An ecotourism case study – Ecuador

Millions of tourists from the wealthy nations travel to foreign destinations – they are being joined by the wealthier people of China and India. The whole world is a tourist destination, and few locations are isolated from the impact of tourism. Tourism is a very important source of employment and earner of foreign currency, but it is subject to political instability, social upset or economic crisis in both the visited and visitor countries, as well as travel trends.

During the late 20th century, environmental and social concerns about the impact of mass tourism at particular destinations led to the development of an approach to tourism called ‘ecotourism’. However, mass tourism proliferates, with ever longer flights in search of a cheap location. Will the next new sun, sea, sand destination be the beaches of China? Low-cost airlines have made flying affordable for a larger number of people, who now emulate government officials, business people, celebrities and personalities, hopping on and off planes for only a few hours – the very antithesis of responsible travel.

Ecuador – geographical diversity

Ecuador is a South American country, slightly smaller than the UK. It lies on the west coast of South America and is crossed by the equator, which passes just north of the capital city of Quito (Figure 1). Mainland Ecuador consists of three major physical divisions:

- The western coastal lowlands, which were originally forested but now support agriculture and shrimp farming where mangroves once grew. There is a distinct wet season (January to April with a total annual precipitation of 1000 mm) and temperatures range from 21 to 31°C being warmest when wettest.
- The Andean mountains, which consist of two parallel ranges of volcanoes running 400km north to south, separated by a fertile central valley which has the highest population density in Ecuador and is also the location of Quito, in the north, as well as other major towns and cities such as Riobamba and Cuenca. Here there is a short dry season (June to September) with a total annual precipitation of 1200mm and an average temperature range of 13 to 21°C but high diurnal ranges.
- The eastern lowlands of tropical rainforest, called the Oriente with rain all year round (annual precipitation 2500 to 4000 mm) peaking in April to October being almost as hot as the coastal lowlands.

Ecuador also includes the volcanic Galapagos Islands, 1,000km offshore in the Pacific Ocean. There are 13 major islands, widely separated, rising due to its oceanic location. The Pacific warm current gives a hot (over 30°C) rainy and humid season from January to April. From May to December cool currents create cooler conditions, but also a grey damp atmosphere called garúa.

Ecuador – ecological diversity

The geodiversity of Ecuador means there is a wide range of habitats that have been exploited by plants and animals, to create one of the most biodiverse and biorich countries in the world. Over 25,000 species of plants, over 15,000 species of birds, large numbers of mammal species, insects, reptiles and amphibians as well as fish exist in the:

- high ice-covered Andean summits
- paramo, or high-altitude grasslands (the sponge of the Andes)
- tropical cloud forest on steep rocky soils at high altitudes
- rainforest
- tropical dry forests
- mangrove swamps along the coast
- rivers, lakes and ocean
- isolated, unique Galapagos Islands.

This geodiversity and biodiversity would appear to lend itself to ecotourism.
The Galapagos Islands

Humans caused a great deal of uncertainty for the islands before tourists arrived. Pirates and whalers collected so many turtles for food they almost became extinct. Unwanted species have been introduced: goats, pigs, dogs, cats, fire ants and also rats. Most recently there has been the destruction of pepinos (sea cucumbers).

The most famous visitor to the Galapagos Islands was Charles Darwin. He spent five weeks in the islands in September and October 1835, 24 years before he published his Origin of Species. The examples he used from the islands made them famous; they were endemic species (found nowhere else), and species that had adapted to the environment.

Tourism did not develop until the 1970s, but in 1959 all areas not already colonised by humans were declared part of the Galapagos National Park, which extends to 97% of the land area. In the same year the Charles Darwin Foundation was created, and in 1960 the Charles Darwin Research Station was established adjacent to the main settlement of Puerto Ayora on Santa Cruz Island.

Once they have landed at Baltra Airport, tourists have to travel by ship. Staying in a hotel is not practical, as distances to other islands are large, and there are only three other small settlements and one other airfield. Consequently it is the number of flights and the capacity of the boats that control tourist numbers. In spite of master plans to limit the number of ships and prevent the building of high-rise hotels, tourist numbers have increased. The 80 tourist vessels have capacities that range from 4 to 96 passengers and tours last from 2 or 3 days to over a week if all the main islands are to be seen and a range of sites visited. The number of hotels has increased from 15 in 1981 to 30 by 1991. Correspondingly, Puerto Ayora has seen an influx of Ecuadorians to work in the tourist and service industries. In 1981 the population of the islands was estimated at 5,000, reaching 10,000 in 1988 and now exceeding 20,000.

Forty-eight visitor landing sites have been designated with marked often circular trails. All visitors and landings are led by a guide licensed by the Galapagos National Park. In order to get ashore passengers have to disembark from their boat anchored offshore into a panga (rubber dinghy), which then takes them to a landing site (Figure 2).

The detailed rules for visitors are strictly enforced, and include:
- food and animals cannot be transported from the mainland
- nothing live can be transported from island to island or removed
- animals and birds must not be touched
- clearly marked trails must be followed
- no litter, graffiti, smoking, mobile phones or eating are allowed whilst on the islands.

In order to enhance the work of the Charles Darwin Research Station, every visitor must pay US$100 on arrival at the airport.

Overarching the rules for tourists is the Galapagos Master Plan, with seven main objectives:
1. protection of the Galapagos ecosystem
2. eradication or control of introduced species
3. appropriate use for visitors
4. providing information for visitors on what they can see
5. education for the local population
6. encouraging economic development of the archipelago’s residents
7. encouraging scientific research.

The plan also zones the National Park for management:
- intensive use zones where a maximum of 90 people are allowed (25 sites)
extensive use zones where a maximum of 12 people are allowed (16 sites)
primitive use zones where visits require a permit
primary scientific zones with no access for visitors
special use zones next to colonised areas where residents may obtain wood, sand and rocks.

The tourism industry is important to both the Islands and Ecuador, so the solution has been to develop responsible tourism through environmental education largely managed by the National Park. It is quite clear that many of the local population are instilled with the concept of conservation. Ecotourism has developed as an integral element of the conservation of the islands.

Whether tourism on Galapagos is referred to as ecotourism or responsible tourism, it has developed and been integrated into the whole development of Galapagos socially, environmentally and politically as well as environmentally. This tourism is strictly controlled and puts the geo-and bio-environment first.

The New Chiva Express

On the Ecuadorian mainland in the Amazon rainforest eco-lodges, including the Kapawi eco-lodge and reserve, attract tourists. In the Andes there is another form of ecotourism being developed that encourages sustainability and responsible tourism.

Before the advent of motorised road transport, the only link between the major port of Guayquil in the south west and the capital of Quito 340km to the north east was a railway line that passed through the wide-open fertile agricultural central valley where about half Ecuador’s population live (Figure 3). The line was opened in 1915, but the branch to Cuenca was not completed until 1965. Six years earlier (1959) the trans-American Highway had been built almost parallel to the railway. Traffic on the railway declined and the impacts of El Nino events in 1982-3 and again in 1997 caused landslides, so the line closed.

Metropolitan Touring, a leading Ecuadorian travel company, decided to capitalise on the scenic nature of the route, develop a tour from Quito to Cuenca and use the railway as a more sustainable form of transport, incorporating visits to local enterprises and using locally owned hotels so local people could benefit from the tourist dollar. The New Chiva Express is an attempt to develop the tourist industry within Ecuador and allow tourists to experience the country in a variety of ways. A chiva is an old-fashioned and colourful bus in the tropics with open sides for carrying bagged grain, fruit and animals as well as people. The New Chiva Express (maximum speed 35 kph) is a combination of a chiva with a train, almost literally a bus on tracks. Three chivas have been constructed to run on three sections of track that have been repaired to offer a unique type of tourism. Less eco-friendly diesel buses are used to link the sections of track (Figure 4).

The scenery is spectacular. Intensive agriculture in the valley is paralleled by 30 mighty active snow-capped volcanoes, including Chimborazo, Pichincha, Antisana, and Cotopaxi. The track is rough and attains over 3000m; the roof seats are exposed and occasionally wet. The New Chiva Express stops at a variety of locations, enabling the tourist to travel through the heart of the country and experience the indigenous culture, its history and traditions as well as the more modern layer of Spanish culture. Visits are made to a dairy farm and hacienda with gaucho demonstrations; to rose plantations (now Ecuador’s second most important export); to traditional local markets; to artisans making cloth and guitars and the world-famous Panama hats hand-woven in Cuenca; and to see more exotic products like orchids and a range of opportunities to experience locally produced food. On
this four-day tour, both hotels used are locally owned and employ local people, and restaurants visited use their own produce. Little of the Inca culture remains in Ecuador but part of the Chiva itinerary includes a visit to the once substantial settlement of Ingapirca. From the town of Alausi the traveller can head south west to the port city of Guayquil, or southwards to the very Spanish city of Cuenca, but not before experiencing the railway descending over 800 metres along a series of hairpin bends and zig-zags.

The New Chiva Express is a unique attempt to utilise the old rail infrastructure and complement the attractions of the Galapagos Islands, Quito and the Amazon lodges with the sights, sounds, tastes and culture of rural Ecuador. Metropolitan Touring is enabling the tourist to experience Ecuador to the full, but also ensuring that the tourist dollar goes more directly to those who will benefit most in this vibrant developing country – the local people.

**Conclusion**

Having obeyed all the rules, trodden lightly, taken only photographs and supported the indigenous population, it is now time to jet off back to Europe or North America on a 14-hour flight. Is the concept of ecotourism valid; can ecotourism ever be sustainable; does ecotourism really exist?

Ecotourism is only a niche market within the whole tourist industry, but it creates a greater ecological and environmental awareness which has influenced other sectors of the tourist industry who want to take advantage of the public’s increasing environmental awareness. Some travel companies claim to be eco-friendly, offering ‘offsetting’ schemes for your carbon pollution (carbon guilt) so you can have ‘peace of mind’. Other green credentials for resorts may be difficult to find, and some eco-holidays only pay lip service to the concept; this ‘greenwash’ (environmental claims that cannot be supported) gives a false respectability to the holiday and the company. Those companies (tour operators, hotels, attractions, restaurants) that embrace proven sustainable development create green credentials that make economic business sense as well as being environmentally friendly. Sustainable management is an all-encompassing ethos that could ensure the future of that company or destination.

**Postscript**

In Ecuador, approximately two-thirds of the population recently voted ‘yes’ to a new constitution, which is the first in the world to grant nature the same inalienable rights as human beings. It is influenced by the indigenous Quechua (Indian) concept of *sumak kawsay*: balanced living – to live in harmony with oneself, society and *Pachamama* – mother nature. This development is a step towards the protection of Ecuador’s natural wealth and cultural diversity, acknowledging that all life on earth is interconnected and must be protected and respected for the sake of all species. The new constitution champions sustainable development over economic growth, Nature will no longer be viewed as available for exploitation. Exploitative tourism will not be encouraged under this new constitution. Ecotourism should become an element within an eco-political, eco-social and eco-environmental country.

**Bibliography**

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**Focus Questions**

1. Many definitions of ecotourism are brief and limited. With the help of the following words and phrases, attempt a fuller definition of ecotourism, justifying the use of each word and phrase:
   - Responsible tourism
   - Sustainable tourism
   - Environmentally friendly tourism
   - Low impact/low density tourism
   - Ecologically sensitive tourism

2. Do the advantages of ecotourism in Ecuador outweigh the carbon cost of travel by air from Europe?

3. How can responsible travel and a sustainable approach develop in the mass tourist market?

4. What impact will political instability and social unrest in the host country, or economic recession in the visitor nation, have on the host country?