



Naturalist Guides in the Galapagos National Park

The Galapagos National Park in Ecuador is perhaps the first protected area where guides were actively utilized to advance ecotourism objectives in an organized manner. All guides are employed by private tourism companies. Since 1975, all guides must be licensed by the national park administration, and all visitors are required to be accompanied by a licensed naturalist guide. Two categories of guides were established initially:

- 1. Naturalist guides:** university educated with a natural science degree, bilingual, foreign born and worked primarily on the larger ships with larger groups of visitors;
- 2. Auxiliary guides:** usually local residents with secondary education, minimal foreign language skills and worked primarily on the smaller boats, often converted fishing boats.

To obtain a license, guides must pass an intensive four-week training course taught by staff from both the Galapagos National Park and the Charles Darwin Research Station. Training courses have been developed for both guide categories and are conducted annually. A licensed tour operator must sponsor participants in the courses.

At first, naturalist guides were mostly foreigners; over time, more Ecuadorians obtained natural science degrees, developed language skills and gradually displaced foreign guides. There is still a small percentage of foreign guides, and their international perspective enriches the pool of experience of the guide corps in general.

By creating a guide system in the Galapagos National Park, park authorities supplemented their work force with a group of motivated, knowledgeable guides who accompany every tour group that enters the national park. In order to retain their licenses (and a lucrative job), guides are required to make sure that visitors follow all park rules, make trip reports after each trip and report on illegal activities that they may observe, such as illegal fishing boats. Guides are also active participants in monitoring tourism impacts at visitor sites. A local guide association supports conservation efforts in the park and in the islands in general and actively participates in regional planning meetings.

Many other protected areas have adapted the Galapagos Islands experience to create naturalist guide systems of their own.

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