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Marketing Tourism In The Galapagos Islands: Ecotourism Or Greenwashing?

Robin M. Self

Alabama State University

Donald R. Self

Auburn University Montgomery

Janel Bell-Haynes

Alabama State University

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Abstract

Tourism accounts for approximately 7.5% - 15% of the world's total employment and is the world's most important service industry. In heavily frequented tourist destinations such as the Galapagos Islands in Ecuador, the importance is even higher. International travel is projected to double by 2020 with over 1.5 billion people traveling throughout the

world. Within the tourism industry, ecotourism is the fastest growing sector, growing from 10 to 30 percent a year. While exact definitions of ecotourism vary, ecotourism is defined by the International Tourism Society (TIES) as “responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and improves the welfare of local people.” A subset of sustainable tourism, ecotourism has a natural area focus, which benefits the environment and communities visited, fosters environmental and cultural understanding, appreciation and awareness. Because there is no universally adopted certification program for ecotourism, tourism operators may market their operations as “ecotourism” while in reality they are “greenwashing.” Greenwashers are dishonest tourism operators who embrace ecotourism as a new selling angle. To greenwash is to promote ecotourism while effectively doing the opposite. The Galapagos Islands is a popular destination for ecotourism. Beginning in the late 1960’s, the Galapagos tourism industry started with about 1,000 tourists per year and has boomed to 148,000 tourists in 2006. This has caused several problems: growing human population, introduction of alien and invasive species, and unwanted by-products from tourism. As a result, in 2007, the Galapagos Islands were placed on UNESCO’s list of World Heritage Sites in Danger. Because of the unique biodiversity of the Galapagos Islands, and the increase in tourism and its negative consequences, the Galapagos Islands presents an excellent example for a case study in marketing of ecotourism. Using the criteria established by the Mohonk Agreement for responsible ecotourism, this paper examines the websites of ecotourism operators in the Galapagos Islands to determine the extent to which they are “ecotours” or “greenwashed tours.” The implications for conservation of the islands and responsible marketing are discussed.

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