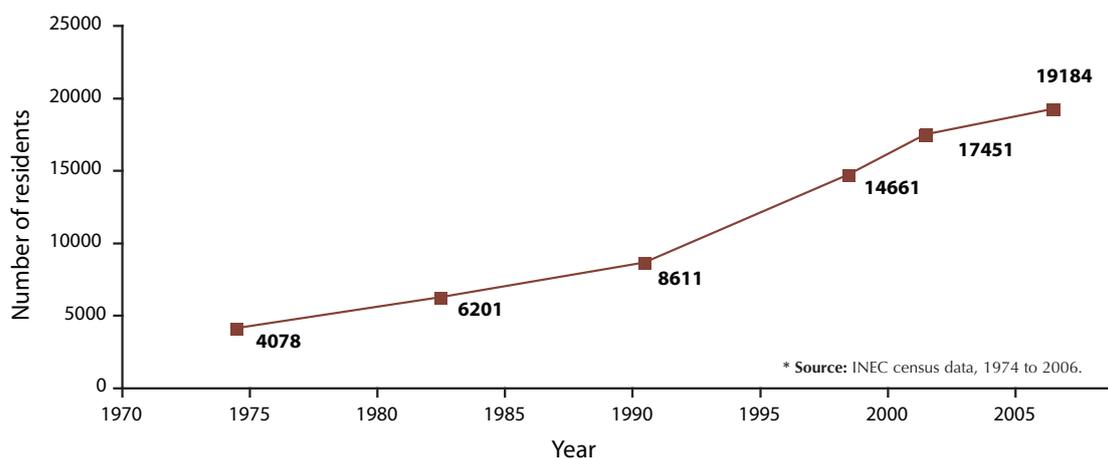
Isabela has the richest natural endowment of any of the inhabited islands and therefore the greatest potential for land-based tourism. There is speculation and concern that the island will become a major tourism hub.

The economy of Floreana is still reliant on small-scale agriculture, but some residents are linking development to tourism. It seems highly unlikely that the island will escape the trends occurring elsewhere, even if the citizenry prefers to limit growth.

A constantly growing population

Rapid and sustained population growth in Galapagos, beginning in the 1970s, was primarily driven by the inflow of tourism dollars that attracted Ecuadorian immigrants. However, extenuating circumstances, such as a meltdown of the national economy and political turmoil during the 1980s and 1990s, also motivated the influx of Ecuadorians from the mainland. According to the National Institute of Statistics and Censuses (INEC), the resident population of Galapagos has quadrupled over the last 30 years, from 4078 in 1974 to 19,184 in 2006. From 1990 to 1998, the average rate of population growth in the Galapagos was an alarming 6.4% per year, three times greater than in mainland Ecuador, where the growth rate was 2.1%. If temporary and clandestine workers from the continent that also reside in the islands are included, the overall annual rate of population growth would approach or exceed 8%. If a growth rate of 6.4% or more continues, the population will double at least every 11 years (Fig. 2).

Figure 2. Population growth in Galapagos, 1974-2006*



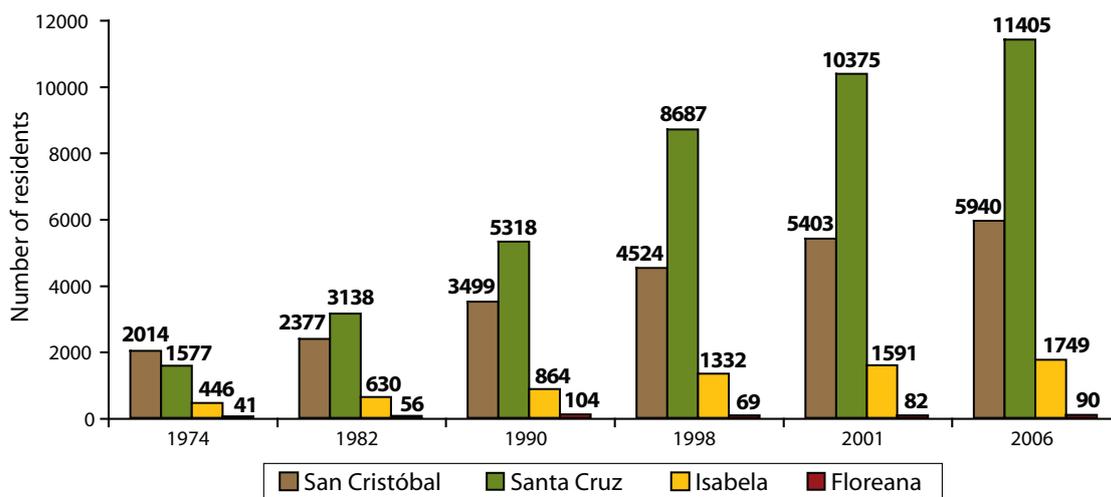
Note:

The official census data from INEC up to 2006 reflect only the resident population of Galapagos. The nature of the population censuses of Galapagos has varied over the years; this should be carefully considered in any analysis.

Each of the four inhabited islands has fared differently. Their economies, population growth rates (Fig. 3), and standards of living are directly correlated with the number of tourists that visit them.

From 1990 to 1998, the number of Galapagos residents grew by an alarming 6.4% per year. At this growth rate, the population will double every 11 years.

Figure 3. Comparative population growth on the populated islands of Galapagos, 1974-2006



Source: INEC census data, 1974 to 2006.

Is there an end to growth?

Due to the fame earned by Galapagos as an ecotourism and diving destination, tourism in the islands continues to grow. In 1980, despite official guidelines recommending that the number of tourists be restricted to 12,000 per year, 18,000 entered the Park. A government commission evaluated the situation and concluded that the limit should be raised to 25,000. Despite some years of decreased tourism due to an unfavorable national or international environment, the overall trend has continued to increase and attempts to set an annual limit on the number of tourists have been abandoned.

Growth in tourism generates more sources of employment and prosperity, and this boom attracts more immigrants and produces a greater demand for food and other supplies, which swells the volume of cargo arriving in Galapagos. Increasing the number of residents and tourists and the amount of cargo increases the risk of introduction of exotic species, with the potential to cause major problems for both human health and the biodiversity of the archipelago.

The challenge

Over the last three decades, Galapagos has become one of the world's most famous ecotourism destinations. Improved means of transportation, communication, infrastructure, and healthcare, as well as socioeconomic conditions, are directly due to the tourism industry and all benefit local residents. Since it was created, the Galapagos National Park has provided over 1.5 million visitors the singular experience of enjoying the natural wonders that only Galapagos can provide.

For more than four decades, managers, scientists, and officials in Galapagos have worked hard to balance opposing mandates in one of the most important ecosystems on Earth. There has been a long series of successful initiatives that have improved the management of the National Park and Marine Reserve, protected the unique biodiversity of the archipelago, and enhanced the socioeconomic well-being of Ecuadorians living on the islands and mainland. This has helped Galapagos to maintain more than 95% of its biodiversity intact. However, the methods used to date will not be sufficient to maintain that diversity in the future.

Ecotourism as defined by the World Conservation Union (IUCN, 1997) is “environmentally responsible travel and visitation to natural areas, in order to enjoy and appreciate nature (and any accompanying cultural features, both past and present), that promote conservation, have a low visitor impact, and provide for beneficially active socioeconomic involvement of local people.” If one looks solely at the direct impact of visitors on visitor sites in Galapagos, one would be hard pressed to find other areas where the objectives of ecotourism have been so successfully achieved. However, the widening impacts of tourism on population growth, development, the resulting increase in introduced species, and nearly all aspects of life in the Galapagos Islands are growing concerns.

Tourism and population are intertwined. The annual growth rate in the number of tourists from 2000 to 2006 was 14%. If that rate continues, there will be more than 500,000 tourists visiting Galapagos ten years from now. The municipalities must be forward-looking. Unlike the Park Service, they have not yet considered establishing limits to growth despite their burgeoning populations. If the 6.4% per year increase in population continues, by 2030, the population in Galapagos will reach 118,000. The population density

in settled areas will be 500 inhabitants/km² and many times that in the coastal towns. These numbers will lead to greater, more intense issues and conflicts.

These are the challenges facing Galapagos. A major management issue for the new millennium and one that complicates conservation worldwide is how to balance the trade-offs between environmental protection and socioeconomic development that will in turn enhance the well-being of citizens. Better planning is key to achieving such a balance. The archipelago must be managed in its entirety, not on a component basis made up of the National Park, the Marine Reserve, and the four inhabited islands. Each component is interconnected. Biological and socioeconomic factors must be incorporated into a comprehensive management plan that will ensure the sustainability of the unique biodiversity and the local communities.

The future challenge is to find a formula to control tourism and population growth that will ensure sustainable and equitable development and conservation of the biodiversity of Galapagos.