



MARK CARWARDINE

WE ALL NEED TO SUPPORT RESPONSIBLE WILDLIFE TOURISM TO PROTECT PRECIOUS SPECIES AND HABITATS.

OPINION

North Cornwall has become the latest in a string of wildlife hotspots that risk being loved to death by inconsiderate ecotourists, as some selfish individuals and irresponsible commercial boat operators flush seals from rocks and repeatedly harass bottlenose dolphins.

Atrocious behaviour by a small minority of uncaring ignoramuses (and I include a disturbing number of wildlife photographers in that category) is a growing problem for wildlife in the UK and around the world. But it's not just bad behaviour that is worrisome. It's the sheer number of ecotourists as well. People flock to wherever there are easy opportunities for watching wildlife – whether it be the urban otters in Thetford, Norfolk, or the unusually visible jaguars in the Pantanal, Brazil.

These days it's impossible to keep a wildlife hotspot secret. One mention on a TV programme, or even a tweet, can turn a quiet backwater into a media circus overnight. This strikes at the heart of

one of the great conservation dilemmas – how do we achieve a balance between encouraging (or merely allowing) people to watch wildlife and protecting the very places they come to see?

One extreme solution is to ban ecotourism altogether in some of the more sensitive regions. There have been calls for this in Antarctica, for example – with no fewer than 37,000 tourists visiting the frozen south during the 2014–15 season alone, you can see why there is so much concern. But Antarctic tourism is fairly well controlled already, and I think people have a right to be wowed by such an astonishing place. More importantly, *responsible* ecotourism can have too many benefits to wildlife for it to be banned.

A better idea is to limit numbers, perhaps by capping the annual total or restricting the number of days or even

hours permitted per visit. The Galápagos Islands is a case in point: it now has more than 200,000 visitors every year, and some well-worn paths can be as busy as high-street pavements. Quite rightly, its wildlife tourism is regulated with military efficiency, but there has to be a limit.

Another solution is to manage the onslaught more

carefully. This might involve herding everyone to a few key places where they can be better controlled. Disturbance may be acceptable in a small part of a national park, for example, on condition that the rest of the park is left alone.

From a selfish point of view, I do wonder how long it will be before wildlife

tourism has to be so tightly managed that it loses all sense of true wilderness and freedom. But if I had a time machine and could live on Earth during any period in the past four billion years, I probably wouldn't use it. Admittedly I'd love to sit in a hide and watch *Archaeopteryx* fluttering about in ancient trees.

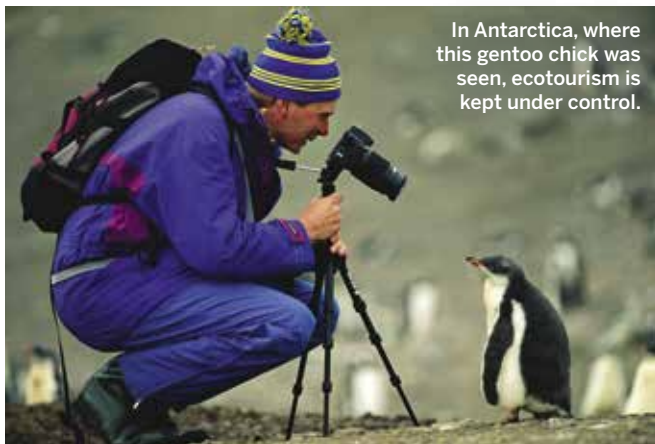
But despite all of my

moans and groans about the flagging state of the natural world, I'd rather hang about at the dawn of the 21st century.

Think about it. If we were to go back in time we'd have to join perilous and expensive expeditions lasting months or years. Alternatively if we were to go forwards in time – perhaps as little as 50 years – there would be less wildlife to watch and, worse still, we wouldn't be able to see it over the shoulders of the multitudes who got there first.

All the more reason, then, to be responsible wildlife watchers who treat wildlife and wild places with the utmost respect. There is only so much that the managers of wildlife hotspots can do – the rest is down to us. 🐾

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In Antarctica, where this gentoo chick was seen, ecotourism is kept under control.

Staffan Widstrand/naturepl.com

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