

## Climate change, tourism threaten species conservation in Galápagos Islands

Unesco calls the Galápagos Islands a “living museum and showcase of evolution,” but they are much more than that. The islands have become the world’s foremost conservation laboratory, which scientists and the Ecuadorean government have promoted as a model on how humanity might prevent, or even reverse, the catastrophic species depletion that has taken place relentlessly ever since Charles Darwin first pondered the finches there.

These efforts matter more than ever now, as recent research suggests that Darwin was wrong when he rejected the natural catastrophe theory of evolution. According to a recent report from the World Wildlife Fund, populations of more than 10,000 vertebrate species declined by 52 percent on average between 1970 and 2010. In South America, the rate of depletion has reached an astonishing 83 percent. This is the process that scientists have called the “sixth extinction,” comparable to the previous five great mass extinctions on Earth. But unlike the others, the current destruction is entirely anthropogenic — a result of human activity. Worst-case scenarios predict the extinction of one-fourth of Earth’s species within 20 to 30 years if the rise in temperatures continues.

In recent years, scientists have cited climate change as a grave danger to the Galápagos Islands’ ecosystem, which depends on the confluence of hot and cold ocean currents. Some studies have already found evidence that abrupt changes in sea temperatures have caused the degradation of coral reefs, and one scientist predicted that if global warming continued, Galápagos penguins might one day have to live in artificial “condos.”

But climate change is only one of the threats. In 2007, Unesco designated the Galápagos to be a World Heritage Site, in danger from tourism, immigration, poaching and overfishing, but it later removed the region from the danger list on the grounds that Ecuador had taken vigorous action to protect it — a decision that some conservationists criticized.

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