

Tourists vs. Tortoises: Visitors Threaten Galapagos Islands

<http://www.icue.com/portal/site/iCue/chapter?cuecard=41279>



General Information

Source:	NBC Nightly News	Resource Type:	Video News Report
Creator:	Amy Robach/Peter Alexander	Copyright:	© NBC Universal, Inc.
Event Date:	11/25/2007	Copyright Date:	2007
Air/Publish Date:	11/25/2007	Clip Length	00:02:40

Description

By 2007, 140,000 tourists visit the Galapagos Islands each year, bringing in population, pollution and trash; a quarter of island plants and half its wildlife species are now endangered, says the UN.

Keywords

Galapagos Islands, Endangered Species, Plants, Exotic Plants, Wildlife, Tourists, Tourism, Eco-Tourism, Trash, Rubbish, Burning, Air Pollution, Development, Population Growth, Illegal Immigration, Recycling, Tortoise, Tortoise Habitat, Farmland, Reclaim, Sea Lion, Fish, Fishing, Local Fishermen, Galapagos Islands National Park, Charles Darwin, Theory of Evolution, Charles Darwin Foundation, United Nations, Mona Lisa, Ecuador, Conservation, Habitat Preservation, Environment, Our Planet

Transcript

Tourists vs. Tortoises: Visitors Threaten Galapagos Islands

AMY ROBACH, anchor:

Finally tonight, our series OUR PLANET and new concerns about a natural paradise in the Pacific. Lying 600 miles off the coast of Ecuador, the Galapagos Islands are known as one of the world's last great places. Almost completely protected as a national park and marine reserve, the islands are home to some

of the world's most exotic creatures and plants. But today, development presents a serious threat, putting nature's beauty at risk. Here's NBC's Peter Alexander.

PETER ALEXANDER reporting:

The Galapagos Islands are celebrated both for their wild beauty and unique creatures. This living laboratory inspired Charles Darwin's theory of evolution. Ninety-five percent of plant and animal life still exists as it did in Darwin's day. Dr. Graham Watkins, head of the Charles Darwin Foundation, says everyone has a stake in preserving nature here.

Dr. GRAHAM WATKINS: If you care that something as beautiful as the Mona Lisa exists, then you should care equally about a place like Galapagos.

ALEXANDER: But just this summer the United Nations officially declared the Galapagos Islands at risk. A quarter of the plants that live here and nowhere else in the world are now considered endangered, as well as half of the wildlife. The greatest threat, humans; 140,000 tourists visited last year. Experts warn, at this pace, 400,000 will visit every year by 2021. Local environmentalists and hotel owner Juan Diego Dominguez worries about the fast pace of development.

Mr. JUAN DIEGO DOMINGUEZ: It took the nature six million years to be as it is today, and we are destroying it in less than 50 years.

ALEXANDER: The local population, now 30,000 people, has skyrocketed over the last two decades. And with humans comes waste. Ten thousand bags of trash pile up each week on this island alone. Dominguez is promoting eco-friendly tourism on land.

At sea, long-time fishermen Banigno Medena and Julio Camez have found a new way to make money by hosting tourist day trips. In the process, they're helping reduce the total number of fish caught. Private organizations are reclaiming farmland. This is now a tourist habitat. And the local government is joining the effort, cracking down on illegal immigration and promoting recycling. The conservationists see the Galapagos as a model for the planet.

Dr. WATKINS: This is basically the land of opportunity. This is the place to do it, if you can do it. And if you can't...

ALEXANDER: If you can't do it here...

Dr. WATKINS: If you can't do it here, you can't do it anywhere else in the world.

ALEXANDER: For now the challenge remains finding a delicate balance between tortoises and tourists. Peter Alexander, NBC News, Galapagos Islands, Ecuador.

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