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Policy Brief

Adjustment of entry fees to the Galapagos National Park – Tourist attitudes and perceptions

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Abstract

This policy brief summarises key findings from the project *Hidden Barriers to Conservation—Addressing Social Acceptability to Enhance Effective Management in the Galapagos Marine Reserve*, conducted by Heriot-Watt University with the support of The Rufford Foundation, in collaboration with the Charles Darwin Foundation and the Galapagos National Park Directorate. It discusses tourist attitudes towards changes in entry fee policies in the Galapagos National Park. As one of the most biodiverse places on Earth, the Galapagos face several challenges for its conservation and sustainable development, including increased anthropogenic pressure due to the rapid growth of tourism. To address this, entry fees have been adjusted for the first time in 25 years, with the aim of regulating visitor flow while generating additional resources for the national park management. Entry fees are a key tool for managing nature-based tourism, and their adjustment is essential to restoring their effectiveness. However, little is known about how these changes impact the tourism sector. By analysing tourist attitudes and perceptions during the fee increase period, this study provides recommendations to guide future entry fee adjustments and the allocation of additional funds collected. Ultimately, these recommendations aim to facilitate an effective and timely implementation of entry fee policies, supporting both the conservation of biodiversity and the sustainable management of the Galapagos.

Keywords: public attitudes, individual preferences, tourism management, protected areas.

JEL Classification: H23, Q26, Q57.

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The rapid growth of tourism in the Galapagos poses significant challenges to their conservation and sustainable development. In 2024, the number of tourists exceeded pre-pandemic levels, reaching 279,200 visitors—seven times the number recorded in the 1990s (Observatorio de Turismo de Galápagos, 2025). This increase, coupled with the growth of the local population, places considerable pressure on the fragile terrestrial and marine ecosystems of the islands. In response, one of the key measures implemented has been the adjustment of the conservation entry fee paid by tourists for access to the Galapagos National Park and Marine Reserve—marking its first update in 25 years.

Since August 1, 2024, the fee increased from USD 6 to USD 30 per person for domestic tourists and from USD 100 to USD 200 for foreign visitors. The national park entry fee serves as a strategic mechanism to regulate tourist flows and visitor profiles, promote sustainability, and generate critical funding for conservation, monitoring, and effective management of the archipelago. However, information on tourist perceptions and attitudes towards this measure, as well as their willingness to pay, is still lacking to inform national park managers.

This study analyses the perceptions and attitudes of both domestic and foreign tourists regarding the fee adjustment, along with their preferences for how the additional funds should be allocated. To this end, 348 in-person surveys were conducted at Baltra Airport, both before and after the implementation of the fee increase. Using the Contingent Valuation Method, the study estimated tourists’ willingness to pay for access to the Galapagos National Park. The findings provide insights into the impact of this policy change and offer valuable information to guide future adjustments to the entry fee and the allocation of the additional funds collected.

The results show that foreign tourists have a more favourable attitude towards the fee increase compared to domestic visitors. Notably, while domestic tourists initially expressed negative attitudes towards the fee adjustment, their perceptions improved after its implementation, particularly under a scenario in which the additional funds would be allocated to specific environmental issues. Domestic tourists prioritize solid waste management and species conservation as the main areas where additional funds should be directed. In contrast, foreign tourists, though less concerned with the specific allocation of funds, also value these areas and additionally prioritize controlling invasive species. Solid waste and invasive species are widely perceived by tourists as two of the most significant threats to Galapagos biodiversity.

These findings align with the estimates of willingness to pay. Among foreign tourists, the median willingness to pay is USD 200 per person—equivalent to the new fee amount. In contrast, the median willingness to pay among domestic tourists is USD 15, which is lower than the new fee (see Table 1). However, responses among domestic tourists show a high degree of variability, indicating diverse attitudes towards the fee adjustment. For example, 30% of domestic tourists surveyed would be willing to pay between USD 30 and USD 100 (see Figure A.5 in the Appendix).

Table 1: Willingness to pay for access to the Galapagos National Park

| USD per person | Foreign Tourists | Domestic Tourists |
|----------------|---------------------|--------------------|
| Median | 200 | 15 |
| Mean | USD 181 [\pm 91] | USD 27 [\pm 45] |
| Min. | 6 | 5 |
| Max. | 500 | 500 |

Updating entry fees to the Galapagos National Park reinforces its role as a strategic tool for managing visitor flows. This adjustment helps restore the entry fee effectiveness, which may have diminished due to inflation and the limited market data available 25 years ago. This study highlights

that, while tourists are willing to contribute financially, domestic tourists are more sensitive to how additional funds are invested. Therefore, improving visitors perception of the fee requires effective and transparent management of resource allocation, prioritizing areas of high-impact and concern for tourists and policymakers such as environmental sanitation, species conservation, and invasive species control.

Additionally, it is crucial to continue improving communication on how entry fee revenues are invested. Enhancing transparency of entry fee revenues and its allocation would support greater flexibility for future adjustments, strengthening its role as a tool for regulating tourism while promoting the sustainability and conservation of the archipelago. Finally, understanding the attitudes and perceptions of the local community is also essential for ensuring the timely and effective implementation of tourism management policies in the Galapagos National Park—see Silva-Zambrano et al. (2025).

References

- Observatorio de Turismo de Galápagos. (2025). *Arribos mensuales*. Retrieved February 13, 2025, from <https://www.observatoriogalapagos.gob.ec/>
- Silva-Zambrano, C., Aravena, C., McLaughlin, E., & Viteri, C. (2025). *Residents attitudes toward the increase in entry fees to the Galapagos National Park – How to build broader public support?* [Policy Brief], Heriot-Watt University, Charles Darwin Foundation.

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A Appendix

The appendix of this policy brief provides a summary of the descriptive results obtained from surveys conducted with tourists, highlighting key aspects such as visitor profiles, preferences, perceptions, and willingness to pay.

Sample Characterization and Tourist Profiles

Table A.1 details the number of surveys conducted by nationality and collection period. A total of 349 adult tourists (144 foreign and 205 domestic) were surveyed at Baltra Airport between July and August 2024. Of the total, 35% of the surveys were collected before the entry fee adjustment, while 65% were collected after its implementation. Table A.2 presents the sociodemographic characteristics of the tourists surveyed.

Table A.1: Sample size and data collection period

| Survey implementation period | Foreign Tourists | Domestic Tourists | Total |
|--|---------------------|----------------------|-------|
| Before the entry fee adjustment (July 2024) | 47 | 74 | 121 |
| After the entry fee adjustment (Agosto 2024) | 97 | 130 | 227 |
| Total | 144 | 204 | 348 |

Table A.2: Demographic characteristics of surveyed tourists

| Demographic characteristic | Foreign Tourists | Domestic Tourists |
|---|------------------------|----------------------|
| <i>Age</i> | | |
| 18 - 24 | 10% | 14% |
| 25 - 29 | 15% | 18% |
| 30 - 39 | 18% | 31% |
| 40 - 49 | 15% | 22% |
| 50 - 64 | 26% | 12% |
| 65 or older | 15% | 3% |
| <i>Education level</i> | | |
| Secondary or lower | 9% | 25% |
| Undergraduate | 41% | 60% |
| Postgraduate | 50% | 15% |
| <i>Occupation sector</i> | | |
| Private sector | 52% | 57% |
| Public sector | 22% | 23% |
| Retired | 17% | 3% |
| Other: students, volunteers, unemployed | 8% | 17% |
| <i>Monthly income (USD)</i> | | |
| Median | 4.000 | 750 |
| Mean [SD] | 22.175 [\pm 39.664] | 1.547 [\pm 3.251] |

Tourist Mode of Travel, Length of Stay, Group Size, and Expenditure

Table A.3 reports the mode of travel of tourists surveyed. Among foreign tourists, 59% chose a land-based visit, while 41% opted for a cruise. Among domestic tourists, 86% preferred land-based, and only 14% visited the islands by liveaboard cruise ship.

Table A.3: Mode of travel

| Mode of travel | Foreign Tourists | Domestic Tourists |
|------------------------|------------------|-------------------|
| Land-based | 59% | 86% |
| Liveaboard cruise ship | 41% | 14% |

Table A.4 details the frequency of visits to Galápagos. For 87% of the foreign tourists surveyed, this was their first visit to the archipelago, while 11% had visited twice, and 2% had visited three or more times. Among domestic tourists, 63% were first-time visitors, 21% were on their second visit, 8% had visited three times, and another 8% had visited four or more times.

Table A.4: Number of times visiting Galápagos

| Number of visits | Foreign Tourists | Domestic Tourists |
|---------------------|------------------|-------------------|
| 1 time (first time) | 87% | 63% |
| 2 times | 11% | 21% |
| 3 time | 1% | 8% |
| 4 times or more | 1% | 8% |

Regarding the length of stay, Figure A.1 shows that most domestic tourists stayed a week or less: 43% visited for 3 to 4 days, while 40% stayed for 5 to 7 days. In contrast, 42% foreign tourists stayed for 5 to 7 days and 38% extended their visit to 8 or more days.

Figure A.1: Length of stay

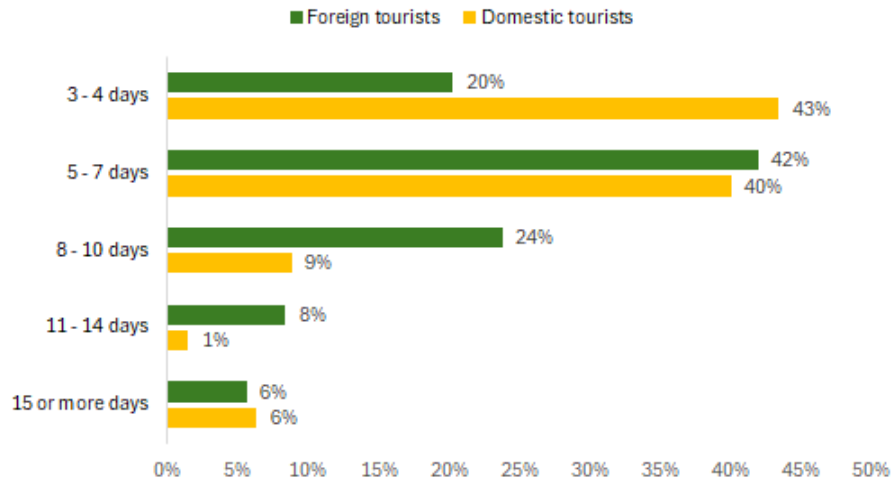


Figure A.2 presents the composition of the travel groups, including the individual surveyed. Among foreign tourists, 16% travelled alone, 35% travelled as a couple, 34% in a family or friend group of 3 to 5 people, and 14% in groups of 6 or more. In contrast, domestic tourists showed a lower proportion of solo or couple travellers (18%), while 50% travelled in groups of 3 to 5 people, and 31% in groups of 6 or more.

Figure A.2: Travel group size

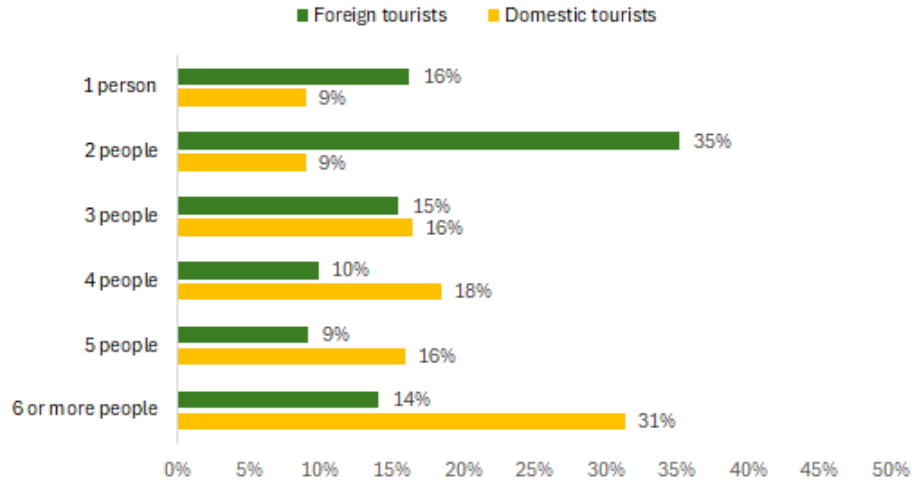


Table A.5 reports the median and average total expenditure per family group (excluding airfare). The median expenditure for foreign tourists was USD 3,000 per visit, while domestic tourists spent USD 1,000 per visit. Visitors on liveaboard cruises reported significantly higher expenditures (USD 3,600 per visit) compared to land-based visitors (USD 1,200 per visit).

Table A.5: Total expenditure per family group (USD per group/visit)

| USD | By nationality | | By visit mode | |
|-----------|-----------------------|-----------------------|------------------------|-----------------------|
| | Foreign | Domestic | Liveaboard | Land-based |
| Median | 3.000 | 1.000 | 3.600 | 1.200 |
| Mean [SD] | 6.342 [± 9.069] | 1.751 [± 1.969] | 7.833 [± 10.645] | 2.133 [± 2.667] |

Table A.6 shows the expenditure per group weighted by days of visit. The median daily expenditure was approximately USD 523 for foreign tourists and USD 200 for domestic tourists. Liveaboard cruise visitors spent USD 600 per day, whereas land-based visitors spent USD 200 per day.

Table A.6: Daily expenditure per family group (USD per group/day)

| USD | By nationality | | By visit mode | |
|-----------|---------------------|-------------------|-----------------------|-------------------|
| | Foreign | Domestic | Liveaboard | Land-based |
| Median | 523 | 200 | 600 | 200 |
| Mean [SD] | 843 [$\pm 1,213$] | 354 [± 396] | 1.004 [$\pm 1,450$] | 394 [± 425] |

Table A7 presents the median and average expenditure per person during their visit to Galápagos. Liveaboard cruise tourists reported an expenditure of USD 1,342 per person for their entire stay, while land-based visitors spent significantly less, at USD 400 per person.

Table A.7: Total expenditure per person (USD per person/visit)

| USD | By nationality | | By visit mode | |
|-----------|---------------------|-------------------|-----------------------|---------------------|
| | Foreign | Domestic | Liveaboard | Land-based |
| Median | 1,342 | 286 | 1,000 | 400 |
| Mean [SD] | 2,623 [± 473] | 473 [± 396] | 2,822 [$\pm 4,646$] | 828 [$\pm 1,241$] |

Activities During Current Visit

Table A.8 presents the activities undertaken by tourists during their visit. The most common among foreign visitors were marine wildlife watching (89%) and snorkelling (81%). Among domestic tourists, the most frequent activities were also marine wildlife watching (83%) and swimming in the sea (83%). A higher proportion of foreign tourists engaged in water sports such as kayaking, surfing, or paddle boarding (36% vs. 25%) and scuba diving (8% vs. 2%) compared to domestic tourists.

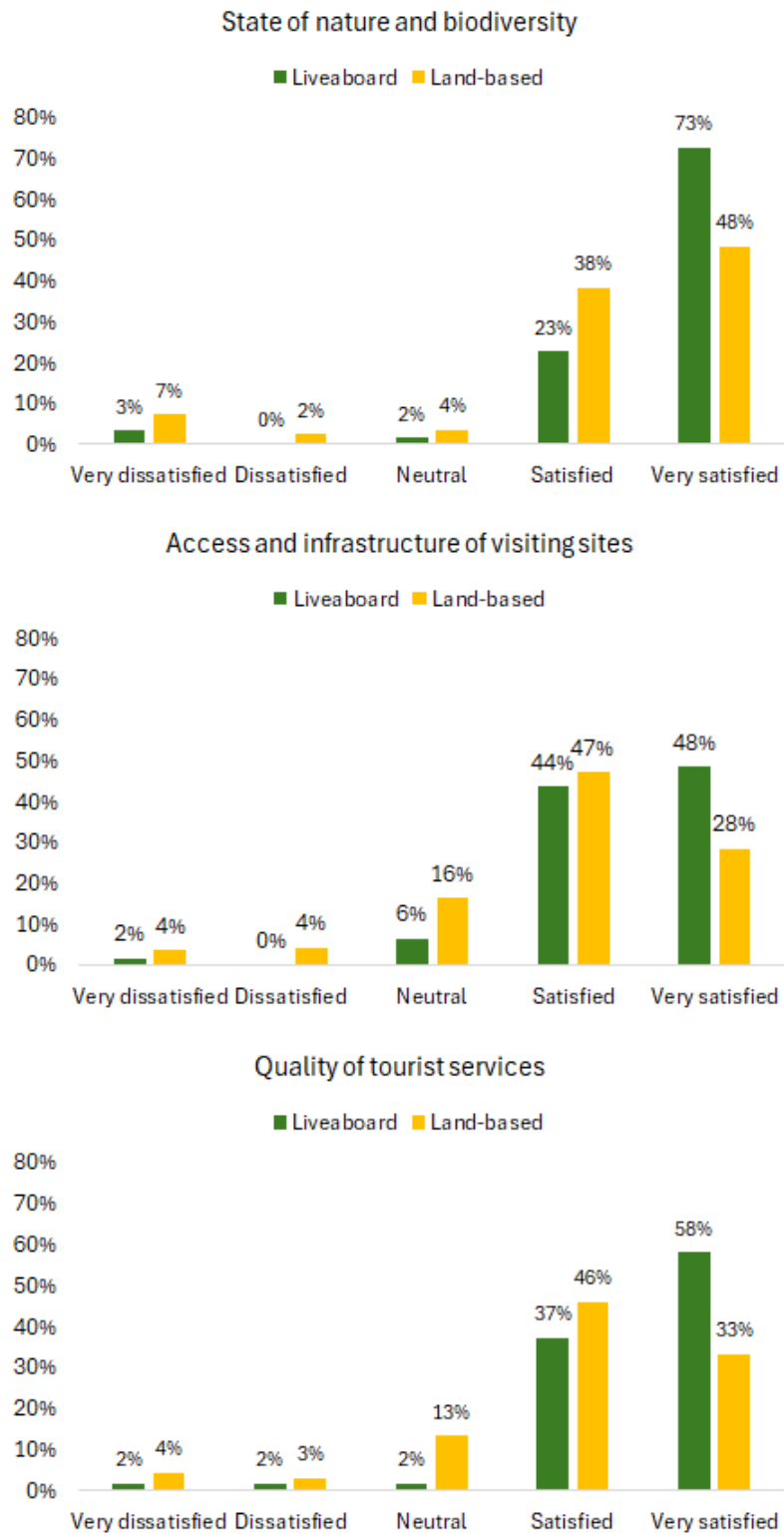
Table A.8: Activities during current visit

| Activities | Foreign Tourists | Domestic Tourists | Total |
|--|------------------|-------------------|-------|
| Marine coastal wildlife watching | 88% | 83% | 85% |
| Terrestrial wildlife watching | 81% | 69% | 74% |
| Swimming in the sea | 89% | 83% | 85% |
| Snorkelling | 88% | 60% | 72% |
| Water sports (surf, kayaking, paddle boarding) | 36% | 25% | 29% |
| Scuba diving | 8% | 2% | 5% |

Level of Satisfaction

Figure A.3 shows the level of satisfaction among the surveyed tourists, assessed using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = very dissatisfied, 5 = very satisfied), broken down by visit mode. Overall, tourists expressed greater satisfaction with the state of nature and biodiversity compared to access and infrastructure of visiting sites, and tourism services. This pattern was more pronounced among liveaboard visitors. Regarding access and infrastructure, 48% of liveaboard tourists reported being very satisfied, compared to 28% of land-based visitors. Similarly, the quality of tourism services was rated more highly by liveaboard tourists, with 58% indicating they were very satisfied, compared to 33% of land-based visitors.

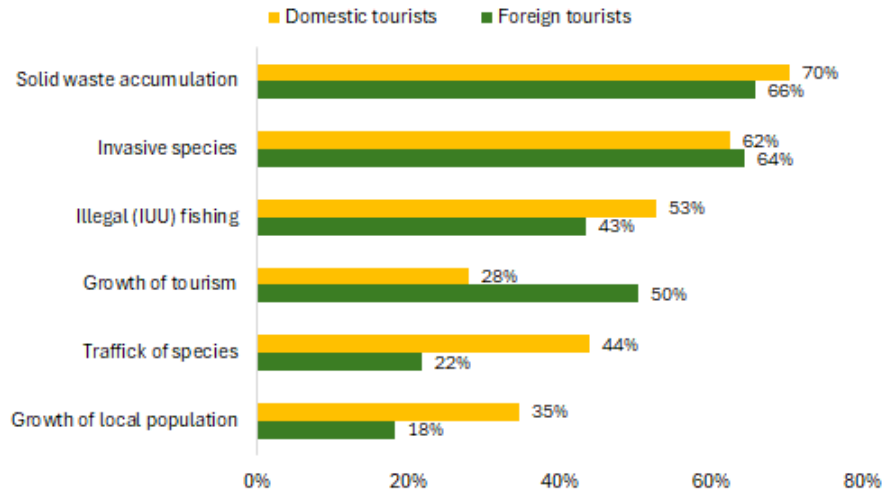
Figure A.3: Level of satisfaction by visit mode



Perceived Threats to Biodiversity

Figure A.4 presents tourist perception of the main threats to biodiversity in the Galápagos Marine Reserve. Between 62% and 70% of both domestic and foreign respondents identified the accumulation of solid waste and the introduction and spread of invasive species as the most significant threats to marine biodiversity. Furthermore, 53% of domestic tourists considered illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing a major concern, while 50% of foreign tourists highlighted tourism growth as one of the main threats.

Figure A.4: Which of the following do you think are the main threats to the biodiversity of the Galápagos Marine Reserve? Select up to three options



Willingness to Pay

Table A.9 reports the tourists' willingness to pay for access to the Galápagos National Park by nationality. Among foreign tourists, values ranged from USD 6 to USD 500, with a median of USD 200 per person, while domestic tourists reported values between USD 5 and USD 500, with a median of USD 15 per person. On average, foreign tourists expressed a willingness to pay of USD 181 [\pm 90] per person, significantly higher than the USD 27 [\pm 45] reported by domestic tourists. Figures A5 illustrate the different willingness-to-pay values provided by both groups.

Table A.9: Willingness to pay for access to the Galapagos National Park by nationality

| Willingness to pay USD per person | Foreign Tourists | Domestic Tourists |
|--------------------------------------|---------------------|----------------------|
| Median | 200 | 15 |
| Mean [SD] | USD 181 [\pm 90] | USD 27 [\pm 45] |
| Min. | 6 | 5 |
| Max. | 500 | 500 |

Figure A.5: Willingness to pay for access the Galapagos National Park by nationality



Table A.10 reports tourists’ willingness to pay by nationality and mode of travel. Among foreign tourists, cruise visitors exhibited a significantly higher willingness to pay, with a median of USD 200, compared to USD 150 among land-based visitors. For domestic tourists, there were no statistically significant differences in willingness to pay based on visit mode.

Table A.10: Willingness to pay for access to the Galapagos National Park by travel mode

| Willingness to pay USD per person | Foreign Tourists | | Domestic Tourists | |
|--------------------------------------|------------------|-----------------|-------------------|----------------|
| | Land-based | Liveaboard | Land-based | Liveaboard |
| Median | 150 | 200 | 15 | 20 |
| Mean [SD] | 162 [\pm 95] | 209 [\pm 77] | 27 [\pm 47] | 29 [\pm 30] |
| Min. | 6 | 100 | 5 | 5 |
| Max. | 500 | 500 | 500 | 150 |

Attitudes and Perceptions Towards the Entry Fee Adjustment

Table A.11 shows the share of tourists aware of the entry fee adjustment, as well as the sources of information, distinguishing whether tourists knew about the adjustment before traveling to the Galápagos or learned about it during their visit. Among foreign tourists surveyed in August 2024 (after the fee adjustment), approximately 40% were aware of the recent increase before their trip. Another 10% learned about the adjustment during their stay, while 49% remained unaware of the change before or after their visit. In contrast, 55% of domestic tourists surveyed in August 2024 reported traveling to the Galápagos and paying the new fee amount with prior knowledge of the adjustment. Meanwhile, 37% were unaware of the increase before traveling, and 8% learned about the new fee during their visit.

Table A.11: Awareness of the entry fee adjustment

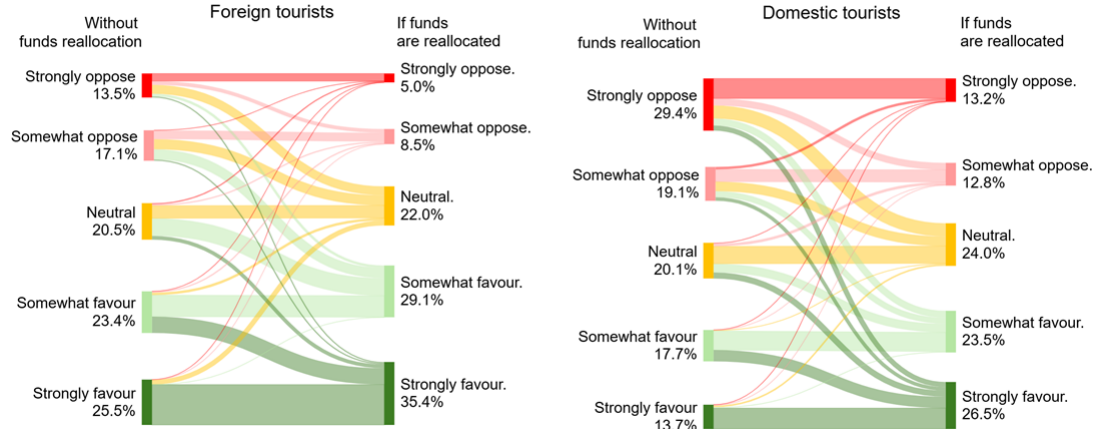
| | Foreign Tourists | | Domestic Tourists | |
|--|----------------------|---------------------|----------------------|---------------------|
| | Before adjustment | After adjustment | Before adjustment | After adjustment |
| Was aware, learned about it before traveling to Galápagos | 36% | 40% | 40% | 55% |
| Was not aware before, learned about it in the Galápagos | 5% | 10% | 9% | 8% |
| Did not know before or after visiting the Galápagos | 59% | 49% | 51% | 37% |

Figure A.6 illustrates the attitudes of both foreign and domestic tourists toward the entry fee adjustment under two scenarios: (1) without the reallocation of funds, where additional revenue follows the existing distribution, and (2) with fund reallocation, where additional revenue is allocated based on public priorities. Among foreign tourists, a significant majority maintained a neutral or positive attitude toward the fee adjustment under both scenarios (Figure A.6, left panel). In contrast, 48% of domestic tourists expressed a negative attitude toward the adjustment under the first scenario (without fund reallocation). Notably, after the implementation of the fee increase, negative perceptions among domestic tourists under this scenario declined significantly from 61%

to 41%. Under the second scenario (with fund reallocation), domestic tourists' attitudes improved, with increased support for the adjustment (Figure A.6, right panel).

In summary, unlike domestic tourists, foreign tourists were less sensitive to the specific allocation of additional funds, demonstrating a more consistent level of support for the entry fee adjustment.

Figure A.6: Tourists attitudes towards the entry fees adjustment, by nationality



Preferences for use of revenues

Finally, Table A.12 details the tourist priorities for the allocation of additional revenues collected from the entry fee increase. Conservation of species and solid waste management were the top priorities for both groups. Foreign tourists also prioritized invasive species control, while domestic tourists included the drinking water and wastewater system as one of their main priorities.

Table A.12: Tourists' preferences for use of additional revenues from entry fees

| Ranking | Foreign Tourists | Ranking | Domestic Tourists |
|---------|----------------------------------|---------|----------------------------------|
| 1st | Species conservation | 1st | Solid waste management |
| 2nd | Control of invasive species | 2nd | Species conservation |
| 3rd | Solid waste management | 3rd | Drinking water and sewage system |
| 4th | Protected areas monitoring | 4th | Control of invasive species |
| 5th | Drinking water and sewage system | 5th | Improvement of visit sites |