

## THE PROBLEMS OF TOURISM TO ISLAND RESERVES

by

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With the exception of countries engaged in armed conflict, no area of the world is now inaccessible to tourists. Organized "adventure tours" can today be made in considerable comfort and safety even to the Antarctic, the Amazon jungle, the wilds of New Guinea, or across the Gobi or Sahara deserts. Hitherto rarely visited islands such as Trislan da Cunha, Easter Island, the Falklands and the Amirantes are now listed in the tourist brochures. Of more importance to conservationists is the fact that unique wildlife areas such as the Galapagos, Aldabra and South Georgia have become readily available to tourists. Considerable alarm has been expressed that tourism will damage or even destroy the vulnerable ecosystems in these localities. A realistic appraisal of the potential advantages as well as the more obvious dangers of this development is needed.

It is undeniable that uncontrolled tourism, even on the present limited scale, could quickly cause irreparable damage to island ecosystems. The risks are self-evident. Even when the numbers landed are small and carefully supervised, there is always some risk that the seeds of alien vegetation may be inadvertently introduced, or that disturbance may be caused (particularly by over-eager photographers) to breeding birds or other animals. Where behavioural research is being conducted, the arrival of boatloads of even the best-behaved tourists can be an unwelcome distraction.

One must, however, recognize that the practical arguments in favour of tourism are compelling. All Governments need foreign currency and particularly the American dollars which at present represent the largest part of the income from tours to remote islands. Few Governments can yet equate the long-term value to science of a unique and unspoilt wildlife community with the immediate value of an increase in dollar income. Some islands of importance to wildlife are occupied by primitive and needy human communities which quickly benefit from tourism. On the other hand there is a danger that in order to obtain additional money from tourists they will develop a harmful trade in souvenirs such as a local sea-shells, butterflies, reptile skins, bird feathers, or even wild birds and other animals.

Where research stations have been created, as on the Galapagos and Aldabra, the regular arrival of tourist ships can be of considerable benefit in providing a mail service, fresh food and water, medical facilities and emergency services. It has also been abundantly proved that in return for the privilege of visiting these islands, tourists will readily provide money for the research stations. The amount subscribed by the Lindblad tours to the Galapagos and Aldabra has been substantial. The Charles Darwin

Foundation has in addition been given valuable equipment by Mr. Lars-Eric Lindblad, who is an ardent conservationist. These are positive and practical advantages arising from tourism.

The educational value of tourism is also important. If the public is asked to subscribe money for the acquisition or operation of wildlife reserves, there is a moral obligation to provide reasonable facilities of access. This benefits the cause of conservation. Most of the organized tours are now accompanied by qualified wildlife lecturers who are actively concerned in the conservation movement. Not only are they at pains by careful supervision and instruction to prevent disturbance to wildlife, but also to ensure strict observance of such restrictions as are specified. They also indoctrinate tourists with the principles and needs of conservation.

Until now it can fairly be said that organized tours to island reserves such as the Galapagos have produced more benefit than harm. The danger lies in the inevitable growth of tourism, both in the frequency of visits and in the size of the parties landed. Regular tourist flights by commercial airlines will soon threaten both the Galapagos and the Seychelles. The success of the Lindblad initiative has attracted other tour operators, some of whom are less scrupulous and less interested in conservation; as many as three tourist ships landed parties on the Galapagos in a single week this year. Apart from the disturbances to wildlife, this imposes a wholly undesirable strain on the personnel of the research station. Until the Galapagos islands are adequately policed by the Ecuadorian Government, the problem of preventing litter, vandalism and disturbance will become increasingly difficult. The crews of tourist ships are a greater problem than the tourists in this respect. Kitchen refuse and litter is usually thrown overboard while ships are disembarking passengers and this causes unsightly pollution on the beaches at Tower, Hood and Sullivan Bay. The painting of inscriptions on rocks by ships' crews continues and one of the recently erected Wildlife Reserve notices has already been destroyed by vandals. Empty film cartons can now be found at most of the places where tourists land, though the Lindblad parties are scrupulous in collecting such refuse before leaving each island.

The economic advantages of tourism will compel Governments to enlarge their facilities for increased traffic. Nothing will prevent this. It is therefore imperative that conservationists should seek to establish such reasonable limitations as are possible so far as vulnerable island reserves are concerned. A standard code of practice is needed for the landing and control of tourists and for the behaviour of ships' crews in off-shore waters and ashore. These regulations should not be left to the personnel of the research stations, who in most instances have neither the time nor the authority for such work. What is needed is an international agreement with the tourist authorities and the local Governments concerned. This might best be initiated by the I.U.C.N. in consultation with the various foundations and research authorities. Unless such an effort is made in the near future there is a real danger that the unique island ecosystems which

now attract tourists and scientists alike will be destroyed by sheer weight of numbers. Unfortunately this problem is likely to be more acute and more difficult to overcome on the archipelago of the Galapagos than elsewhere. If the Charles Darwin Foundation is to protect its research investment, it should seek action now. Tomorrow may be too late.