



Position Statement on Tourism Growth in the Galapagos Islands

In July 2016, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) released a State of Conservation Report on the Galapagos Islands. Chief among the concerns addressed in the report is the lack of a clear strategy to discourage rapid and uncontrolled tourism growth. This growth, according to UNESCO, poses a direct and immediate threat to the biosecurity of the archipelago. Increased tourist arrivals and the concomitant increase in the size of the local population have resulted in ever-increasing cargo shipments and air traffic, the primary vectors for the arrival and dispersal of new invasive species from the mainland.

Invasive species have already inflicted devastating harm on endemic flora and fauna, and have permanently altered delicate ecosystems on some islands. Earlier this year, the San Cristóbal vermilion flycatcher became the first endemic bird species in the Galapagos to be declared extinct. Scientists believe the extinction was caused by *Philornis downsi*, an invasive fly species whose larvae feed on the nestlings of Galapagos birds, as well as by egg predation by invasive rats. Those same scientists warn that other species may soon follow, including several species of Darwin's famed finches. And, wild blackberry, an invasive and highly aggressive plant, has destroyed more than 99 percent of the endemic *Scalesia* forests on the islands of Santa Cruz and Isabela.

UNESCO addressed its concern over tourism growth in 2007, when it placed the Galapagos Islands on the List of World Heritage in Danger. That was an alarm bell that made headlines around the world and resulted in efforts by the Ecuadorean government to more closely control population and tourism growth in the islands. Although the islands were removed from that UNESCO list in 2010, growth in tourism has continued unabated. From 2007 to 2015, visitor arrivals increased by 39 percent (from 161,850 to 224,775).

IGTOA and its member companies believe that there is a clear line between responsibly and sustainably operated ecotourism and loosely regulated mass tourism, which can have catastrophic consequences on a destination as fragile as the Galapagos Islands. We are deeply concerned about the current rate of tourism growth, which is not

sustainable and poses a serious, long-term threat to the ecological and biological integrity of the islands. We believe our industry has an obligation to help ensure that tourism remains a positive force in the Galapagos Islands—one that encourages and supports their lasting protection.

As such:

1. We support reasonable regulations and restrictions on Galapagos tourism, which focus on promoting the long-term conservation of the islands, including—but not limited to—a firm cap on annual visitor arrivals.
2. We support policies and regulations designed to curb visitation and maximize the economic benefits of tourism for local people and conservation, such as increased national park fees and itinerary rules that encourage fewer but longer stays.
3. We believe all forms of tourism should be equally well regulated. Land-based tourism undoubtedly has an important role to play in a healthy, vibrant and sustainable Galapagos tourism industry, and many IGTOA member companies are actively engaged in promoting and selling land-based tour packages. However, the statistics clearly show that 100 percent of the growth in Galapagos tourism in the last decade has resulted from the increasing popularity of land-based tourism. Between 2007 and 2015, the number of visitors participating in land-based tours increased from 79,406 to 140,323 (a 77 percent increase), while ship-based tourism actually decreased from 82,444 visitors to 75,368 (an 8.6 percent decrease). We believe measures must be taken to limit growth in this segment of the tourism market and that land-based tourism must be regulated as stringently and carefully as ship-based tourism is currently regulated. We support placing a firm cap on the total number of land-based participants annually, restrictions on new hotel development (including the size and number of new hotels), and stricter rules governing the operation of land-based tours. In particular, we believe the growing popularity of self-organized vacations, which often include the services of unlicensed guides and day-tour operators, is not sustainable and must be addressed.
4. We support the continued stringent regulation of the ship-based sector of the tourism industry, including firm caps on the number of live-aboard tourist vessels permitted to operate in the archipelago, sensible limits on vessel size and occupancy, and strict monitoring and enforcement of rules governing the activities and environmental impacts of live-aboard vessels.
5. We believe that tourism activities in the Galapagos Islands should focus on introducing visitors to the unique wildlife and natural history of the islands. We have grave concerns about the development and promotion of tourism activities for which the Galapagos Islands offer little or no advantage compared to other tropical destinations around the world. These types of activities may contribute to uncontrolled tourism growth and diminish the islands' uniqueness and well-deserved reputation as

one of the world's premiere nature and wildlife destinations. These activities include—but are not limited to—golf, sportfishing, surfing, windsurfing, jet-skiing, parasailing, and the promotion of the archipelago as a venue for national and international conferences that are unrelated to issues pertaining to the Galapagos Islands.

Based on the above, IGTOA stands ready to support the government of Ecuador in its efforts to design and implement policies and regulations for a well-circumscribed tourism industry in the Galapagos. Without those policies and regulations, the Galapagos Islands run the risk of being irretrievably undermined by excessive and poorly managed tourism.