WHAT CAN GALÁPAGOS LEARN FROM TOURISM MANAGEMENT IN OTHER DESTINATIONS AROUND THE WORLD?

Tools and lessons learned from seven case studies

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Galápagos Islands are a world-renowned conservation area and natural tourist destination. As such, they stand at a crossroads between increasing tourism pressures and the fundamental need to protect one of the planet's most unique ecosystems. This report explores what the Galápagos can learn from tourism management strategies employed elsewhere in the world. Through a series of case studies from other destinations and a structured summary of management tools, the report offers a practical resource for tourism policymakers, other authorities, industry leaders, local communities, and other stakeholders in the future of tourism in the archipelago.

The report begins with a general overview of tourism management approaches and tools, including the SIMAVIS visitor management system used by the Galápagos National Park Directorate. In many respects, Galápagos has been a leader in regulating access through cruise ship quotas, itinerary scheduling, tourist guidance, and coordinated management of its protected areas. However, increasing pressures from land-based tourism, short-term rentals, and visitor numbers in sites adjacent to populated areas highlight the need for continued innovation and investment.

The remainder of the report comprises case studies of seven locations that, like the Galápagos Islands, are world-renowned and affected by the pressures of tourism. Each case study provides brief background information and then describes the management tools used, their objectives, their effectiveness in managing the positive and negative impacts of tourism, and their relevance to the Galápagos Islands. Each case study concludes with a table summarizing key discussion points to stimulate and inform further discussion.

The list below highlights the main features of each case study, while the table at the end of the executive summary provides a quick reference to the tools used in each case.

01 The mountain gorilla parks of East Africa (Uganda, Rwanda, and the Democratic Republic of Congo) use strict quotas and high-priced permits to restrict tourism, fund conservation, and support local communities. Learning from this strategy, Galápagos could consider a model of premium access to special and vulnerable sites.

02 Bhutan's "high-value, low-impact" tourism model is based on a framework of national policies, controlled prices, and volume restrictions, aligning tourism with broader social, cultural, and environmental objectives, as reflected in the country's Gross National Happiness measurement. This approach demonstrates the importance for the Galápagos Islands of a clear vision and strategic coherence between the public and private sectors.

03 Despite having no permanent inhabitants, Antarctica serves as an example of the importance of sectoral coordination and proactive conservation measures, including effective biosecurity controls and consistent information sessions for visitors —tools that Galápagos could adapt and standardize across all its tourism businesses.

04 The Inca Trail in Peru serves as an example of how strictly regulated access, prior authorization, and seasonal closures can reduce pressure on famous sites. The Galápagos Islands can learn a great deal from the two decades of experience in implementing visitor limits.

05 Barcelona, Paris, and Venice are at the forefront of the response to urban overtourism by implementing measures such as digital visitor tracking, regulation of short-term rentals, and structuring of entrance fees. These examples provide a model for monitoring land-based excursions to sites like Las Grietas or regulating the growing supply of Airbnb accommodations on the islands. Barcelona has added relevance for the Galápagos Islands, as the reorientation of tourism there is part of a broader movement toward a socially and environmentally regenerative development model.

06 Angkor Wat, in Cambodia, is a UNESCO World Heritage cultural site that, like the Galápagos Islands, has experienced rapid growth in tourism. In response, it has developed infrastructure, dispersed tourist pressure, introduced an entrance ticketing system, and increased entrance fees. Galápagos can learn from the impacts and limitations of these measures.

07 New Zealand demonstrates how industry cooperation, destination management planning, and cultural narratives like the Tiaki Promise can create a regenerative tourism industry. The Galápagos Islands could adopt comparable training and marketing initiatives and voluntary codes based on shared responsibility and local identity, and emulate New Zealand's high investment in biosecurity.

The report does not use these case studies to propose a single solution or a fixed model. Rather, it analyzes the advantages and disadvantages of each tool and presents a “menu of options”—a diverse set of tools that includes both strict measures (such as access restrictions and pricing plans) and soft measures (such as visitor education and codes of conduct). In this way, the report aims to support the development of a more regenerative and forward-looking tourism model that leverages the leadership and experience of the Galápagos Islands while addressing the evolving challenges of tourism management in this fragile ecosystem.

Case study	Challenges faced	Tools used
Uganda, Rwanda and DRC: mountain gorilla tourism	Sensitive habitat for wildlife, risk of disease transmission, pressure from excessive tourism	Strict daily quotas, high permit fees, guided visits only
Bhutan: high-value, low-volume tourism	Protecting culture and the environment from mass tourism	Sustainable Development Fee, visitor limits, guided travel requirement
Antarctica: expedition tourism	Fragile ecosystems, biosecurity risks, remote management	International Association of Antarctica Tour Operators (IAATO) guidelines, site quotas, vessel limits
Peru: Inca Trail	Overcrowding, erosion, heritage preservation	Permit system, daily quotas, mandatory guides
Barcelona, Paris and Venice – Urban Overtourism	Day-tripper congestion, heritage degradation, housing shortages, community displacement	Entrance fees, fines, crowd control measures, short-term rental limits, tourist taxes, Doughnut Economics framework
Angkor Wat, Cambodia – Cultural Tourism	Rapid growth in tourism volume and cultural degradation	Infrastructure, dispersed tourism pressure, ticketing, and increased entrance fees
New Zealand - National Tourism Strategy	Pressure on infrastructure, threats to cultural integrity, threats to the environment and island biodiversity	“Tiaki Promise”, destination management plans, conservation levy, strict biosecurity

INTRODUCTION

The aim of this report is to offer a set of public policy tools and management approaches that can help Galápagos improve its sustainable tourism management. Drawing on seven case studies from around the world, the report presents practical options—ranging from strict quota systems to innovative visitor education campaigns—that could be adapted or scaled up locally. These examples are not recipes, but rather sources of inspiration on how the Islands can strengthen their existing management frameworks, address emerging risks, and ensure that tourism plays a supporting role in both community well-being and long-term ecosystem health and resilience to climate change.

Tourism in the Galápagos Islands is the mainstay of the local economy, providing jobs, generating management funds, and inspiring global support for the conservation of this unique archipelago. However, tourism also places increasing pressure on the cultural fabric of island communities, vulnerable ecosystems, and inadequate infrastructure. Congestion, unregulated accommodation, site degradation, and poor waste management have become urgent problems as visitor arrivals reach record levels. Tourism growth has fueled population growth and increased transportation of people and cargo, leading to the introduction and spread of exotic species that pose an existential threat to native biodiversity. Effective prevention and management of these impacts require innovative approaches.

The Galápagos Islands themselves have previously been a global benchmark for tourism management in sensitive environments. However, with the increasing number of tourists and the evolving challenges, there is a clear need to adapt and expand current approaches and complement them with new tools in order to safeguard both nature and the well-being of the community. By offering concrete examples of international tourism management strategies and highlighting their potential relevance to the challenges facing the Galápagos, this report can support informed, inclusive, and forward-looking discussions about the future of tourism in the archipelago. Its aim is to help Galápagos stakeholders select appropriate policy interventions and tools to manage tourism and its impacts.

As context for this exercise, the first part of the report summarises approaches to managing the positive and negative impacts of tourism, including the SIMAVIS visitor management system used by the Galapagos National Park Directorate. The main body of the report then presents case studies from seven locations that, like the Galápagos, have to make difficult decisions affecting visitor satisfaction, community well-being and conservation. It explores tools ranging from infrastructure and visitor education to access restrictions, pricing policies, and governance reforms. Each case study highlights a distinct approach, emphasizing that there is no “one-size-fits-all” approach to destination management.

The seven cases are:

- East African mountain gorilla parks (Uganda, Rwanda, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo), which use strict quotas and high-priced permits to restrict tourism, finance conservation, and support local communities.
- Bhutan's "High Value, Low Impact" tourism model, which uses a framework of pricing and policies to guarantee that travel complies with cultural and environmental norms.
- Antarctica where the tourism sector is organised and proactive in setting standards for biosecurity and impact mitigation.
- The Inca Trail in Peru which uses regulated access, prior authorisation and seasonal closures to lessen the stress on famous locations.
- Barcelona, Paris, and Venice which are using a variety of measures to try to reverse overtourism.
- Angkor Wat in Cambodia, which cooperates closely with UNESCO and has increased entry fees, in order to raise funds for management.
- New Zealand which has used industry cooperation, destination management planning and cultural narratives to pioneer regenerative tourism but is now changing course.

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These seven examples are presented as potential inspiration for future policy decisions, rather than as rigid models to be adhered to. They emphasize both the potential for innovation and the advantages and disadvantages that should be taken into account during their implementation. Some of the strategies discussed would be new for Galápagos, while others are, or have been, applied in some form in the islands, reflecting Ecuador’s longstanding commitment to managing tourism responsibly. All of them provide food for thought, as Ecuador seeks to steer the sector towards a more sustainable, regenerative model.

MANAGING THE POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE IMPACTS OF TOURISM

The tourism industry can bring many benefits to destinations. However, it can also cause undesirable environmental, social, and economic impacts. In order to maximize the positive impacts of tourism and minimize the negative ones, the responsible authorities have various management tools at their disposal. Some examples are:

- increase capacity (so that the destination can accommodate more visitors)
- make capacity more flexible
- the reinforcement of facilities (e.g., physical infrastructure to prevent erosion)
- biosecurity measures
- restriction or prohibition of access to vulnerable places
- “Demarketing” / “Detourismification” (actively discouraging visits to certain places or seasons)
- raise rates/prices (to discourage those unwilling to pay a higher price)
- quota systems and scheduled admissions
- waiting list management
- education and interpretation
- seasonal restrictions
- reservation systems to allow centralized destination management

There are various ways to classify management tools, depending on their mode of operation and objectives. For example, Richardson and Fluker (2004) refer to "hard" and "soft" measures:

Hard measures: These are measures that can be enforced, are firm, and binding. Examples include physical restrictions on visiting attractions or areas of the destination, such as closures during certain periods, the declaration of no-go zones, permit requirements, selective vehicle parking, and vehicle bans in certain areas. There may also be financial restrictions, such as entrance fees and pricing policies.

Soft measures: measures that are not so easily enforceable and are not so binding, but rather persuasive. They can offer incentives to take some action or, sometimes, act as a deterrent without the need for a prohibition as such. Some examples are signage, codes of ethics, codes of best practice, and fact sheets (Richardson and Fluker, 2004).

Desired tourism impact	Examples of impacts	Soft management policies	Hard management policies
Increase positive impacts	• - Increased local revenues • - Funding for conservation • - Preservation of cultural heritage • - Knowledge of other languages	• - Community education programs about cultural sites • - Marketing campaigns highlighting responsible tourism	• - Entrance fees directed to local projects • - Seasonal restrictions to spread visitor flows
Reduce negative impacts	• - Soil erosion • - Wildlife disturbance • - Cultural commodification • - Overcrowding • - Introduction and spread of invasive species	• - Visitor information and interpretation centres • - Codes of conduct for tourists • - Directional signage to manage visitor flows	• - Quota systems limiting the number of visitors • - Restricted access to sensitive sites / site hardening • - Zoning / no-go areas • - Quarantine inspection and reduction of cargo

Instead of the "hard" and "soft" categories, an alternative classification of tourism management measures refers to education, enforcement, and engineering, or the "3 Es" (Education, Enforcement, and Engineering). Engineering refers to modifying the destination or creating something physical that alters visitor behaviour.

What is being managed?

An important consideration is what the management tools are actually intended to manage. Some focus on a specific site or location, such as a waiting list system or restricted access to certain areas. Others operate at a broader destination or system level, seeking to manage the impacts of tourism holistically across multiple sites or tourist attractions. The itinerary management system for boat-based tourism in the Galápagos Islands is a good example, as it combines site-level restrictions with a system-level limit on the total number of passengers and their itineraries.

Other management tools focus on encouraging individual tourists to improve their behaviour, either voluntarily (through some type of educational program) or mandatorily (for example, by charging a tourist tax or an entry fee). These tools can also operate independently or as part of a holistic approach to system management that comprises multiple tools working in synergy.

How much tourism is too much?

Several management tools are based on the concern that tourism can have negative impacts when tourist pressure becomes too great. One widely used concept in this regard is the "carrying capacity" of a place or destination, which is generally understood as the maximum number of tourists that can visit the place before their collective negative impacts become excessive. This is a simple concept that has been widely adopted in public policies, such as quotas or permits for the number of visitors. However, it is also very simplistic, as it overlooks important factors such as the variability of the impact among individual tourists. Furthermore, it is commonly applied to specific places without considering how those places fit into a larger system.

For example, in the Galápagos Islands, the concept of carrying capacity is used to manage the number of visitors allowed at each site, without considering the number of tourists the entire Galápagos system can sustain. The latter would require taking into account factors such as municipal solid waste management and biosecurity. For instance, if biosecurity measures between the islands, or between the mainland and the Galápagos, are weakened, the tourist carrying capacity for any individual site or for the entire archipelago would be much lower, while tightening biosecurity would have the opposite effect.

An alternative framework is the “Limits of Acceptable Change” approach, which focuses on the overall observed impacts of tourism, rather than the number of tourists. It is considered a less arbitrary and more flexible approach because it focuses on what truly matters (i.e., the outcome of tourism) rather than a single aspect of tourism (i.e., the number of tourists). The Limits of Acceptable Change approach can be used at the site level (e.g., changes in wildlife behaviour at a particular visitor site) or at the broader system level (e.g., changes in invasive species or solid waste volumes in a municipality).

How to select the right response?

When undesired changes are identified, it is necessary to establish the cause of the change and the best way to respond. A useful guide in this regard is **the Visitor Use Management Toolkit**, developed for U.S. national parks. This toolkit suggests first defining the likely causes related to the "non-compliance" with desired site conditions, such as (from Cole et al., 1987):

Cause of undesired change

1. Type of visitor activity
2. Visitor behaviour
3. Inappropriate visitor attitudes and expectations
4. Timing of use
5. Location of use
6. Inadequate site durability
7. Spatial distribution of visitation
8. Amount of use

Management measures which can be adopted to achieve the desired state

1. Modify the type of use
2. Modify visitor behaviour
3. Modify visitor attitudes and expectations
4. Modify the timing of use
5. Modify the location of use
6. Increase the ability of sites to handle use
7. Modify the spatial distribution of use
8. Reduce use or increase the supply.

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Monitoring and management of tourism in Galápagos: the SIMAVIS system

Tourism management in the Galápagos has evolved through several stages, from early research in the 1960s to formal tourism management frameworks since the 2000s. The first monitoring programme, conducted by the National Park between 2000 and 2004, was not linked to any Limits of Acceptable Change framework and therefore had minimal influence on practical tourism management. Concern about increasing impacts led to the adoption of the Galápagos Visitor Management System (SIMAVIS) in 2008.

SIMAVIS is an adaptive management framework that is based on the ideas underlying the Limits of Acceptable Change, but incorporates existing management practices in the Galápagos. It consists of six elements:

Zoning: Each site visited is assigned to an appropriate management category, which takes into account the ecological vulnerability of the site.

Itineraries: boat-based tourism must follow fixed and agreed itineraries.

Tourism-related monitoring: Approximately 100 different indicators (ecological, social, physical, and managerial) of tourism practices and impacts are measured. Vessels are tracked by the satellite vessel tracking centre at the Galapagos National Park headquarters, and park rangers are authorized to board vessels to verify compliance with regulations.

Acceptable number of visitors: This is based on the number of groups that can be on each site at the same time.

Management strategies at visitor sites: including clear communication and interpretation, with tour groups accompanied by naturalist guides.

Evaluation and adaptation: to ensure that the system is operating effectively and adapt it accordingly.

Thus, the multifactorial monitoring system that operates under SIMAVIS identifies the desirable conditions and the Limits of Acceptable Change for each spatial zone and visitor site, and guides management decisions accordingly.

SIMAVIS was updated in 2017 following a comprehensive review. This led to a series of actions to make the program more participatory and to better leverage digital technology. These actions involved more stakeholders, including guides, tour operators, academics, and community members.

In general, SIMAVIS has been successful in managing cruise tourism with fixed itineraries of a week or more. However, it has been less effective in managing visits to sites near populated centers, accessible only by day trips, particularly those reachable on foot. Efforts are being made to manage day-trip boats, but it is difficult to enforce controls on people arriving on foot, for example, at beaches like Tortuga Bay. An additional challenge is that these groups may include many local residents who do not want to be treated the same as tourists. These issues were among the reasons cited for introducing guide requirements in 2020, with associated costs for tourists, for certain sites near populated centers that had previously been freely accessible, such as Las Grietas and the Turtle Breeding Center on Santa Cruz Island. However, this requirement has not completely resolved management problems or improved the visitor experience (some consider it too restrictive and/or the guide fee excessive). Managing sites with high visitor pressure under the SIMAVIS system remains a constant challenge.

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CASE STUDIES OF TOURISM MANAGEMENT IN OTHER DESTINATIONS AROUND THE WORLD

01 Permit system for mountain gorilla watching: Uganda, Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of Congo

Background:

Mountain gorillas are one of the world's most famous natural tourist attractions, popularized by Dian Fossey, the film Gorillas in the Mist, and David Attenborough's documentaries. The gorillas are divided into two small populations: one in the Bwindi Impenetrable Forest in Uganda, and the other in the Virunga Volcanoes, which straddle the border between Rwanda, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Uganda. The mountain gorilla is critically endangered, although the population has grown steadily in recent years. Mountain gorilla tourism began in Rwanda in the late 1970s and in Uganda in the 1980s, although there have been periods of disruption due to war and political conflict in the region (there is currently no gorilla tourism in the Democratic Republic of Congo for this reason). To prepare them for tourism, the gorillas must be habituated. This long process makes them tolerant of human presence, although not to the same extent as many wild animals in the Galapagos.

Since its inception, there have been concerns about the inherent risks of mountain gorilla tourism. Gorillas are very close relatives of humans and are therefore at risk of contracting similar diseases. Tourists come from all over the world and could easily introduce a new pathogen that could be devastating to the gorilla population. There are also concerns about the impact on behaviour, although groups visited by tourists have had birth and survival rates similar to those of other groups.

Tourism management:

Gorilla tourism is managed through a permit system. Similar rules govern visits in all three countries within the gorillas' range. These include a strict daily quota of eight tourists per gorilla group, a maximum visit time of one hour (although the round trip can take much longer), and a minimum distance of seven metres between visitors and gorillas. Tourists in Uganda and Rwanda must wear masks during their hour with the gorillas and undergo health screenings before entering the park. This is not consistently enforced in the Democratic Republic of Congo when it is open to tourism.

Prices vary considerably, even though the product is very similar. Gorilla tracking costs US$800 in Uganda, US$1,500 in Rwanda, and US$400 in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Uganda also offers a premium "habituation experience" that allows for a visit of up to four hours. The price is US$1,500. All prices are lower for foreign residents and significantly lower for East African citizens. Permits are sold on a first-come, first-served basis, with no specific quotas for different nationality categories.

Permits typically sell out months in advance, especially during peak season. They can only be purchased online through government conservation agencies, although tour operators can buy them in advance and then resell them as part of a package. There are no seasonal discounts, despite significant seasonal variations in demand. On-site, cash-only permit sales were discontinued due to corruption and overselling of permits in the early years of gorilla tourism. Currently, all tourists visiting Uganda and Rwanda must obtain a permit in advance to be able to see the gorillas.

The gorilla range states vary in how they distribute the revenue generated by gorilla permits. For example, in Uganda, a small portion of the revenue from tourist fees goes into a Revenue Sharing Fund, exclusively for local communities. This proportion has varied over time, but it is typically around 20% of the daily park entrance fee, which is USD40 for foreign tourists. It represents a very small part of the total cost of gorilla viewing, as it excludes the permit itself. This has been a source of conflict with local communities, who feel they are not being treated fairly. The remaining revenue is retained by the Uganda Wildlife Authority, which uses it to subsidize the operating costs of all the other national parks and wildlife reserves in the country. Adams and Infield (2003) explore the many conflicting interests surrounding gorilla permit revenue and the institutional challenges of managing it fairly and transparently. They argue that gorilla tourism effectively subsidizes the central government's budget (for example, for health, education, the military, etc.), as it reduces the amount of central tax revenue that the Ministry of Finance needs to allocate to conservation.

Objective:

The goal of the permit system is to minimize the risks of human impact on gorillas (through the transmission of diseases or the impact on their behaviour), while maximizing revenue for conservation agencies and local communities around gorilla parks.

Positive and negative impacts:

Gorilla tourism has been highly successful in generating funds for gorilla conservation. The best evidence of this is the increase in gorilla numbers over the past 20–30 years (McNeilage et al., 2007). Gorilla parks also serve as a source of funding for the entire national conservation network of Uganda and Rwanda, as most other parks in both countries are generally not profitable.

It could be argued that mountain gorilla tourism has not contributed as much as might have been expected to the national tourism sector in Uganda or Rwanda due to strict limitations on the number of tourists allowed to visit the gorillas each day. It would be difficult to create a national industry based on a product with a daily limit of 40-50 tourists. Partly for this reason, there has been significant pressure to habituate more gorilla groups and increase the number of tourists who can visit them. One could argue that, over time, the focus has shifted from tourism that supports conservation to conservation that supports tourism, and only gorilla groups living in completely inaccessible areas have not been habituated.

Relevance to Galapagos:

Galapagos tourism and mountain gorilla tourism share several important similarities. First, both are among the most iconic wildlife tourism products on the planet. Both are considered "must-see" destinations for nature enthusiasts, yet they can only accommodate a relatively modest number of visitors. They also appeal to very wealthy individuals seeking iconic experiences, including those without a particularly strong interest in nature. Second, both have a strict permit-based management system for specific activities: boat tours and visits to designated sites in the case of the Galapagos, and mountain gorilla watching in East Africa.

Third, there are similarities in the types of international tourists who visit: in many cases, it's the same people on different trips. This demonstrates that at least some of the Galapagos visitors are able and potentially willing to pay a premium for iconic experiences. It's also worth noting that gorilla tourism isn't exclusive to the super-rich. A good number of foreigners—backpackers, teachers, nurses, and so on—go to see the gorillas, often considering it an exceptional, once-in-a-lifetime expense for a unique experience. The same is likely true for some of the younger, budget-conscious tourists currently visiting the Galapagos, and for some of the growing number of Ecuadorian visitors.

Fourth, both cases generally have a high level of confidence in the tourism product. Over 95% of all tourists who go to see gorillas manage to find and observe them on the day of their permit. This allows for charging a high fee. If tourists don't see the gorillas, they can't simply return the next day, because there will be another group with a reservation and there are daily quotas. In the Galápagos, there are also many opportunities to see iconic wildlife, thanks to the fact that most animals generally ignore tourists. There is a lower degree of certainty in the case of some diving and birdwatching experiences, which involve an element of luck, tourist skill, and seasonality. It would be very difficult to charge a high price for a permit for something that might not be seen.

Fifth, there is strong pressure to open new visitor sites to meet the demand from the tourism industry, investors, and local residents who hope to provide accommodation and services. This has been observed with the habituation of new gorilla groups in Africa and the opening of new visitor sites in the Galápagos.

Sixth, tourists can enter both parks for a relatively low price: for example, entering Bwindi Impenetrable National Park in Uganda for a day without seeing the gorillas costs US$40 for foreign tourists, while seeing the gorillas incurs an additional cost of US$800. In a sense, the entry system for gorilla parks for those not planning to see the gorillas is analogous to land-based tourism in the Galápagos, where tourists pay a relatively low entrance fee (US$30 for Ecuadorian nationals up to US$200 for international tourists) and there is no formal limit on the number of tourists who can enter.

On the other hand, there are important differences between the Galápagos Islands and gorilla watching. First, the Galápagos Islands require an entrance fee to access the entire system, including accommodation, while tourists visiting gorilla parks can stay in villages outside the park without paying any fees. This means there is no mechanism for the government to control the number of visitors to villages outside the gorilla parks. This lack of control could be considered similar to the current situation in the Galápagos, however there could, in theory, be controls on the number of visitors to the archipelago, enforced through the park entrance system and the management of flight numbers and hotel permits.

The use of permits for specific activities differs significantly between the two cases. Gorilla tourism charges a high price for a one-day activity with a strict limit on the number of visitors. Galápagos uses permits for visits to specific sites, particularly through the complex system used to manage the itineraries of the various modes of tourism, such as live-aboard tours, dive tourism and day tours (one-day boat trips from the inhabited areas to visitor sites). However, there are no additional fees (other than certain obligatory guiding services) for specific sites or activities, and no equivalent to the USD800+ fee for a specific activity charged by gorilla tourism. It could be argued that Galápagos now needs a system of additional fees for specific sites, which are particularly sensitive or which are accessible by day tours from inhabited areas and hence are under pressure to increase the permitted number of visitors.

It's worth asking whether such a system could be adopted in the Galápagos. Arguably, the Galápagos lacks any iconic wildlife or nature experience as emblematic as seeing gorillas (perhaps marine tourism at Darwin and Wolf Islands comes close). However, it would be possible to introduce some kind of tiered pricing system for visitor sites, provided it's clear what is covered by the existing entrance fee and what is extra. For example, there could be premium fees for accessing sensitive or special sites (e.g., Punta Espinoza, Genovesa, Punta Suárez, diving at Darwin/Wolf) and a two-tiered (or sliding scale) fee for accessing congested sites near the ports (e.g., Santa Fe, Plaza, Seymour). The latter could encourage tourists to plan ahead and choose low-season dates or off-peak times of day. This would even out the flow of visitors and reduce the pressure to allow tourist numbers to reach levels that negatively impact biodiversity and the visitor experience. Of course, this would present technical challenges regarding accurate fee collection, reservation systems, and so on. In this regard, it is worth noting that the permit system for seeing gorillas in East Africa is very simple, without even seasonal prices.

Gorillas and Galápagos: Talking points table

Gorilla tourism - Policy intervention	Relevance to Galapagos	Advantages	Disadvantages
High-priced permits for unique and exclusive wildlife experiences	• Partially relevant: Galapagos lacks an iconic experience like gorilla watching, but premium sites could justify special fees (e.g., diving at Darwin/Wolf). Some sites (for example, Punta Espinoza, Punta Suárez, Genovesa) are very vulnerable and could have a limited number of visitors and special rates.	• - Generates funding for conservation. • - Limit the number of visitors to sensitive sites. • - It captures the willingness to pay. • - In remote locations, the number of visits is lower anyway for logistical and cost reasons. • - Differential pricing could be built into the itinerary management system.	• - Galápagos lacks a clear and uniquely emblematic terrestrial equivalent; • - May encounter resistance from travelers with smaller budgets. • - Requires robust booking and monitoring systems.
Strict daily quotas for gorilla viewing permits	• Relevant: quotas already exist through the itinerary system for visitor sites in the Galapagos; the quota system could be strengthened in sensitive or congested terrestrial sites.	• - Protects fragile ecosystems. • - Maintains the high quality of the visitor experience (no overcrowding), which enhances the reputation of the Galapagos.	• - Complexity of enforcing quotas across numerous sites in the Galapagos. • - Risk of reducing local access or creating tensions if quotas prioritize foreign or high-spending tourists over Ecuadorian visitors and residents.
Simple, centralized permit booking system for both general park access and specific sites or experiences.	• Relevant, but currently fragmented in the Galapagos; a centralized reservation system could improve the management of the most congested sites.	• - Improves the predictability of visitor flows. • - Improves data collection for planning and conservation. • - Facilitates the application of differentiated prices for sites or prices for specific activities.	• - It requires administrative capacity and coordination among stakeholders. • - Possible resistance from tour operators and agencies.
Low entrance fees for non-premium visits to the park	• It is already applied in Galapagos (i.e. basic entry fees); there is an opportunity to clarify what the entry fee covers and how the collected amounts are invested.	• - Maintains accessibility for travelers on a budget. • - Guarantees a basic financial contribution for conservation from all visitors.	• - It encourages a high total volume of visitors beyond the limits of the archipelago in terms of biosecurity, infrastructure and services. • It does not deter overcrowding in popular, non-premium sites • - The opportunity to take advantage of the high willingness to pay of some visitors is lost, unless there are premium add-ons.
Permit revenue directly funds conservation and communities	• Already implemented: Galapagos entrance fees contribute to the funding of the park, the biosecurity agency and the local government, but with limited transparency and accountability regarding the achievement of the intended ecological and social outcomes.	• - Strengthens local support for tourism restrictions. • - Ensure that economic benefits reach conservation and local communities.	• - Requires accountability mechanisms to ensure that funds are allocated and used effectively. • - Potential conflicts over income distribution.
Habituation of additional gorilla groups to increase supply	• Analogous to the opening of new visitor sites in the Galapagos; relevant to debates on expanding tourism capacity. The finite number of gorilla groups is analogous to the limited number of critical sites, such as seabird breeding colonies.	• - It temporarily satisfies the growing tourist demand. • - It potentially distributes visitor pressure across more sites, reducing localized impacts.	• - Risk of long-term ecological degradation, including wider spread of invasive species, if not managed carefully. • - Few critical wildlife sites remain undisturbed. • - It can encourage unsustainable growth of tourism infrastructure.

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02 Tourism management in Bhutan

Background:

Bhutan, a small Himalayan kingdom nestled between India and China, has earned iconic status as a tourist destination thanks to its unique blend of cultural authenticity, environmental stewardship, and a development philosophy centered on Gross National Happiness. Famous for its breathtaking mountain scenery, centuries-old Buddhist monasteries, and vibrant festivals, Bhutan offers a tourism product rooted in preserved traditions in a rapidly globalizing world.

Until 1974, Bhutan was almost completely isolated from the outside world, both politically and economically. This approach stemmed from the monarchy's desire to preserve Bhutan's unique cultural identity, religious traditions, and fragile natural environment from external influences. Foreigners were rarely allowed into the country, and those who did—mostly diplomats, academics, or members of certain aid organizations—required special invitations and permits. There was no formal tourism infrastructure, and international awareness of Bhutan was extremely limited.

This self-imposed isolation helped Bhutan avoid colonization and maintain a high degree of sovereignty and cultural continuity, but it also limited economic development. In 1974, the decision was made to cautiously open up. This marked a turning point, balancing the desire for modernization and economic growth with a strong commitment to cultural preservation and environmental protection. Since then, Bhutan has earned a reputation as a leading tourist destination.

Tourism management:

Bhutan manages tourism through its "high value, low impact" strategy (originally called "high value, low volume"), which aims to ensure a sustainable approach while preserving its cultural and natural heritage. Since September 2023, all foreign visitors (except those from India, Bangladesh, and the Maldives) have been required to pay a Sustainable Development Fee (SDF) of USD 100 per person per night, which the government collects and retains. In addition, a one-time visa fee of USD 40 is required.

In 2023, Bhutan also abolished the Minimum Daily Package Rate (MDPR) system, which varied seasonally. This rate used to be USD200 per day in the low season and USD250 per day in the high season, with a guaranteed share going to local communities. The decision to abolish the MDPR was made for several reasons, including a lack of transparency regarding what the daily rate covered, a race to the bottom among tour operators to capture the largest share of the rate, and concerns about the concentration of profits among a limited number of operators. The new SDF is paid entirely to the government, and additional costs vary more transparently among operators. There are no seasonal prices in the SDF system, although the additional fees charged by tour operators vary depending on the season.

Since September 2022, Bhutan has allowed self-designed itineraries, enabling travelers to independently arrange their visa, accommodation, and overall trip without being required to book through a licensed tour operator. They still have to pay the daily SDF of USD100, and a licensed guide is mandatory at all times outside the main tourist circuit area. While this approach offers tourists slightly more freedom than before, there are still strict limitations on the areas that can be visited, and permits are required for some activities, such as trekking. Trekking routes and travel dates are set in advance, and permits are tied to specific trails.

The vast majority of visitors book their stay and travel through a government-accredited tour operator. The operator includes accommodation, meals, ground transportation, licensed guides, and entrance fees in a single daily rate (which includes the SDF). The aim is to ensure quality, control visitor numbers, and channel revenue directly towards conservation, infrastructure, and community well-being. This system allows the government to closely control the tourism industry, as it can dictate which sites can be visited and how many people can go to them.

Bhutan was receiving between 200,000 and 300,000 international visitors annually until the collapse caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Numbers are recovering, reaching 146,000 in 2024. India is the main country of origin, with over 94,000 visitors in 2024. There is no official quota for visitors to Bhutan, but high fees and the requirement that most visitors book through Bhutanese operators act as a *de facto* quota system. In peak season tourist numbers are also limited by hotel and airline capacity (only two airlines are authorized to fly to Bhutan, and they are expensive). Visas must be obtained well in advance. Most visitors are over 60 and highly educated.

Although not specifically related to tourism management, it is worth mentioning that Bhutan has pioneered the concept of "Gross National Happiness" as an alternative to Gross National Product. This concept emphasizes the happiness and well-being of the population, rather than its total economic activity. This can be seen as a strategy to avoid treating economic growth as an end in itself, instead viewing it as a means to achieve more important goals, such as a happy society and a healthy environment. Bhutan's preference for keeping tourist numbers low and minimizing their impact on national culture can be seen as consistent with this approach (Brooks, 2013).

Objective:

Limit the number of tourists while promoting cultural preservation and environmental protection.

Positive and negative impacts:

Tourism management in Bhutan offers several advantages. The use of the Sustainable Development Fee (SDF) and the charging for tourist entry at the national level limit the number of visitors, maintain exclusivity, and generate significant revenue for the government. Arguably, this has enabled Bhutan to preserve its unique character (both cultural and environmental) while deriving significant value from tourism.

On the less positive side, Bhutan's strict management approach undoubtedly limits the visitor experience, reduces opportunities for community involvement in tourism, and offers visitors a somewhat sterile experience of government-authorized sites. The reforms in 2023 appear to have slightly reduced the level of control, but it is still too early to assess their full impact.

Relevance to Galápagos:

Despite being a mountainous, landlocked country, Bhutan shares some striking similarities with the Galápagos Islands in their approach to tourism management. Both employ "system-level" management interventions, where all visitors pay an entry fee to the country or archipelago, plus additional controls for visits to specific sites. They have a similar total number of annual visitors and both were severely impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Furthermore, almost all tourists arrive by air via a limited number of airlines. While neither country enforces a strict visitor quota system-level limit, Bhutan appears to deliberately restrict the total number of visitors by limiting the number of flights entering and leaving the country. For Galápagos, restricting more tightly the routes and frequency of flights could also significantly strengthen biosecurity.

A key difference is that Bhutan's SDF of USD100 per day guarantees that all tourists make a significant financial contribution to the country and its conservation efforts. This contrasts with the Galápagos Islands, where, after paying for the flight and a single park entrance fee, a tourist could, in theory, stay for a considerable amount of time in land-based accommodation without making any further contributions to the park. They could also do so at relatively low cost, provided that they didn't take too many expensive excursions, whereas in Bhutan, this type of budget tourism is not possible. One drawback of this model in Bhutan is that the system incentivizes short visits, which can hinder more immersive and meaningful tourist experiences.

The revenue from the SDF goes to the central government, whereas the Minimum Daily Package Rate model, in place before 2023, included guaranteed revenue shares for various stakeholders, including the government, conservation agencies, and local communities. In the case of the Galápagos Islands, the 1998 Special Law allocated fixed percentages among various national and local government bodies. The updated Special Law of 2015 empowered the Galápagos Governing Council to modify these proportions, but with the guarantee that the National Park would receive at least 50%. In practice, the Council has not exercised this power.

It is clear that both Bhutan and Ecuador have been grappling with the trade-offs involved in setting entry fees: how much revenue is needed for conservation and social needs, how the fee should vary depending on the length of stay (in Galápagos or in Ecuador), how it should vary based on nationality or other categorization, how the fee system will influence the total volume of tourism and its distribution among market segments (high/low, nature/sun-and-sand), and how the revenue should be managed and distributed. In Bhutan's case, the assessment of trade-offs is simplified by the clarity and consistency of its objective: "high value, low impact". In the case of the Galápagos, the government must consider additional objectives, particularly reducing biosecurity risks, promoting scientific research, providing mainland Ecuadorians with the opportunity to experience their country's natural heritage, and enhancing the role of Galápagos as a national emblem and a catalyst for mainland tourism and other economic activities. For example, a daily fee like the SDF applied to the Galápagos Islands would likely discourage longer stays and reduce the total number of overnight stays, especially on land where trip duration is more flexible. This would reduce pressure on services, natural resources, and congested sites but, on the other hand, biosecurity risks may not be reduced and the resulting shorter stays could lessen the distribution of local economic benefits. From a biosecurity perspective, it would be preferable to have fewer tourists in absolute terms, but with each tourist staying longer, thereby reducing the amount of transportation per tourist-day and increasing opportunities for community involvement and benefit. Furthermore, such tourists typically have greater environmental awareness than casual visitors.

Despite the differences, Ecuador could learn a lot from Bhutan's experience and apply it to a thorough analysis and dialogue on optimizing the tourism fee system, which is much needed.

The concept of Gross National Happiness is also relevant to the Galápagos Islands. Indeed, the vision of the Galápagos 2030 Plan is “An archipelago to be happy in”, and the plan includes a range of social and environmental indicators. Other initiatives in the Galápagos to broaden measures of progress beyond simplistic GDP include: the Ecuadorian Government’s designation of Galápagos as a “pioneer province” for the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, research by the Charles Darwin Foundation and others on the UN Ecosystem Accounting framework, and the exploration of the “Doughnut Economy” model as a framework for reorienting the Galápagos Islands toward a more sustainable future. Therefore, the Galápagos Islands could certainly learn from Bhutan’s experience in characterizing and measuring happiness as a key indicator of development.

Bhutan and Galápagos: Talking points table

Bhutan - Policy Intervention	Relevance to Galápagos	Advantages	Disadvantages
Formal government policy to aim for "high value and low impact" tourism as a strategy for preserving natural and cultural values, while obtaining economic benefits.	Relevant: The law mandates the conservation of biodiversity and the evolutionary processes of the Galápagos Islands, while promoting a "good life" (buen vivir). Despite the 2011 ecotourism policy, the trend is towards increased volume and impact of tourism, mainly through growth of the low-value segment. The outline tourism strategy submitted to UNESCO in 2024 aims for regenerative ecotourism. The government could review the advantages and disadvantages of Bhutan's "high value, low impact" model and clarify its own policy.	• - A formal approach to "high value, low impact" could help address the problem of unsustainability. • - A formal State policy on the proportions of high and low value tourism would facilitate decision-making and the adoption of new tools to manage volume and impacts.	• - It will probably be controversial at the local level and perceived as benefiting the interests of the elite, since high-value tourism is not perceived as distributive (real comparative economic data are scarce).
Government-accredited tour operators as major tour organizers	Partially relevant: although Galápagos tour operators are already accredited, they could receive further training in quality, safety and sustainability.	• - Improves regulation of the impacts of tourism. • - Ensures satisfactory quality standards across different operators. • - Facilitates the collection of data on tourist flows.	• - Risk of limiting competition between operators. • - Possible concentration of profits in a few companies, which may narrow their distribution.
There is no official visitor quota, but there is a *de facto* limit through daily fees, operator and hotel capacity, and limits on the number of airline routes and flights.	Relevant: Galapagos could adopt a similar model, using economic instruments (higher fees, accreditation limits, flight capacity limits) to effectively limit the number of visitors, even without fixed total quotas.	• - It uses a combination of system constraints and market forces to determine volume. • - It maintains the exclusivity of the experience without the administrative burden of fixed limits.	• - Less transparent than explicit quotas; may lack precision in limiting the absolute number of visitors if demand increases unexpectedly. • - In the Galapágos the number of tourists is more likely to be driven by the increasing availability of informal accommodations (e.g., Airbnb).
The Gross National Happiness (GNH) index influences tourism policy	Partially relevant: although the GNH index is not directly transferable, Galapagos could adopt a holistic well-being model, such as the Doughnut Economy, to combine conservation, community benefits and visitor satisfaction, and use that framework to manage tourism adaptively.	• - It frames tourism policy around broader social and environmental objectives. • - It encourages consideration of intangible cultural and community outcomes. • - Methods and tools already exist, for example, for the Doughnut Economy.	• - Could be difficult to implement and measure in the Galapagos context. • - It needs clear metrics linked to management actions, otherwise it may seem vague. • - There is a risk of selectively choosing indicators to justify management decisions, instead of applying the essential integrated approach.

High daily fees which, if they are a significant percentage of the total package price, encourage short visits.	Precautionary relevance: Optimizing fees and tour prices in Galapagos requires balancing objectives that may be contradictory or synergistic (depending in part on other measures), for example, revenue per tourist, impact per tourist day, local benefits, catalysis of tourism in continental Ecuador, visitor experience, etc.	• - Encourages high-value, low-impact tourism. • - Short visits, encouraged by a daily fee, use fewer resources per individual tourist. • Generates revenue for government, which could be used for conservation and development.	• - Rapid turnover can maintain or increase the absolute number of visitors. • - Short visits limit the depth of the experience, which can undermine visitor satisfaction and education. • - Short visits offer fewer opportunities for local businesses. • Short visits have almost the same footprint in terms of carbon and biosecurity risks.
Centralization of visas and SDF collection with improvements in transparency following the 2023 reforms.	Relevant: Galapagos already has centralized fee collection, but it could improve clarity and accountability regarding what entry fees cover and/or allocate funds to specific conservation and community benefits, thereby increasing transparency and local support.	• - Enhances the legitimacy of tourism management. • - Increases stakeholder confidence. • - Transparency increases tourists' willingness to pay. • - Creates opportunities to allocate funds explicitly to conservation and community projects.	• - Administrative complexity of providing transparent reports on the distribution and use of income. • - Potential disputes between stakeholders regarding the allocation of funds.

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03 Cruise operators and tourism management in Antarctica

Background:

Tourism in Antarctica has evolved from a niche adventure activity into a carefully regulated industry that reflects both the allure and fragility of the world's most remote continent. From its beginnings in the late 1950s with sporadic expedition cruise visits, Antarctic tourism has expanded significantly, with over 100,000 visitors recorded in recent seasons, most arriving by sea via the Antarctic Peninsula. The sector is managed under the Antarctic Treaty System, particularly through guidelines established by the International Association of Antarctica Tour Operators (IAATO), which promotes environmentally responsible travel.

Visitors are drawn to the continent's beauty, its unique wildlife, and its scientific appeal, but concerns persist about ecological disturbance, carbon emissions, and cumulative impacts on vulnerable polar ecosystems. As a result, Antarctic tourism represents a prime example of how access to extreme environments must be balanced with the principles of preservation, precaution, and international cooperation.

Tourism management:

The tourism management system in Antarctica is unique, as it operates within the framework of international environmental governance, specifically the Antarctic Treaty System (ATS). It has evolved in response to the increasing number of visitors and emerging environmental and logistical concerns.

Established in 1959, the Antarctic Treaty designates Antarctica as a zone of peace and science and applies to all human activity south of 60° south latitude. Tourism is not explicitly mentioned in the original treaty but is addressed in subsequent instruments, notably the 1991 Protocol on Environmental Protection (Madrid Protocol). The Madrid Protocol prohibits mining and establishes strict environmental standards, requiring that all activities, including tourism, have a minor or temporary impact.

Under the Madrid Protocol, any country that permits tourism must ensure that operators conduct an Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA). There are three levels of assessment: Preliminary, Initial, and Comprehensive, depending on the potential impacts. Most tourism falls under the initial environmental assessment category, which requires detailed mitigation plans and approval by a national authority.

Established in 1991, IAATO is a voluntary, self-regulating industry body with over 100 members, representing the majority of commercial tour operators. IAATO plays a key role in setting operational standards, coordinating tours and itineraries, enforcing visitor limits (no more than 100 people on land at any one time at most sites), and establishing requirements for trained guides, biosecurity protocols, and inter-vessel coordination. IAATO guidelines have become the *de facto* management framework, although they are not legally binding under the Treaty. Tour operators must be authorized by a national authority (e.g., the US EPA or the UK Foreign Office) of a Treaty Party. Permits typically include detailed itineraries, EIA approval, and emergency contingency plans. Operators submit post-visit reports, which are used for monitoring and policy development.

Popular landing sites (e.g., Deception Island or Port Lockroy) have specific guidelines, developed jointly by the Treaty Parties and IAATO. These include restrictions on the maximum number of visitors, prohibited areas (e.g., bird colonies during nesting season), prohibited access routes, visit duration, and biosecurity procedures.

Most tourism takes place between November and March (southern summer), when sea ice retreats and conditions are relatively safe. Ship-based tourism predominates (98% of visitors), but there is growing concern about air-cruise tourism (flying in to join a ship) and deep field tourism (to remote, inland locations such as the South Pole).

Antarctica does not have an official entry fee levied by a host country, as it is managed under an international treaty. This means that the costs associated with managing tourism are borne by the member states. In theory, operators who are members of IAATO could agree on a payment equivalent to an entry fee, but to date this has not happened.

Objective:

Facilitate safe and environmentally friendly visits, while ensuring that tourism activities do not compromise the ecological integrity, scientific value or peaceful governance of the continent under the Antarctic Treaty System.

Positive and negative impacts:

The Antarctic tourism management system has several advantages and successes. First, the system ensures that all activities have a minor or temporary impact, as required by the Madrid Protocol. Biosecurity measures, guidelines on landing sites, and strict protocols help prevent the introduction of non-native species, disturbance of wildlife, and habitat degradation. Second, the system operates within a multilateral framework, with all decisions made by consensus among the Antarctic Treaty Consultative Parties (ATCPs). IAATO coordinates activities among operators from different countries, promoting cooperation rather than competition. Third, IAATO has played a key role in developing operational standards, including limits on the number of tourists on land at any one time, mandatory visitor briefings, visitor-to-guide ratios, and centralized scheduling of site visits to avoid overcrowding. Fourth, monitoring has shown that the impact of ship tourism has generally been low, especially compared to scientific and logistical infrastructure. No major incidents of environmental damage in IAATO-compliant operations have been directly attributed to tourism. Finally, Antarctic tourism arguably raises public awareness of climate change, polar ecosystems, and scientific research, often turning visitors into ambassadors for environmental causes.

There are, however, several disadvantages and challenges for Antarctic tourism management. First, IAATO is a voluntary association; non-member operators are not bound by its codes, and there is no legally binding enforcement mechanism under the Treaty for tourism-related violations. National implementation of the Madrid Protocol varies, creating inconsistencies in oversight. Second, while individual visits may have a limited impact, the overall volume of tourism—currently exceeding 100,000 visitors per season—raises concerns about cumulative pressure on landing sites and wildlife. The system lacks a formal carrying capacity or Limits of Acceptable Change framework to limit the total number of visitors. Third, most visitors reach Antarctica via long-haul flights to South America and cruises with high carbon emissions, raising concerns about the impact on climate change. Tourism in a region symbolic of climate vulnerability creates ethical tensions, especially without carbon offset requirements. Fourth, tourism is expanding beyond the coastal cruise model to include air landings, expeditions to remote areas, and luxury inland camps. These activities carry additional environmental risks (including the introduction of invasive species) but fall outside IAATO's most rigorous oversight mechanisms, and their regulation remains incomplete. Finally, tour operators dominate decision-making through IAATO; scientists, environmental NGOs, and Indigenous voices (from transit countries to Antarctica) are often underrepresented. Treaty discussions on tourism can be slow and politically conservative, lacking the agility needed to respond to emerging risks.

Relevance to Galápagos:

There are several ways in which tourism in Antarctica and the Galápagos Islands are very similar. Both rely on highly fragile ecosystems with sensitive wildlife and islands vulnerable to invasive species. Both seek to manage tourism and visitor numbers in various ways, both at the site level and systemically. Both have biosecurity controls in place to prevent the introduction of species, but both are expanding tourism activities such as camping, which carry biosecurity risks. Both emphasize tourist education. Finally, both are experiencing increasing pressure from the rising number of tourists, although the Galápagos Islands still receive more than twice as many visitors as Antarctica. In many respects, the strongest similarities are between boat-based tourism in the Galápagos and Antarctic tourism.

There are also important differences. Antarctica has no formal entry fee. The Galápagos Islands are under the jurisdiction of a single country, have a permanent resident population (and therefore a wider range of stakeholders and institutions involved in governance), and legally binding rules (albeit with varying degrees of enforcement in practice), a mixed model based on land and boats (as opposed to the almost exclusively ship-based model in Antarctica), independent tourist activities in certain areas, and a much more fragmented coordination of the tourism industry with multiple sub-sector associations (operators, hotels, guides, agencies, etc.) and technical committees at the local government level. The organizational complexity of the sector in the Galápagos reflects its diversity and the fact that it has a social and cultural dimension that does not exist in Antarctica, except with regard to polar science and exploration. Nevertheless, there are undoubtedly lessons to be learned from the sector's proactive approach to managing its long-term cumulative impact on Antarctica

Another difference is that Antarctic tourism has a much closer relationship with scientific research, which is often conducted on tourist ships, than the Galápagos, which have long had regulations that keep tourism and research separate, administratively and physically. This policy is softening and there are good examples of cooperation, especially in logistics, but there is considerable scope for reforming park policy to actively foster synergies between tourism and scientific research and to combine them with conservation, including community-led conservation.

The Galápagos Islands could consider implementing stricter biosecurity protocols for tourism, similar to those in Antarctica. They could also leverage Antarctica's experience to strengthen the capacity of the tourism operators' association, improving coordination and becoming more proactive in setting standards and combatting threats to the ecosystem. However, Galápagos would also need a sector-wide body or platform to discuss and address broader issues related to cumulative impact and sustainability, and to contribute to local government committees and public policy fora involving other sectors, such as agriculture, fisheries, and science.

Despite the differences, many of the systemic challenges facing both locations are the same, and both need to find solutions to overall growth, which cannot be adequately controlled by site- and vessel-based regulations alone. There may be opportunities for learning and exploring these issues together, especially considering that some of the Galápagos tourism companies also operate in Antarctica.

Galápagos could also place greater emphasis on encouraging tourists to change their behaviour after their visit, something often highlighted in Antarctic travel. There are anecdotal reports of tourists visiting Antarctica who, before returning home, participate in sessions to share how the trip impacted them and consider what they can do in the future to address issues like climate change. This is said to be a powerful driver of philanthropy and behaviour change, which could be relevant for the Galápagos.

Antarctica and Galápagos: Talking points table

Antarctica - Policy intervention	Relevance to Galápagos	Advantages	Disadvantages
Coordination through the International Association of Antarctica Tour Operators (IAATO)	Highly relevant: The Galápagos Islands could benefit from a strengthened partnership of tour operators, which would facilitate the establishment of unified standards and the adoption of coordinated and proactive measures regarding cumulative impacts. However, the relative complexity of the Galápagos Islands may also require a more inclusive platform for the entire sector.	• - Improves compliance with best practices among operators. • - Facilitates scheduling to avoid congestion at sites (in Galapagos, the DPNG does such scheduling, using SIMAVIS) • - Improves collective action and accountability regarding impacts.	• - It lacks legal enforceability if it is not backed by government regulations. • - It could favour larger operators, reducing opportunities for small or independent businesses.
Environmental impact assessments (EIAs) required by the Madrid Protocol.	Relevant: Galapagos could require more rigorous EIAs for tour operators, new itineraries, or infrastructure projects, especially in the case of sensitive or new sites. However, both the Galapagos Islands and Antarctica should have more holistic EIAs that take into account cumulative and indirect impacts.	• - Ensures the proactive identification and mitigation of environmental risks. • - Promotes more sustainable planning and innovation in tourism. • Complies with Ecuador's environmental laws.	• - It increases the administrative and supervisory burden for operators and government agencies. • - It can leave too much to discretion if regulations, plans, and project development conditions are not specific. • - Requires local capacity for thorough evaluation, monitoring and enforcement.
Specific guidelines for each visitor site, restricting the number of visitors, routes, and duration of the visit.	Relevant: Galapagos could strengthen limits on the number of visitors to fragile or congested sites.	• - Protects sensitive areas with measures adapted to the specific site. • - Provides a more secure framework for the future for operators and managers. • - Facilitates site restoration plans.	• - Difficult to adapt in areas with intensive local use (e.g., near to urban areas). • - It could create friction with tour operators if the guidelines become too restrictive.
Mandatory information sessions for visitors before excursions	Relevant: Galápagos could strengthen current briefings by guides by requiring standardized, pre-visit sessions that cover specific messages about biosecurity, behaviour, and conservation. This is especially relevant at visitor sites near towns.	• - Increases awareness of regulations and ecological sensitivity. • - Reduces unintentionally harmful behaviours (e.g., disturbing wildlife, littering).	• - Requires the centralized development of standardized materials and regular updates. • - May lengthen the logistics of the excursion if it is not integrated efficiently.

Strict biosecurity protocols (e.g., boot cleaning, gear inspections)	Highly relevant: Galapagos could impose a stricter requirement on visitors to wash their boots and keep gear clean, and ensure that port/ airport/ship staff and guides (for site visits) ensure it is followed.	• - Minimizes the risks of invasive species. • - Protects the endemic flora and fauna. • Reinforces the destination's conservation image.	• - Increases operational complexity. • - Requires supervision by properly trained port personnel, crew members, and guides. • Requires consistent infrastructure at entry points and excursion sites. • - Would be ineffective (and hypocritical) if not complemented by good local practices in urban and rural areas.
Visitor education to foster commitment to long-term conservation	Highly relevant: like Antarctica, the Galápagos Islands could frame visitor education not only as immediate guidance on behaviour, but as a way to inspire climate advocacy and action in their places of origin, whether abroad or in Ecuador, which is a global priority in terms of biodiversity, climate vulnerability and its role in ecosystem resilience (Amazon basin, Andes, Eastern Tropical Pacific).	• - Generates informed support in mainland Ecuador for conservation and for the Galápagos Islands. • - Builds a global community of ambassadors (and donors) for the conservation of Galápagos. • - Creates lasting positive impacts beyond the direct tourist footprint. • - It strengthens the destination's reputation for responsible stewardship.	• - It is difficult to measure and track long-term behavioural change. • - Risk of superficial engagement if education is not well designed or culturally relevant.
The tourism sector proactively participates in scientific research and monitoring, involving expert scientists and citizen science.	Relevant: Galapagos could change its regulations to allow greater involvement of tourism in science and conservation, including on inhabited islands.	• - Enables the sector to develop ecologically and socially regenerative products. • - Positions Galapagos as a nature and science destination. • - Can strengthen research, monitoring, and community-led conservation.	• It requires co-creation of a regulatory and financial framework, including biosecurity.

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04 Limits and fee system for the Inca Trail, Peru

Background

Tourism along the Inca Trail in Peru has become one of South America's most iconic tourist experiences, attracting thousands of visitors each year who trek the ancient paths leading to the citadel of Machu Picchu. The Trail, along with Machu Picchu itself, is a UNESCO World Heritage Site recognized for both its cultural and natural values. Part of a vast network of Inca roads, the Trail winds through diverse ecological zones and archaeological sites, offering both natural beauty and cultural richness. The classic Inca Trail is 42 km long and typically takes four days and three nights to complete. There is also a shorter two-day route and a longer five-day route, though all converge at the end. Tourists hike the trail on foot, as pack animals and vehicles are not permitted. However, many tourists hire porters to carry some or all of their luggage and equipment.

Tourism management:

The Inca Trail and Machu Picchu were designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1983. From approximately 6,000 hikers in 1984, the number grew rapidly to over 82,000 in 2000. This surge in tourism led the Peruvian government to implement strict regulations to mitigate environmental degradation and preserve the site's heritage. These regulations are overseen by the Peruvian Ministry of Culture, in coordination with the National Service of Natural Protected Areas (SERNANP). The system has changed little since 2002, aside from some updates to management protocols and the permit sales schedule.

Access to the Inca Trail is controlled by a strict permit system. There is a daily limit of 500 people allowed on the trail. Typically, less than half are tourists, with the remainder being porters, guides, and cooks. Permits must be purchased months in advance, especially for the peak season (May-September), and can only be obtained through authorized tour operators. Similar to mountain gorilla permits in Africa (see case study above), permits are issued in each traveler's name and include passport information. They are non-transferable and date-specific.

Permit prices are fixed year-round, rather than varying seasonally. The price for a tourist hiking the Classic Trail is around $75-$80 per person, slightly less for students. The porter rate is much lower. There is no difference in pricing between Peruvian citizens and foreigners. Permits for the peak season, from May to September, sell out almost immediately after going on sale.

Only agencies authorized and registered with the Ministry of Culture can operate on the Inca Trail. These companies must comply with strict regulations, including environmental protection, equipment quality, and the well-being of porters (e.g., maximum load limits). Independent trekking is not permitted. All tourists must be accompanied by a licensed guide, and most packages include a team of porters and cooks. Guides are responsible for safety, interpretation, and adherence to trail rules.

The Trail is maintained through government revenue from the permit system. There are regular seasonal closures (usually in February) for repairs, cleaning, and erosion control. Visitors must sleep in designated campsites, take all their rubbish with them, and avoid overcrowding at archaeological sites along the route.

To reduce pressure on the Classic Inca Trail, the Peruvian government promotes alternative routes (e.g., Salkantay, Lares, Jungle Inca Trail), which do not require permits and allow for greater flexibility. However, these routes often lack the same level of regulation, raising concerns about the varying quality of management and sustainability.

Objective:

To reconcile the preservation of cultural and environmental heritage with economic opportunities for local communities.

Positive and negative impacts:

The implementation of a strict quota-based permit system on the Inca Trail has effectively resulted in zero tourism growth. This has undoubtedly reduced the physical impact on the natural and cultural heritage and decreased overcrowding, thus enhancing the tourist experience.

However, this model presents some challenges: while the scarcity of permits drives up prices and generates more revenue, it also encourages informal work in unregulated trekking sectors. The high price of trekking packages (often exceeding USD1,000) limits access to the product to those who can afford such prices, although this includes many young backpackers willing to pay a premium for a unique experience. The price factor is a particular concern in the case of Peruvian citizens, as they, like foreigners, must pay the full price and use authorized tour operators, resulting in a prohibitive cost for many.

This has raised concerns about inequality of access and the commodification of Peru's national heritage. The enforcement of porters' rights remains inconsistent despite the regulatory framework, climate change and erosion pose long-term threats to the trail's infrastructure, and overcrowding at Machu Picchu itself, which is managed under a separate system, sometimes undermines the positive effects of regulating the Inca Trail. Visitor limits help protect the resource and maintain a high value per visitor, but it is inevitable that the tourism industry will lobby for higher limits.

There were some serious problems at the start of the permit system. Many established operators were initially uncertain or resistant to the new system, which imposed limits, permit fees, and licensing requirements. Some tried to circumvent the system by under-reporting staff or disguising unregistered tourists as porters. In the early years, enforcement of the 500-person daily limit and porter welfare standards was inconsistent, especially at remote checkpoints. Allegations arose of under-the-table permit allocation, bribery, and favouritism in licensing operators. Initially, the government lacked a robust online permit booking system, leading to delays, overbooking, and a lack of transparency. Tourists often had no way of verifying whether permits had actually been secured, which bred distrust. Informal guides and porters who had previously worked outside the formal system were pushed out, creating social tension and economic hardship for some rural communities. Although the regulations limited the load of each carrier and required that they be given adequate equipment, enforcement was weak at first, and many carriers remained overloaded and underpaid.

These problems were addressed through several complementary approaches. The authorities implemented the new system in phases: regulations were introduced first, and their mandatory application was gradually strengthened. Dialogues with operators and training sessions helped build understanding of the purpose and benefits of the new system. In the mid-2000s, Peru introduced an online permit reservation platform, which improved transparency and reduced the overselling of permits.

The system now displays real-time availability and links permits to passport numbers. NGOs and labour rights advocates spearheaded reforms that led to stricter laws regarding porter welfare (e.g., weight limits, provision of food and tents, insurance). These measures were backed by a system of oversight and penalties for non-compliant agencies, though enforcement remains inconsistent.

As a final measure, only licensed agencies can now access the permit system. The licensing criteria were clarified and enforced, and the licenses of those who violated the rules were revoked.

Relevance to Galápagos:

The permit and advance booking system used for the Inca Trail has some similarities to how boat-based tourism is managed in the Galápagos, even though one is done on foot and the other by boat with short shore excursions. In both cases, the management system allows for monitoring tourists throughout a multi-day experience following a fixed itinerary.

The similarity is much less obvious when comparing the Inca Trail with land-based tourism in the Galápagos. The latter allows tourists to choose the places they wish to visit each day, including traveling from one island to another using inter-island transportation services.

Galápagos could consider adopting a system similar to the Inca Trail, adapted to the Islands, for groups of sites accessible to land-based tourists, connected in a multi-day itinerary, with daily limits on visitor numbers. These daily limits would push up prices, generating revenue and allowing for greater control over the most popular sites near the urban areas of Galápagos.

However, management of the system would be complex and would require careful negotiation with the tourism industry, which offers day trips from the towns, and with other stakeholders, such as local residents who use these sites for recreation. Such a management system in the Galápagos could follow the Inca Trail model, with phased implementation, an online booking system with real-time availability information, and a system for monitoring and enforcing compliance. Indeed, the Galápagos National Park Directorate has initiated a system along these lines for the congested visitor site of Las Grietas.

The use of fixed prices on the Inca Trail has the advantage of guaranteeing predictable and high revenue thanks to the 500 permits issued daily. However, the total cost of organized Inca Trail packages greatly discourages Peruvian citizens from exploring their own heritage.

If the Galápagos Islands were to introduce a quota limit, either for the entire system or for specific islands or for certain groups of connected sites, decisions would have to be made regarding whether to retain the current nationality-based pricing structure in each case, and whether to introduce separate quotas for different nationalities or allow flexibility in the proportion of different nationality categories within the total tourism quota. This would be a complex decision-making process, weighing factors such as revenue generation and the accessibility of national heritage sites for Ecuadorian citizens.

Peru and Galápagos: Talking points table

Inca Trail - Policy intervention	Relevance to Galapagos	Advantages	Disadvantages
System with a strict limit on visitor numbers (500 permits per day, including workers)	Highly relevant: Galapagos could limit daily visitor numbers either for the whole archipelago or for specific islands or for groups of connected sites near populated centers, similar to the daily limit on the Inca Trail. Such a change would require careful planning with the institutions and stakeholders involved and transparency, learning from the Peruvian experience.	• - Enables effective control of the environmental impacts, especially biosecurity risks. • - Maintains the exclusivity and quality of the visitor experience and reputation of Galápagos. • - Enables sustainable, zero-growth tourism and encourages a stable flow of tourists during the year • - Having only two access points facilitates archipelago-level control of permits.	• - Would be complex to manage sub-archipelago limits involving several sites and multiple agencies. • - Requires upgraded online entry fee and management system • - It may provoke resistance from operators who rely on flexible schedules. • - Risk of hindering citizens' access to national heritage
System of advance permits linked to travelers' passports or IDs	Relevant: Galapagos could require personal permits with a specific date for certain excursions, which would improve control and accountability.	• - Prevents unauthorized visits or visits that exceed the limit. • - Facilitates tracking of visitor and enforcement of regulations. • - Enables transparent allocation of scarce permits.	• - Could burden tourists with inflexible schedules. • - Possibility of increased administrative complexity. • - It would constrain spontaneous trips, hence require Ecuador to decide how to manage self-organized tourists.
Flat permit price, regardless of nationality or season.	Relevant but sensitive: Probably applicable only in the case of fees for visits to specific sites, if Galapagos were to introduce them. In that case there could be universal fixed fees for a given site, but the issues of equity surrounding access for Ecuadorian citizens would have to be carefully addressed.	• - Generates predictable and stable sources of income. • - It could be considered fair that equal fees reflect equal impacts. • - It simplifies the administration of permits and reduces loopholes for fee evasion.	• - Risks discouraging visits to the specific sites by Ecuadorian citizens, hence undermining their access to national heritage. • - It could be considered unfair that domestic visitors pay the same as foreign visitors.
Regular seasonal closures for maintenance and restoration	Relevant: Galapagos could rotate temporary closures of certain sites to allow habitat recovery and maintenance, inspired by the closure of the Inca Trail each February. In Galapagos the measures could be linked to seasonality of species and to projections of the Niño-Niña cycle, which affects ecosystem resilience/ vulnerability.	• - Provides opportunities for site restoration. • - Signals commitment to conservation. • - Reduces cumulative visitor pressure.	• - Disrupts operator schedules. • - Potential loss of revenue during closures. • - Requires stakeholder dialogue and clear communication to maximize acceptance.
Promotion of alternative routes (e.g., Salkantay, Lares) to reduce congestion.	Highly relevant: Within the archipelago, the Park has sought to encourage visits to lesser-known, ecologically resilient sites in order to reduce tourism at overcrowded sites, thus mirroring the promotion of alternative routes in Peru. The experiences offered to visitors to the inhabited islands could be further diversified. Connections between tourism on the islands and tourism on mainland Ecuador could also be strengthened.	• - It reduces pressure on iconic, crowded sites. • - Diversifies tourist experience. • - Spreads the economic benefits across more communities.	• - Alternative sites may lack infrastructure. • - It requires investment in training, facilities and marketing. • - Diversification may in some cases require regulatory changes.

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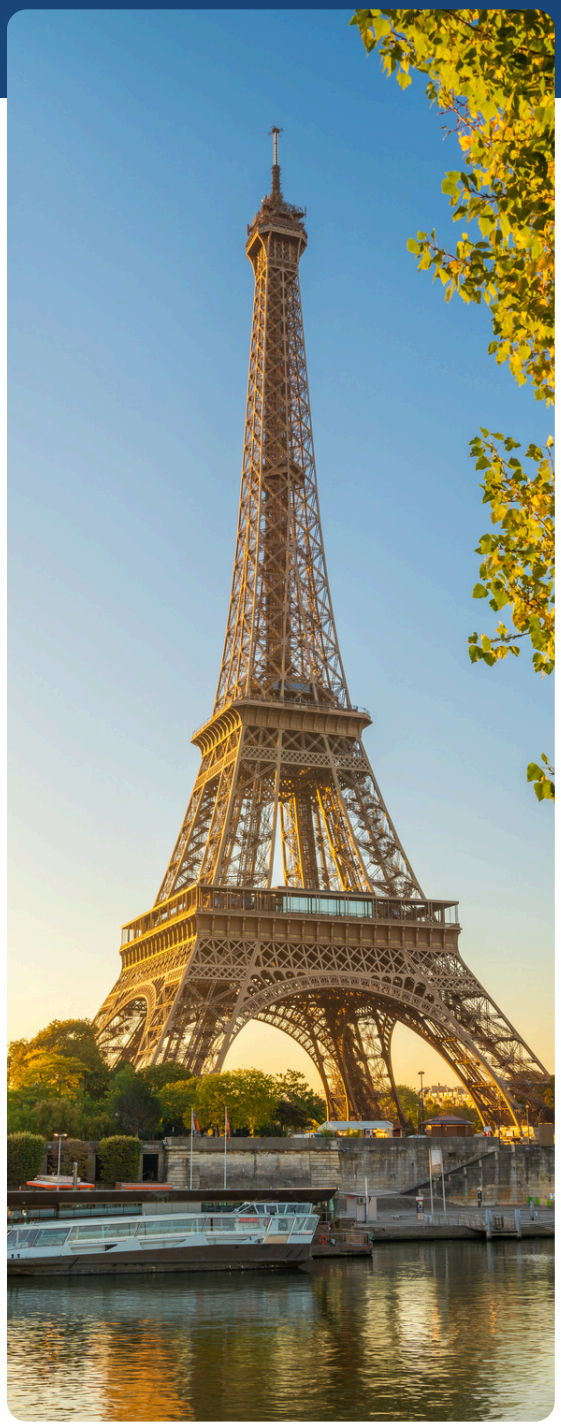
05 Managing overtourism in European cities: Barcelona, Paris and Venice

Background



Overtourism has become a major challenge in several European cities, where the sheer volume of visitors is straining infrastructure, degrading cultural heritage, and fueling social tensions. Cities like Paris, Barcelona, and Venice have become emblematic of this crisis. Paris receives around 50 million visitors per year, Barcelona about 15 million, and Venice around 6 million. In Paris, iconic attractions such as the Eiffel Tower and the Louvre suffer from extreme overcrowding, while the city grapples with soaring property prices and loss of local character in tourist-saturated districts. Barcelona has seen widespread protests against the impacts of mass tourism, including unaffordable housing, noise pollution, and the displacement of residents by short-term rentals. In Venice, the daily influx of cruise ship passengers and day-trippers has overwhelmed the fragile urban fabric and ecosystem, prompting authorities to introduce controversial measures such as charging admission fees and limiting group sizes. These cities illustrate the widespread dilemma of reconciling economic dependence on tourism with the need to preserve liveability, authenticity, and cultural integrity for residents.

All these cities have been the scene of major protests and push back by local residents, who feel that tourism is ruining their lives, despite the economic success of the industry.

Tourism management:

Paris: Tourism management in Paris has increasingly focused on addressing the negative impacts of short-term rentals (especially Airbnb) and congestion at major cultural sites, in order to preserve housing affordability, neighbourhood character, and the quality of life for residents. Primary residences can only be rented on platforms like Airbnb for a maximum of 120 days per year. All short-term rentals must be registered with the city authorities, and a unique ID must appear in online listings. Renting out a second home as a short-term let is heavily restricted. To compensate, owners must convert another commercial space into an equivalent long-term residential unit - a costly and complex requirement. Paris has actively enforced its regulations, conducting inspections, issuing fines, and taking Airbnb and other platforms to court over illegal listings. Thousands of listings have been removed.

Barcelona: Since mid-2024, Barcelona has ceased issuing new tourist rental licences. Existing licences will expire by 2028, with no renewals - effectively phasing out all ~10,000 tourist apartments by 2029. Mayor Jaume Collboni has framed this as a "paradigm shift," asserting that "we will not seek more visitors," and emphasizing housing recovery over tourism expansion. The city is enforcing compliance through immediate delisting demands, threats of legal and criminal action against Airbnb, and collaboration with regional authorities. Barcelona's strategy is designed to return up to 10,000 units to the long-term housing market, aiming to ease rent price pressures, which have surged by ~68% in the past decade due in part to tourism-related conversions.

The city's housing department uses automated web-scraping tools to detect unlicensed listings on Airbnb, Booking.com, and other platforms. Listings without registration numbers — or those that appear to exceed permitted activity (e.g. over 31-day stays that mask short-term use) — are flagged for investigation. Barcelona has dedicated inspection teams that conduct on-the-ground investigations in neighbourhoods where illegal rentals are suspected. Inspectors may pose as tourists, verify listing information, or interview neighbours to confirm illegal activity. Property owners operating without a license can be fined up to €60,000 per violation, with additional penalties for repeat offences. The city also issues fines to platforms that host illegal listings; Airbnb has faced multiple rounds of fines and lawsuits. In some cases, the city has gone further by demanding the delisting of specific addresses and threatening criminal prosecution for non-compliance.

In 2025, **Barcelona** appointed geographer José Donaire to be the first **Commissioner for Sustainable Tourism.** This is intended to shift focus from promotion of tourism growth to tourism management, aiming to control numbers, enhance distribution, and reduce impacts. Measures include: cruise ship terminal reduction by 2027; a tourist tax increase; timed entry and capacity limits at hotspots like Park Güell, which now manages thousands of visitors hourly; rerouting of tourist flows; and support for offpeak and off-beat experiences. Barcelona uses a range of digital tools for real time monitoring of crowds, including sensors on the streets and big data analysis from things like mobile phones and tourism platforms. Apps for visitors provide real-time information on crowds and encourage people to go to less busy areas.

Venice: In 2024, Venice became the first city in the world to introduce a mandatory entry fee for day-trippers, aiming to curb the negative impacts of overtourism and generate revenue for city maintenance. The scheme, piloted in April and expanded in 2025, applies to visitors over the age of 14 entering the historic centre during peak hours (8:30am–4pm) on selected high-traffic days. Tourists must pre-book a permit online, receiving a QR code for entry, with fees set at €5 if booked at least four days in advance and €10 for late bookings. Exemptions apply to overnight guests, residents of the Veneto region, students, workers, and those visiting family, though they must still register. The system's primary goal is to discourage the surge of daytime-only visitors, known as the "eat and flee" crowd, who contribute little economically while placing heavy pressure on infrastructure. The entry permit system has been accompanied by other crowd-control measures, including limits on tourist group sizes (maximum 25 people), bans on loudspeaker use by tour guides, and continued restrictions on large cruise ships entering the lagoon.

Objective:

All three cities share an intention to control excessive visitor numbers and mitigate the impacts of mass tourism. However, they each have their own distinct character. Paris's tourism management is primarily focused on regulation and impact mitigation within a framework that still broadly supports tourism growth. Similarly, Venice's objective has been primarily to regain control over overwhelming tourist flows, particularly from day-trippers and cruise visitors, which threaten the city's physical and social fabric. Barcelona stands out for its more radical orientation. The city is not only trying to manage tourism impacts but is actively shifting toward a different value system, one that reasserts the primacy of residential life, urban sustainability, and social justice. This is most evident in its decision to eliminate all tourist apartment licenses by 2029, reclaiming housing for locals, and in political messaging that explicitly rejects further growth in visitor numbers.

Positive and negative impacts:

Paris: The 120-day annual cap on primary residences, along with a mandatory registration requirement, has helped moderate the expansion of tourist rentals in central districts. Legal enforcement has been assertive, with the city successfully suing platforms like Airbnb over non-compliant listings. While these efforts have slowed the loss of housing stock, they have not reversed rising rents or fully eliminated illegal rentals, many of which persist through loopholes or unregistered hosts. In terms of visitor flow, Paris has introduced timed ticketing at popular attractions like the Louvre and encouraged dispersal to lesser-known sites. These measures have eased some congestion, but overall tourism levels remain high, and the city continues to operate within a mass tourism model.

Barcelona: Barcelona's interventions have produced the most transformative impacts of the three cities, perhaps connected to the Barcelona City Council's adoption in 2021 of Doughnut Economics principles and methods https://doughnuteconomics.org/ . The city's crackdown on illegal tourist apartments has led to the closure of thousands of short-term lets, with visible effects on housing availability and neighbourhood stability, particularly in the most saturated districts. The planned elimination of all tourist apartment licenses by 2029 is expected to return a significant number of homes to the long-term rental market, addressing one of the root causes of resident displacement. Public perception has shifted as well; the city's assertive policies have empowered local communities, changing how tourism is discussed and governed. Visitor flow management has resulted in more predictable congestion patterns and reduced pressure on sensitive sites.

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However, tensions are emerging between businesses that depend on tourism and those pushing for deeper transformation. The city's strategy is beginning to reshape urban identity, though the full consequences - economic, social, and cultural - are still unfolding.

Venice: Venice's entry permit system has had high symbolic and political value, positioning the city as a global innovator in tourism management. It has raised several million euros in revenue and significantly improved the city’s ability to track and analyse visitor flows. Yet the actual impact on overcrowding has been limited. Some of the days when the fee applied saw increases rather than decreases in visitor numbers, suggesting that the measure’s deterrent effect is weak without more substantive caps or restrictions. Residents have expressed ambivalence—some welcome the effort to control influxes, while others see the permit as a superficial fix that monetises the problem rather than solving it. Moreover, the policy has done little to reduce the city’s deep economic dependence on tourism, and housing affordability remains a significant issue, especially for young Venetians. As a result, Venice’s model appears innovative but piecemeal, effective in signalling urgency but less so in delivering structural relief.

Relevance to Galapagos:

Efforts to control overcrowding in the three European cities highlighted here are highly relevant to Galápagos, despite the completely different nature of the social and ecological environment. In particular, they demonstrate that it is possible to implement regulations that control the Airbnb market, thereby ensuring housing availability for local residents and generating additional revenue for the authorities. This is especially relevant for the urban areas of Galápagos, where there has been uncontrolled growth in the supply of Airbnb, impacting residents' living conditions (such as housing rental prices). In 2025, the Ministry of Tourism put in place measures to close unauthorized Airbnb listings; however, in the face of social pressure the government pulled back from implementing them.

Venice's permit system is less innovative from the Galápagos perspective because, in a sense, it involves applying a tourism management mechanism to a city that many national parks, including the Galápagos, have been using for many years. However, one possibility at the archipelago level could be to add a surcharge for tourists who do not also visit mainland Ecuador. Another possible adaptation of the Venice model could be to implement a permit system, with a fee, to specific sites within the archipelago (as discussed elsewhere).

One notable difference between the cases is that measures to control overtourism in Europe have been driven by protests from local residents, who were sick of the number of tourists, high prices and lack of available housing. This is starkly different from the Galápagos, where local protests have primarily targeted efforts to control tourism through increased entry fees or any other management mechanism. This may be because the volume of tourism is far greater in European cities than in the Galápagos, with millions of tourists each year.

The case of Barcelona is particularly interesting. It demonstrates that tourism management can be used not just as a technocratic measure to adjust tourism within a prevailing system, but rather as a means to move toward a completely different way of understanding the role of tourism in the social and ecological system.The authorities in Barcelona wish to move to a new model, based on Doughnut Economics, which is the same model suggested as a framework for Galápagos in a 2022 report for the Galápagos Governing Council on policies for post-pandemic recovery and reorientation towards sustainability (Galápagos Policy Advisory Group, 2022). It is related to the concept of Buen Vivir in Ecuador's constitution and to the designation of Galapagos as a pioneering province for pursuit of the Sustainable Development Goals. Thus, Galápagos could learn from Barcelona's experience of how changing the way that tourism is regulated can be a step towards a more holistic system in which people thrive and so do the ecosystem and environment.

European cities and Galápagos: Talking points table

European cities - Policy intervention	Relevance to Galapagos	Advantages	Disadvantages
Strict regulation of short-term rentals (e.g., Airbnb limits, registration, limits on cumulative rental days)	Highly relevant: controlling Airbnbs in Galápagos towns, which the Ministry of Tourism started to do in 2025, could protect housing affordability and the stability of the local community, similarly to Paris and Barcelona.	• - Maintains housing stock for residents. • - Prevents speculative property conversion. • - It helps to preserve the character of the community in towns.	• - May provoke resistance from some property owners. • - Could reduce some income streams for local families who depend on tourist rentals. • - Requires robust enforcement capacity.
Phasing out of tourist apartment licences (Barcelona model)	Relevant: Galápagos could consider freezing or reducing the growth of permits for tourist apartments in order to maintain housing for residents.	• - Directly addresses housing shortages and rising rents. • - Shifts focus from mass accommodation to more controlled tourism. • - Empowers local residents.	• - May reduce tourist accommodation options, though in contexts such as Galápagos, where there is already an oversupply for tourists and a shortage for residents, this could help rebalance the housing market rather than significantly impacting income. • - Could concentrate tourism in a smaller number of larger hotels or resorts.
Timed entry and capacity limits at key attractions (Barcelona and Paris models)	Very relevant: Galápagos could implement scheduled visitation windows for high-demand sites - e.g. Tortuga Bay - refining the model applied for Las Grietas, in order to spread visitor flow.	• - Reduces overcrowding at peak times. • - Improves visitor satisfaction. • - Improves site conservation by limiting wear and tear.	• - Requires reliable booking systems and effective communication. • - Potential frustration for tourists prefering flexible schedules.
Real-time monitoring of tourist flows using digital tools (Barcelona model)	Relevant: Galápagos could adopt crowd monitoring technology to manage congestion, re-route visitors and provide real-time information via apps.	• - Enables dynamic visitor management. • - Provides data for better planning. • - Allows visitors to adjust their plans, which reduces congestion.	• - High upfront cost of the technological infrastructure. • - Concerns about data privacy. • - Requires reliable connectivity and maintenance. • - Needs an array of alternatives so that visitors can adapt their plans.
Creation of institutions dedicated to tourism planning and management in population centres (e.g. Barcelona's Commissariat for Sustainable Tourism).	Highly relevant: Galápagos could establish an entity solely focused on managing the positive and negative impacts of tourism in inhabited areas, with the aim of bridging conservation and social and economic considerations. One possibility would be to activate the Provincial Technical Committee for Tourism, envisioned in the Special Law for Galápagos.	• - Centralises policy coordination. • - Enhances stakeholder engagement. • - Strengthens capacity for long-term adaptive management.	• - Risk of bureaucratic inefficiency. • - Potential overlap or conflict with existing institutions. • - Needs consistent funding and political support.
Use of tourism policy to shift value systems and development goals (Barcelona's reorientation towards social justice and the well-being of residents)	Highly relevant: it could inspire Galápagos to integrate concepts such as Buen Vivir, which is established in Ecuadorian law, and the Doughnut Economy, reframing tourism as a tool for enabling both people and nature to thrive.	• - Aligns tourism with social and conservation priorities. • - Encourages community support for a more holistic, sustainable model of development. • - Encourages more regenerative and sustainable tourism practices. • - Reduces dependence on tourism and encourages economic diversification.	• - Difficult to implement without broad political and social consensus • - May conflict with short-term economic interests within the tourism industry. • - Requires investment in alternative, conservation-oriented economic activities.

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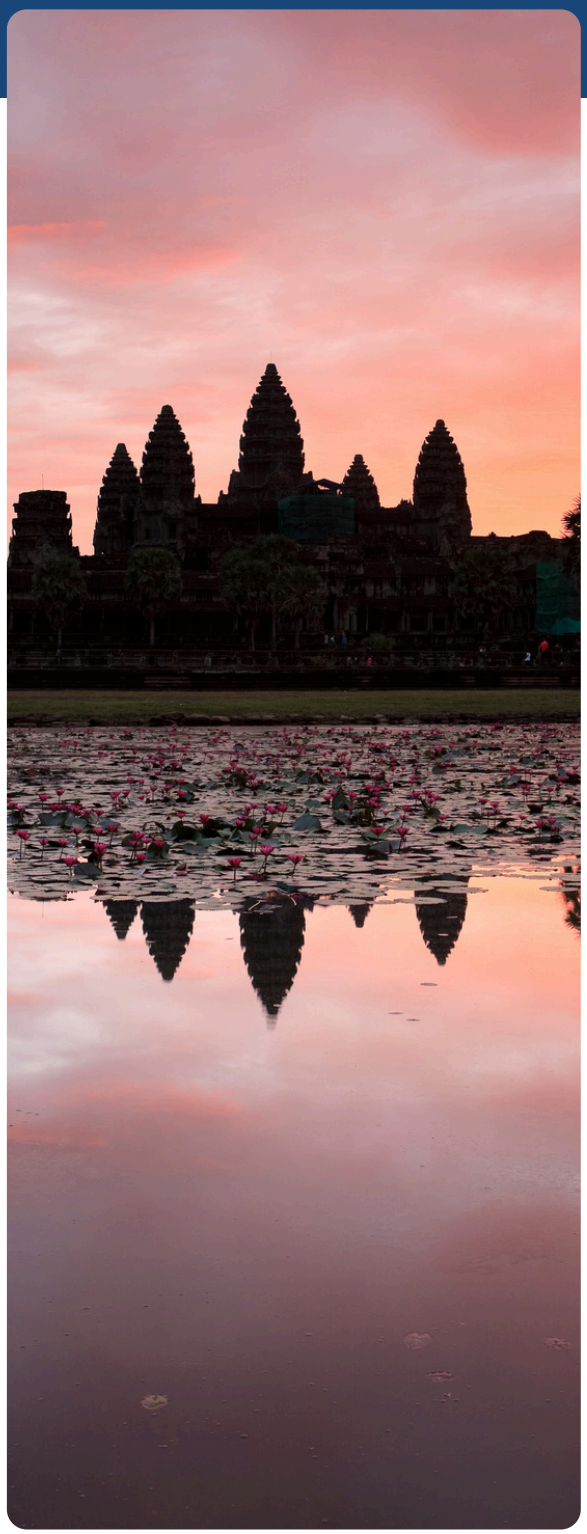
06 Cultural site visitor management in Angkor Wat in Cambodia

Background:



Angkor Wat, located in Cambodia, is one of the most significant archaeological sites in Southeast Asia and a major global tourism destination. Originally built in the early 12th century as a Hindu temple dedicated to Vishnu, it later transformed into a Buddhist site and remains an active place of worship. Since the end of Cambodia's internal conflicts in the 1990s, tourism to Angkor has surged, with millions of visitors drawn annually to its iconic architecture and symbolic cultural heritage. This rapid growth has brought substantial economic benefits, particularly for the nearby city of Siem Reap, but also raised concerns about environmental degradation, physical damage to the temples, and the commodification of heritage. In response, national authorities, together with international organizations, including UNESCO, have implemented various management measures to regulate visitor flows, preserve the site's integrity, and promote sustainable tourism development.

The Angkor Archaeological Park spans approximately 400 km^2, making it one of the largest and most significant religious and archaeological sites in the world. It contains the remains of the different capitals of the Khmer Empire, which flourished between the 9th and 15th centuries. The park is home to hundreds of temples, ranging from major state temples to smaller, more remote structures scattered through forested areas and rice fields.

Tourists are typically drawn by the combination of aesthetic grandeur, historical depth, and spiritual atmosphere. Sunrise at Angkor Wat is particularly popular, as are guided tours that explore the symbolic meanings of the temples and their roles in Khmer cosmology. Increasingly, visitors are also seeking more experiential and off-the-beaten-track encounters, including bike tours, visits to less frequented temples, and engagement with local communities and crafts.

Tourism management:

Tourism at Angkor Wat is managed through a multi-level governance framework involving national authorities, local institutions, and international partners. The central body responsible for site management is the APSARA National Authority (Authority for the Protection and Management of Angkor and the Region of Siem Reap), established in 1995. APSARA oversees conservation, zoning, visitor regulation, and infrastructure development within the Angkor Archaeological Park. International support, particularly from UNESCO and countries like Japan and France, has been crucial in providing technical expertise and funding for conservation efforts.

Over time, tourism management at Angkor has evolved significantly in response to rising visitor numbers and associated pressures. In the early years following Cambodia's stabilization in the 1990s, the focus was largely on attracting tourists and rebuilding infrastructure. However, as visitor numbers climbed - peaking at over 2.6 million in 2018 - management efforts shifted toward mitigating negative impacts.

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Strategies introduced include the development of a ticketing system (with revenue shared between institutions), enforcement of zoning regulations to control construction near heritage sites, crowd management at key temples, and limitations on commercial activities within sensitive areas.

Recent years have also seen increased attention to sustainable tourism practices, including the promotion of alternative attractions outside the core Angkor temples to disperse visitor pressure, and investment in local community involvement and capacity-building. The COVID-19 pandemic further prompted a reevaluation of the tourism model, highlighting the risks of overdependence on international mass tourism and renewing interest in low-impact, culturally respectful approaches to heritage visitation. However, more recently the focus has returned to growth in numbers, particularly with the opening of a new Siem Reap-Angkor International airport in 2023.

Visitors must purchase an Angkor Pass, available in three main types:

- **1-day pass: USD37**
- **3-day pass (valid over 10 days): USD62**
- **7-day pass (valid over 30 days): USD72.**
  Children under 12 years old enter free and Cambodian citizens do not have to pay.

Tickets are digitally scanned at checkpoints across the park to prevent fraud and monitor visitor flows. More recently, efforts have been made to introduce online ticketing and electronic monitoring systems for greater efficiency and data collection.

Originally managed by private companies in joint ventures with the Cambodian government, the system was brought under full state control in 2016 through Angkor Enterprise, a public body. A portion of revenues is allocated to the APSARA National Authority for conservation and site management. Another portion is directed to the Ministry of Economy and Finance. Finally, a small, fixed contribution (USD2 per ticket) goes to the Kantha Bopha Foundation, supporting children's hospitals in Cambodia. There is no specific share of the entrance fee for local people, although tourism does create many economic opportunities in the region.

There are no quotas or limits on overall tourist numbers. Pricing is used more to generate revenue than as a tool to manage visitor numbers. There are daily limits on visitors to certain temples or sites within the wider complex, but focus has been more on dispersing visitors around the area rather than limiting overall visitors.

Prices were increased significantly in 2017 after the system came under state management. International visitor prices went from USD20 to USD37 for a one-day pass.

Objective:

The primary objective is to fund the maintenance, restoration, and protection of Angkor's vast and vulnerable temple complexes. The ticketing system also allows for tracking daily and seasonal visitor numbers, informing management decisions about crowd control and resource allocation.

Positive and negative impacts:

Tourism management at the site has several strong points. The creation of the APSARA Authority and collaboration with UNESCO and international conservation teams have provided a relatively strong governance structure. The shift in 2016 to public management of ticketing through Angkor Enterprise improved transparency and revenue allocation. Major temples like Angkor Wat, Bayon, and Ta Prohm have undergone significant restoration and structural reinforcement, often with foreign technical assistance. Fragile areas have been subject to access restrictions and timed entry, reducing direct physical wear. The ticketing system consistently generates over US$100 million annually in normal years, funding conservation, infrastructure, and public services like children's hospitals.

However, there are several ongoing challenges. Most tourists focus on a small number of temples, especially Angkor Wat, Bayon, and Ta Prohm, causing localised congestion and accelerated degradation. Attempts to disperse tourists to lesser known sites have had limited success. There is no daily cap for the whole park nor a system of quotas within the park, and total visitor numbers (over 2.6 million in 2018) have periodically strained both infrastructure and conservation capacity. Local communities living in and around the park receive no direct share of government tourism revenue, and often face restrictions on land use and livelihood practices due to conservation zoning. This has led to social tensions and perceptions of exclusion from tourism benefits. Visitor flow and impact monitoring remain inconsistent, and data is not always transparently shared or used to adaptively manage tourism pressure. The COVID-19 pandemic exposed overdependence on mass international tourism, prompting calls for a more diversified and resilient tourism model, but reforms have been slow.

The 2017 price increase in Angkor Wat led to a short term dip in visitor numbers (particularly backpackers), but this recovered within a year with no lasting impact on tourist segmentation. Total revenue went up significantly, from about USD60 million in 2016 to over USD100 million in 2018. The small contribution to children’s hospitals is very popular and has helped to boost the legitimacy of the price rise and ticketing system.

The reduced daily price for longer stays offers an economic incentive for staying longer, but in practice, most tourists buy either the 1- or 3-day pass, and their length of stay is determined more by time available and itinerary than by permit prices. As a result, the link between duration of stay and cost of pass has had little impact on tourist behaviour.

Relevance to the Galapagos:

The example of Angkor Wat shows that entrance fees can be raised significantly at a world-famous heritage site, generating much more revenue without causing a lasting reduction in tourist numbers. Whether this is considered good news or not depends on the objective of the price increase. In the Galápagos, part of the discourse around price increases has centered on initiating a path toward zero-growth tourism, although raising additional funds was the main focus. Angkor Wat has not experienced any reduction in tourism growth, even as the tickets have generated a very large amount of revenue. However, prices are lower than for Galápagos, costing only USD72 for a 7-day pass (which seems the best comparison, since most Galápagos visitors stay longer than 3 days). It is possible that further increases in the Angkor Wat entrance fee could begin to affect visitor numbers.

Allocating a small portion of entrance fees to a popular public service like children's hospitals appears to generate a widespread public relations benefit. A substantial portion of the funds from Galapagos National Park entrance fees goes to the municipalities and parishes and is legally earmarked for public services and conservation, without specifying any particular service. Perhaps, especially since the annual amounts have been increased, local authorities could make more specific commitments regarding the uses of the funding and the expected social, environmental, and biodiversity benefits, thereby helping to forge a positive connection in the minds of residents.

It's also interesting that at Angkor Wat, having a variable daily rate based on the length of stay hasn't had much impact on tourist behaviour. Perhaps the difference in the daily price would need to be greater to have an effect. If duration-dependent fees were introduced in Galapagos, the high daily cost of living may in any case swamp the price differences, when it comes to the decisions of budget-conscious tourists about how long to stay.

Angkor Wat and Galápagos: Talking points table

Angkor Wat - Policy intervention	Relevance to the Galapagos	Advantages	Disadvantages
Multi-day passes with decreasing daily price	Partially relevant: Galapagos could explore where to position itself on a spectrum ranging from a fixed rate regardless of duration (current approach) to a daily rate.	• Switching to a daily rate could generate a lot more revenue.	• Daily rates would discourage longer stays, which tend to have lower impact per day. • High numbers of short visits could increase transport-related carbon and biosecurity impacts and reduce local economic benefits. • Could encourage price-sensitive visitors to compress their itineraries into fewer days.
Allocation of a portion of ticket sales to popular social causes (in this case, the Kantha Bopha Foundation)	Relevant: Allocating a small portion of Galapagos entrance fees for investment in specific social benefits with a high level of visibility, transparency, and accountability could generate local support and legitimacy, echoing Angkor's approach.	• - Strengthens buy-in of community and general public. • - Makes conservation fees feel more equitable. • Demonstrates tangible social benefits derived from tourism revenue.	• Requires clear governance and accountability to avoid perceptions of mismanagement. • May spark debate over allocation priorities among the various stakeholders.
Electronic scanning of tickets to prevent fraud and monitor distribution of visitors among multiple sites	Highly relevant: Galapagos could implement electronic permit verification at certain key locations and transport hubs to obtain real-time data on visitor movements and compliance with regulations.	• Enhances enforcement of site limits and rules. • Improves the accuracy of visitor statistics. • Deters unauthorized excursions.	• Requires a reliable digital infrastructure and staff training. • Could divert Park staff and resources away from higher priority field activities. • May raise privacy or data management issues if not handled transparently.
There is no overall visitor quota for the entire park; the strategy focuses on dispersal across multiple sites.	Relevant: The Galapagos Islands could learn from Angkor's dispersal strategy, but should note that at Angkor Wat this strategy did not curb the overall growth of visitors or prevent congestion at specific sites.	• Could potentially ease pressure on certain special sites by promoting less visited sites. • Encourages tourists to explore more widely, distributing the economic benefits.	• Does not control total number of visitors, so overall pressure on the ecosystem can continue to increase. • Increases the web of routes by which tourism facilitates the spread of invasive species around the archipelago. • Requires investment in infrastructure and interpretation at secondary sites.

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07 Integrating Indigenous Management into New Zealand's Tourism Strategies

Background:

New Zealand has long marketed itself as a premier destination for nature-based and adventure tourism, with a unique combination of stunning landscapes, endemic biodiversity, and Māori cultural heritage. Pre-pandemic the country attracted nearly 4 million international visitors per year, a figure equivalent to around 80% of its population—placing it among the world's most tourism-dependent developed economies. Tourism has historically been New Zealand's largest services export, contributing about 6% of GDP directly, and closer to 10% when including indirect effects.

Tourism is concentrated in a handful of iconic locations—such as Fiordland National Park (Milford Sound), the Tongariro Alpine Crossing, Rotorua's geothermal area, and the Southern Lakes. About 70% of tourism growth since 2022 has been concentrated in the South Island, increasing strain on these sites. Additionally, despite rebounding to 80-90% of pre-pandemic visitor arrival numbers, spending per visitor has declined and average stays have shortened, meaning more tourists are coming for fewer days, especially via cruise ships and short-break travel.

Tourism management:

New Zealand's tourism management system is guided by several national strategies and frameworks. Key among them is the Tiaki Promise, a nationwide visitor education initiative launched in 2018 in collaboration with Māori leaders, industry bodies, and government agencies. Tiaki (meaning "to care for" in te reo Māori) encourages visitors to respect local communities, travel safely, and protect nature. This soft, voluntary code has been promoted through airports, airlines, car rental companies, and digital platforms, and has become a central part of New Zealand's global tourism brand.

Another key strategy, applied across the board but very relevant to tourism, is the heavy investment in biosecurity, with quarantine inspections and associated communications, primarily at national entry points but with additional biosecurity at some especially vulnerable sites, such as nearshore islands where introduced species have been eradicated.

In parallel, the New Zealand government has strengthened regulatory tools to manage visitor flows at sensitive sites. The Department of Conservation (DOC) has implemented Great Walk booking systems, which cap daily hiker numbers on popular trails like the Milford, Routeburn, and Tongariro Alpine Crossing. These limits protect fragile ecosystems and ensure a quality wilderness experience. National parks are free to enter, but certain high-demand activities (e.g., hut bookings on Great Walks) incur fees, which fund maintenance and conservation.

To address the burden of rising international visitor numbers on public infrastructure, New Zealand introduced an International Visitor Conservation and Tourism Levy (IVL) in 2019 (MBIE, 2025a). The IVL charges most foreign visitors NZ$35 upon applying for an electronic visa or travel authority; this was increased to NZ$100 in October of 2024 (or ~$60 USD).

According to New Zealand Immigration, revenue from the levy is earmarked for conservation and tourism infrastructure, with funding decisions made through a contestable grant process. NZ Immigration tells visitors, “The IVL is your contribution to maintaining the facilities and natural environment you will use and enjoy during your stay”.

New Zealand has also emerged as a global leader in regenerative tourism thinking, which aspires to move beyond reducing negative impacts towards actively improving environments and communities through tourism rooted in Indigenous Māori worldviews that see nature and humans as one. Since 2021, New Zealand has developed 29 Destination Management Plans with financial support from the IVL), with many of them referencing or advancing regenerative principles in their destinations. Pilot projects funded by the IVL include carbon-neutral tours, indigenous-led cultural experiences, and visitor participation in ecological restoration (MBIE, 2025b).

However, the new government in New Zealand elected in late 2023 has enacted a major policy shift, abandoning the previous “high-value, low-impact” approach in favour of what critics describe as an “open-door” tourism strategy — and what the Tourism Minister for New Zealand recently summarized as “anyone, from anywhere, anytime” (Scheyvens, Higham and Becken, 2025). This reversion to volume-driven growth prioritizes rapid recovery of tourist numbers over concerns about visitor impact or community well-being.

Objective:

To create a tourism sector that is environmentally sustainable, culturally respectful, and socially inclusive, fostering shared responsibility among visitors, the industry, and local communities. New Zealand’s approach emphasizes education through initiatives such as the Tiaki Promise, encourages strategic planning through destination management plans developed with local Māori communities (iwi) and stakeholders, and supports national coordination through Tourism Industry Aotearoa (TIA). The aim is to ensure that tourism growth enhances, rather than harms, natural landscapes, community well-being, and cultural values.

Positive and negative impacts:

New Zealand's biosecurity measures are exceptional, and the country is a recognized leader in island biosecurity both regionally and globally. These efforts have reduced the introduction of new non-native species to the already heavily modified island ecosystem and have protected restored coastal islands. Nevertheless, it is an ongoing battle.

New Zealand's tourism policies prior to 2024 achieved notable successes. Booking systems on the popular Great Walks reduced congestion, protected fragile alpine ecosystems, and improved the visitor experience. The International Value List (IVL) generated substantial funding for conservation and infrastructure, while the Tiaki Promise promoted responsible visitor behaviour and reinforced New Zealand's image as a sustainable destination. However, several challenges remained: congestion persisted at the most popular sites, cruise ship visitors often added pressure but contributed little economic benefit, and the Tiaki Promise was not effectively enforced. The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the vulnerability resulting from reliance on high-volume tourism, and although arrivals have returned almost to pre-pandemic levels, tourists are now staying for shorter periods and spending less per visit, increasing pressure without a corresponding economic benefit. The shift to an "anyone, anywhere, anytime" policy is recent, so its social, economic, and environmental impacts cannot yet be fully assessed. It is likely to increase the social and environmental costs of tourism.

Relevance to the Galapagos:

New Zealand’s experience offers clear lessons for Galápagos. The Tiaki Promise shows how culturally grounded visitor education can encourage respectful behaviour, while the Great Walk permit system demonstrates the effectiveness of daily caps at sensitive sites. The International Visitor Levy highlights how a transparent, dedicated fee can fund conservation and infrastructure while reinforcing tourists’ responsibility to contribute. Yet the New Zealand government’s recent pivot toward maximizing visitor numbers at the expense of sustainability is a cautionary tale: it shows how quickly progress towards a regenerative tourism model can reverse if policy prioritizes short-term growth over long-term ecological and community health. The social licence for tourism could erode if communities experience increased congestion, environmental degradation, and unaffordable housing driven by unregulated tourism growth. This suggests that for Galapagos, combining an effective system of limits, clear funding mechanisms, and strong policy commitment will be essential to build a tourism model that preserves its unique ecosystems and benefits the people.

With regard to biosecurity, there are clear parallels in vulnerability and in the need for a 2-tier quarantine barrier: in NZ it is on national entry and then for certain islets, whilst for Galápagos it is first at the mainland ports and airports then at the ports and airports of the archipelago. For some three decades Galápagos has benefitted from the expertise, strategic advice and training of New Zealand biosecurity and island conservation experts. However, although the technical expertise in Galápagos is now very high, strategic advice has not always been taken on board, for example with regard to minimising the number of ports of departure from the mainland and of entry into the archipelago, including both sea and air ports.

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New Zealand and Galápagos: Talking points table

New Zealand - Policy intervention	Relevance to Galapagos	Advantages	Disadvantages
Education code for visitors «Tiaki Promise»	Highly relevant: Galápagos could create a code of conduct and responsible co-management to encourage respectful behaviour from visitors towards wildlife, biosecurity and local communities.	Promotes responsible tourism with minimal enforcement costs. Builds a positive image of the destination.	It is not legally binding; relies on voluntary compliance, which by itself may prove insufficient.
Great Walk booking systems with daily limits	Directly relevant: Strengthening and expanding a system of limits for the most sensitive and the most popular sites in the Galápagos could reduce congestion and protect sensitive habitats.	Controls the number of visitors. Preserves ecological integrity. Improves visitor experience.	Requires administrative capacity. It could limit access for budget travelers (if that is a target market segment). It could lead to disputes with certain tour operators.
International Visitor Conservation and tourism Levy (IVL)	Relevant: It is necessary first to evaluate the recent increase, but in principle increasing entry fees to Galápagos or adding a transparent, accountable conservation surcharge could guarantee sustainable funding for conservation and community needs.	Generates stable revenue. Reinforces the responsibility of tourists. Provides funds for infrastructure, conservation etc.	Risk of adverse political reaction. Could reduce affordability for some Ecuadorian citizens. Requires transparent allocation and use of funds to maintain trust.
Destination management plans with a regenerative approach	Highly relevant: Planning frameworks that integrate conservation and social goals can guide sustainable tourism development in the Galápagos. This is especially relevant because each island has a unique context. However, the process for and use of such plans would need careful prior consideration, because the Islands have a history of plans left unimplemented.	Encourages holistic, long-term planning. Aligns tourism with conservation and community well-being. Supports regenerative initiatives. Encourages local authorities to align with conservation goals.	The plans risk being under-resourced. Plans may be implemented inconsistently or ignored in the face of local or external investor pressure. Success depends on stakeholder cooperation and government commitment.
Recent shift by the new government to a volume-focused strategy	Highly relevant as a caution. There are constant demands for growth of Galapagos tourism, similar to the “anyone, from anywhere, anytime” policy of the new NZ government. Through the World Heritage process, the Government of Ecuador could formally lock in the commitment to curb growth of Galapagos tourism and focus instead on making it regenerative, through the strategy outlined by Ecuador to the WH Committee in 2024.	Highlights the importance of consistent, long-term policy. Serves as a warning to maintain a focus on ecological and social sustainability in the management of Galapagos.	Demonstrates how quickly sustainable progress can unravel. Shows that policy changes that prioritise growth can undermine conservation and resident support.

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Conclusion

The Galapagos Islands were a pioneer in enabling nature tourism to coexist with conservation in a sensitive environment. To this end, the Ecuadorian government deployed a variety of tools, such as the SIMAVIS system, strong cruise regulations, the quarantine system and the use of park entry fees to fund protected area management and local government services. However, despite these tools, the past two decades have seen changes in the character and volume of tourism, which have pushed the archipelago towards an unsustainable model in which neither nature nor people can thrive in the long term. Consequently, there is a need to consider additional tourism management tools and/or to change the way the tools are used.

Other iconic natural sites around the world are similarly facing challenges of increased tourism pressure, compounded by biodiversity loss, the climate crisis and rapid social change, so Ecuador may be able to learn from the successes and failures of policies and tools adopted for those sites.

This report has not aimed to prescribe one solution, but to offer a menu of possible tools—gathered from diverse places facing similar dilemmas. Some are bold and structural, such as systems of limited permits or differentiated fees. Others are softer but can also be powerful, such as visitor education, destination branding, or local planning processes. What they share is an understanding that managing tourism well means more than controlling numbers. It's about shaping experiences, protecting ecological integrity, and ensuring that tourism works for both nature and people over the long term.

Many of the examples explored—like New Zealand's Tiaki Promise, Bhutan's national fee model, or the digital permitting of Peru's Inca Trail—show what's possible when a shared vision is supported by thoughtful design and the right institutional frameworks. Importantly, Galapagos already has several of these elements in place. What's needed now is the space and support to adapt, test, and scale the next generation of tourism policies—especially for land-based tourism, which is currently less tightly regulated and has grown rapidly.

The way forward is not about abandoning what works, but building on it. This means continuing to invest in tools like SIMAVIS, but also using information technology for efficient control of visitor numbers and distribution. It also means coordinating better the development and management of land- and boat-based tourism, strengthening participatory governance, and bringing greater transparency and accountability to how tourism revenues are used. It may also mean making hard choices — setting limits, prioritizing high-value over high-volume, or closing sites seasonally to allow ecosystems to recover.

Tourism involves positive and negative impacts, which have to be reconciled. In the face of rapid growth and a range of threats to the ecosystem, Galápagos needs to manage tourism with care, creativity and responsibility. In rising to this challenge, the institutions, people and other stakeholders of the Islands can enable Galápagos to once again be a leader — not only in conservation, but in showing how nature and people can coexist and thrive in a vulnerable oceanic island system. This report compiles some of the management tools that are already out there. The question is, how can they be put to good use in the Galápagos context?