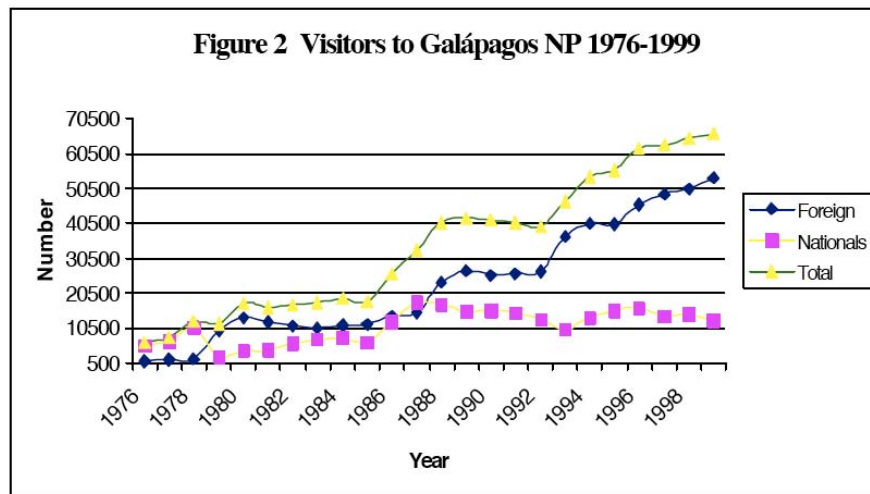




CASE STUDY: VISITOR NUMBERS AT THE GALAPAGOS ISLANDS

Rare and unique places are highly valued by tourists and have often been successfully developed for ecotourism, which is the case for the Galápagos Islands. The first cruise ship, the “Lina A,” arrived in the islands in 1969 and tourism has been increasing continuously ever since. Though there were fewer than 5,000 visitors in 1970, the number increased to more than 66,000 in 1999. The increase in tourism has seen a concomitant increase in infrastructure, e.g., boats and hotels.

Today, tourism is the main economic activity of the archipelago. Most tourists travel by air to the islands of Santa Cruz or San Cristóbal. Tours then leave from the Baltra airport near Santa Cruz or the two main port towns near the airports. Tourism activity is most important on Santa Cruz island because it is the commercial center of the islands and the location of the GNPS headquarters and the CDRS. The number of ships and hotels has increased since 1972. There are 23 places to lodge on the island of Santa Cruz, 11 on San Cristóbal, six on Isabela and one on Floreana. Tourism is now mainly on live-aboard boats; since visitors travel largely by boat, and eat and sleep on board, the need for significant tourist infrastructure on outlying islands is greatly reduced. In 1972, there was a single ship with the capacity of providing overnight accommodation; by 1984 there were 54 ships, and in 2000, 80 ships were registered. The passenger capacity of the ships increased from 597 in 1981, to 1,729 in 2000. The growing number and size of charter boats is generating a different kind of impact and leading to congestion at some visitor sites.

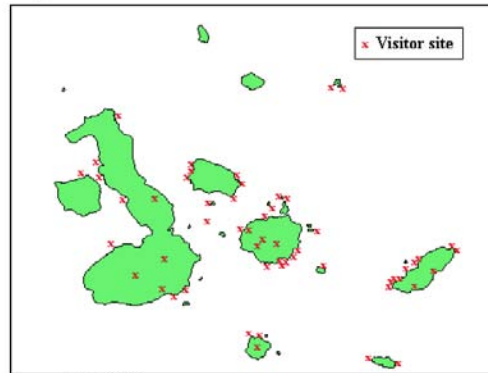


Sources: Carrasco, 1992; GNPS, 2000

The GNPS assumed management of tourism on the islands in 1974, and between then and 1977 the park Management Plan led to establishment of **visitor sites** on many of the islands, delineation of paths and the determination that tourists be accompanied by guides. Most of the visitor sites can be accessed only by ship, so visits are primarily done in organized groups with a certified guide. In 2000 there were 56 terrestrial visitor sites and 62 marine visitor sites.



Map 3 Visitor sites



Since 1975, the GNPS has managed a guide certification program. Guide training courses are given in collaboration with the Charles Darwin Research Station. Guides play a strategic role in park management; they help enforce park regulations and provide tourists with information on the conservation programs carried out by the Galápagos NP and the research station.

Visitor Carrying Capacity

In 1973, the Management Plan of the Galápagos NP established a maximum number of 12,000 tourists per year to the islands. Due to growing demand, this number has been increased several times. In 1978, the number was increased to 14,700 visitors, and again in 1982 to 25,000.

Currently, there is no limit on the total number of visitors allowed to visit the Galápagos NP. In lieu of a total visitor limit, the Management Plan established a specific carrying capacity for each of the terrestrial visitor sites, a key tool for effective management and conservation of the sites.

The methodology for defining the carrying capacity was first applied in 1984 and then was improved and partially applied in 1991.

In 1996, the Galápagos NP Management Plan applied a revised methodology specially suited for the unique characteristics of the Galápagos NP. The carrying capacity of a site is determined after studying several factors, including: timing of the visit, length of the visit, area available, erosion susceptibility, number of people in the group, precipitation and tidal patterns, and management capacity.

The GNPS manages the number of people visiting the sites by using a “fixed itinerary” system for ships carrying 20 or more passengers. This system, started in 1978, initially focused on 90+ berth vessels, but in 1990 it was expanded to include all ships with more than 20 passengers. Each ship annually receives a compulsory site schedule from the park, which allows the GNPS to control the number of visitors at each site. Ships with fewer than 20 passengers have an open itinerary, which gives the GNPS the flexibility to move visitors from overused sites to under-used ones. There is some flexibility in this mechanism as ships are frequently granted changes in their schedule.

Visitor numbers to the Galápagos NP are monitored in three ways:

1. **Visitor information cards** (on arrival, each visitor provides their age, nationality and other general information).
2. **Reports by ships** on the number of tourists carried per trip.
3. **Reports from the guides** (for each trip the guide must submit a report on the number of tourists aboard, the duration of the visit, and the sites visited).

Source: The Nature Conservancy. Visitor Use Fees and Concession Systems in Protected Areas: Galapagos National Park Case Study. April 2001. Ecotourism Program Technical Report Series, Number 3.