

Unchecked Tourism in Galapagos Endangers National Park and Marine Reserve: Interview with Graham Watkins

Over the past decade and a half, tourism in the Galapagos Islands has boomed: from 40,000 visitors in 1990 to 140,000 in 2006. This has had a domino effect on the islands, according to a draft report by the Charles Darwin Foundation, soon to be released. Rising tourism has promoted the growth of local businesses and, in turn, increased immigration - doubling the islands' human population over the same period. The influx of people has contributed to overfishing in the surrounding Galapagos Marine Reserve, and to rapid rises in the introduction of non-native species on land, according to the draft report. There are now more non-native plant species on the islands than native ones.

Due in part to these findings, UNESCO and IUCN have formally declared the Galapagos National Park and Marine Reserve to be "in danger" from these threats. The declaration, made in June, is intended to raise the profile of threats to Galapagos and highlight the need for national and international action. (The press release is at http://www.iucn.org/en/news/archive/2007/06/28_pr_Galapagos.htm.)

This month, MPA News discusses the situation in Galapagos with Graham Watkins, executive director of the Charles Darwin Foundation, which advises the Galapagos Park Service on scientific and conservation matters. Watkins is co-author of the draft report with Felipe Cruz, former sub-director of the Galapagos National Park and current director of technical assistance for the Charles Darwin Foundation.

MPA News: In recent years, international attention on Galapagos Marine Reserve has focused on overfishing and related conflicts between fishermen and the park service (*MPA News* 5:8), and on a major oil spill in 2001 (*MPA News* 2:7). You say these are related to tourism. How?

Watkins: Tourism is the driver of economic, social, and ecological change in the islands. Rampant immigration to work in tourism or tourism-linked businesses has been the basis for a "frontier" culture and exploitative attitude. This attitude in turn has an impact on the sustainability of fisheries. The main direct threat to the marine reserve is overfishing of target species including sea cucumbers, sharks, lobster, and grouper, resulting from increased fishing effort.

Pollution, such as the *Jessica* oil spill of 2001, is a secondary, but potentially devastating, threat to the marine reserve. The *Jessica* was carrying fuel for the growing tourism industry and the growing local population.

From a management perspective, the overcapitalized fisheries and pollution risks are inextricably linked, socially and economically, to tourism. In the 1990s, for example, the booming Asian market for sea cucumbers drew fishers from mainland Ecuador to Galapagos. Now that the sea cucumber market has gone bust in Galapagos, many of those fishers are being allowed to enter the tourism business, which increases the impact of that sector. Changes in one sector have impacts in the other. We should be managing the sectors in an integrated way and making all of them sustainable over the long term.

MPA News: What impact do you think the "in danger" listing by UNESCO will have on management of the park and marine reserve?

Watkins: The UNESCO listing backs up a call to action issued by the President of Ecuador in April 2007. We hope that the Government of Ecuador [which took office in January 2007] will continue to demonstrate responsibility and leadership and be able to construct a shared vision for the future of the islands. More importantly we hope that all players will work together to implement this vision in such a way that the islands remain conserved and the risks of invasive species and overfishing are addressed in the coming years.

MPA News: What will it take to get Galapagos off the danger list?

Watkins: We believe that actions in the following areas are critical for Galapagos to move off the danger list:

- Create a functional and effective institutional framework in the islands;
- Ensure that businesses are truly sustainable and orient growth in the direction of quality and equity, not quantity;
- Implement the process of integrated educational reform to help construct an "island culture", rather than frontier culture, and train local residents for employment in local businesses; and
- Effectively manage the direct impacts (invasive species and fishing) on the terrestrial park and marine reserve.

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