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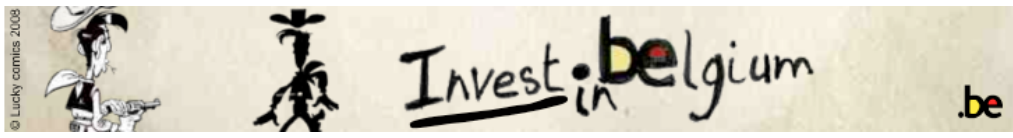
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Finance & Economics

Ecotourism and economics
Shellshock

Mar 27th 2008
From *The Economist* print edition

The Galapagos Islands show the mixed blessings of greenery

TOURISM has a long history in the Galapagos Islands. An early visitor was Charles Darwin nearly 175 years ago, on a trip that inspired his theory of evolution by natural selection. A lot has changed over the years. Visitors are now central to the future of the isolated archipelago. Income is needed to raise standards of living and create incentives for local people to conserve the fragile natural environment.

Edward Taylor, an economist at University of California, Davis, and colleagues report on ecotourism and economic growth on the islands in a forthcoming paper in *Environment and Development Economics*. They say the conservation strategy of relying on income growth in the islands has failed owing to uncontrolled migration from mainland Ecuador.

Between 1999 and 2005, GDP increased by an estimated 78%, from a base of \$41m—giving the archipelago an annual growth rate of around 10% and making it one of the world's fastest-growing economies. Tourism provided 68% of this growth. Despite this, average income per head rose by only 1.8% annually. This is because Ecuador's economy collapsed in 1999 and large numbers of migrants sought opportunities elsewhere. Because of migration, the islands' population rose by 60%.

More people have put increased strain on the islands' water supply, sewerage and waste disposal, not to mention its fragile wildlife. Exploitation of fish from the marine reserve is increasingly intense and there is plenty of antagonism between fishermen and conservationists; the fishing fleet doubled during the study and illegal catches are common. However, fishing is a relatively minor contributor to GDP. Just under 4% of the recent growth can be attributed to sales of fish.

Even the conservationists and scientists are making things worse—they, too, are an important source of GDP growth. Although their spending is focused on environmental protection, it also injects millions of dollars into the economy each year, further stimulating migration.

The authors say that the slow growth in GDP per head creates even more political pressure to explore development options for the economy, whether through commercial fishing in the nature reserve, or additional numbers of tourists.

Visitors to the islands who hope to help the Galapagos may want to bear in mind that every \$3,000 more the islands earn—every three extra visitors, in other words—sucks in another migrant. Not very eco-friendly.

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