



# MARK CARWARDINE

## WILD THOUGHTS

I've just returned from photographing jaguars in the Pantanal, which happened to be the subject of Steve Winter's stunning portfolio in last month's *BBC Wildlife*. These big cats were notoriously difficult to see in the wild until quite recently, when word reached the outside world of a particular place where sightings are virtually guaranteed.

Now, with visitor numbers increasing fast, it has become the latest in a string of wildlife hotspots that risk being loved to death by well-meaning ecotourists.

Ecotourism can be hugely beneficial, of course, and there are cases where it has saved species from extinction. But just because it's labelled 'eco' doesn't necessarily make it OK.

A recent study by the University of California, for instance, compared a number of protected areas with and without ecotourism. One of its most shocking findings was a five-fold decline in the density of native carnivores in the areas where ecotourism was allowed.

One problem is sheer numbers. Fifty thousand people now visit Antarctica every year – five times as many as in the early 1990s. Nearly 180,000 people go to the Galápagos Islands; on my last visit to the islands, I saw a lone albatross on her nest surrounded by no fewer than three tour groups – 48 people in all.

But it is the sudden and unexpected growth in numbers that is causing special concern. A couple of years ago, *BBC Wildlife* published a portfolio of my Amazon river

dolphin pictures. With hindsight, I should have anticipated the response – an onslaught from photographers wanting to know where to go. Within a year, what was once a quiet backwater became a media circus.

Should the Pantanal and the Amazon river dolphins have been kept secret for as long as possible? Should visitor numbers to Antarctica and the Galápagos be capped? These questions strike at the heart of one of the great conservation dilemmas of the day – how do we achieve a balance between encouraging (or merely allowing) people to watch and care for wildlife and protecting the very wildlife they come to see?



**Think pink: should river dolphins be protected from photographers?**

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Turn to p53 for Mark's exclusive feature on his adventures with Stephen Fry during the making of *Last Chance to See*.