

Galápagos Islands Removed From Danger List, But Concerns Remain

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On 28 July 2010, the United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) world heritage committee removed the Galápagos Islands from the list of world heritage sites in danger.

Recession is biggest tourism deterrent

The Galápagos Islands were added to the list in 2007 because rapid increases in tourists and residents, in addition to excessive fishing and the introduction of non-native animal and plant species, threatened the delicate eco-system.

Although tourists are concerned about the islands' conservation, the placement of the islands' on the danger list did not lead to a decline in visitation in 2008. It took the global recession to cause a decline in foreign visitors in 2009 although domestic visitors increased.

Government implements changes but critics abound

The Ecuadorian government worked quickly to remove the Galápagos Islands from the danger list. It began to strictly enforce its migration policies and deport "illegal" residents.

It also implemented programs to eliminate invasive animal and plant species. The government incorporated clean energy sources, such as solar power.

Despite these efforts, many conservancy groups criticized UNESCO's decision.

Both the Galápagos Conservancy and the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) argue that the decision was premature and the government has not done enough to minimize the risk to the island's unique plants and animals.

Future growth in tourism likely

According to industry sources, visitation rebounded by around 20% in the first few months of 2010 as the global economy began its recovery. Future growth in tourism is likely with the expansion of airlift to the islands.

For example, LAN airlines launched its first flight to the Galápagos on 17 September 2010, which will likely increase daily passengers to the islands by 25% to 750.

The airline has also applied to fly to the other airport on the islands, which would further increase the number of passengers.

Industry sources speculate that the number of visitors could grow between 50% and 80% over the next five years.

It remains to be seen if the government can manage this strong growth in tourism while protecting the islands' unique and fragile eco-system.

by Michelle Grant

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