

MARK CARWARDINE



On the wild thoughts that won't let him sleep. This month:

Spreading the tourist load

How long will it be before wildlife tourism has to be so tightly managed that it loses all sense of true wilderness and freedom?

I've just returned from the Galápagos and, as ever, it was terrific. Within seconds of landing almost anywhere, I was face to face with some of the most fearless and curious wildlife on the planet.

But I was among no fewer than 170,000 tourists to visit the islands in the past year, and they're beginning to feel a little crowded. There were several other boats at almost every anchorage and, in certain places at certain times, the well-worn paths were as busy as high-street pavements.

The consequence of such an onslaught is that wildlife tourism is more tightly controlled in the Galápagos than anywhere else in the world. You're only allowed to visit tiny pockets of the national park; you can only disembark (from small boats) at designated landing spots; you must only walk on clearly marked trails in strictly disciplined small groups; and you must be accompanied by certified local guides. But given the number of visitors, that's exactly how it should be.

The Galápagos Islands may be an extreme example, but they're not alone in having to regulate wildlife tourism with military efficiency. Indeed,

I believe that many other hotspots would benefit from even stricter regulations – ships carrying more than 100 passengers should be banned from Antarctica, for instance.

One of the problems is that an inordinate amount of pressure falls on a relatively small number of high-profile places. While we can't blame Darwin for putting the Galápagos on the map, we can point an accusatory finger at those culpable for excessive tourist numbers



The Galápagos: where tourist meets tortoise.

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elsewhere in the world.

For example, it would help enormously if the BBC realised that the Maasai Mara isn't the only safari destination in Africa. At least then the pressure on that little corner of Kenya wouldn't be quite so intense.

Mark Carwardine is a zoologist, photographer, writer, conservationist and BBC TV presenter.