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RESEARCH NOTE



## Watching wildlife in Cabo Polonio, Uruguay: tourist control or auto-control?

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### ABSTRACT

Cabo Polonio (Uruguay) is a popular but atypical centre for beach vacations, because tourists spend days without electricity, running water and vehicle. There is a continental pinniped colony that acts as secondary attraction, but there is not direct control over tourist visits to the rookery. Our objective was to evaluate the experience of visitors to this pinniped colony. We used questionnaires to determine the information used by tourists and to analyse their attitudes towards the colony conservation. To validate questionnaires, we also conducted direct observations of the tourist-pinniped interactions. Less than 15% of tourists received information, which was provided by local people. Most tourists saw the rookery as an important touristic attraction. There was total consensus about the requirement for wildlife information. Despite the lack of active supervision, most people behaved properly and complied with conservation measures: the probability that a tourist crossed the fence during a visit was only 0.002 (17 crosses in 902 hours). This positive attitude is possible related to the fact that tourists in Cabo Polonio, accept the discomfort of living without social commodities and welcome the closeness with nature. It is expected that most people will have a spontaneous predisposition to take care of nature.

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## Introduction

Tourism is one of the world's largest industries and has seen an average annual increase of 6.6% since the 1960s (Yeoman, Munro, & McMahon-Beattie, 2006). Nature-based tourism is no exception. It has been defined as tourism focused principally on natural resources such as relatively undisturbed parks and natural areas, wetlands, wildlife reserves and other areas of protected flora, fauna and habitats (Laarman & Durst, 1993; Weaver, 2006). Wildlife-watching tourism is a type of ecotourism that should be distinguished from other forms of wildlife tourism, such as captive-wildlife, hunting and fishing tourism (Higginbottom, 2004; Newsome, Dowling, & Moore, 2004). In a recent study using viability population analysis, Buckley, Morrison, and Castley (2016) showed that

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wildlife tourism can extend expected survival time for some species; however, it does not currently overcome other major conservation threats associated with natural resource extractive industries. The increase in this type of tourism demands ecological research on its potential negative effects on wildlife and socio-psychological research on its potential positive effects in relation to other anthropogenic threats such as poaching, primary industries and habitat loss (Fennell, 2015; Steven & Castley, 2013).

Marine mammals are charismatic animals that are frequently found around accessible coastal areas of the world (Jefferson, Leatherwood, & Webber, 1993). This has resulted in financially viable businesses based on taking tourists to see them and led to a rapid growth in marine mammal-based tourism (Constantine, 1999). There are concerns over the impacts of this growing industry on the conservation of species, and therefore research has been conducted to evaluate the effect of tourism on the behaviour, demography and ecology of marine mammals (Barton, Booth, Ward, Simmons, & Fairweather, 1998; Curtin, Richards, & Westcott, 2009; Orsini, Shaughnessy, & Newsome, 2006).

More than 20 years ago, we initiated a study on the impact of tourists on a colony of the South American fur seal *Arctocephalus australis* and the sea lion *Otaria flavescens* in Cabo Polonio National Park, Uruguay (Cassini, 2001; Cassini, Szteren, & Fernández-Juricic, 2004). The main goal of our research was to establish the impact of tourist approaches on the behaviour and distribution of the animals of this colony. We found that the most disturbing effects were produced by large groups, approaches closer than 10 meters, and intrusive tourist behaviour. In other words, in previous studies, we analysed the interaction tourists-pinnipeds from the point of view of the animals. In this paper, we analysed this interaction from the point of view of the tourists.

Uruguay is a very interesting case study for tourism (Brida, Scuderi, & Seijas, 2014). The tourism industry has become a key sector of the Uruguayan economy, both for its importance in generating value-added and job creation and as a generator of foreign exchange (Brida et al., 2014). Over the past decade, the tourism sector generated revenue of currency similar to that generated by traditional exports, reaching between 20% and 30% of foreign exchange generated by total exports and equivalent to 3% of gross domestic product (Brida et al., 2014).

Cabo Polonio is an atypical National Park in several ways. It is the first National Park of Uruguay despite being created as recently as 2009. At present, the village is a beach touristic centre, but its origin is very different. It was created around the exploitation and killing of sea lions organized by a government institution called 'Industrias Loberas y Peces del Estado' (State Industries for fish and Sea Lion Exploitation). Cabo Polonio was the last place to practice legal and systematic killing of marine mammals in South America.

The village is small, with around 200 'ranchos', small and simple houses used by tourists as temporary residences. However, in summer, the influx of people is enormous, with more than 30,000 tourists entering Cabo Polonio in January alone (Cabo Polonio National Park records, personal communication), in search of its wonderful beaches.

The most important characteristic of the village is its lack of electricity, running water and roads in or leading to it. Currently, solar energy devices are being set up in some ranchos but for decades tourists have depended on candles for nocturnal illumination and water was obtained by collecting rain or from 'cachimbas', simple holes in the sand

that access fresh ground water. The village is reached by walking or in four-wheeled trucks some of them recycled from the Second World War.

At the tip of the Cape there is a lighthouse. A colony of pinnipeds is established in the rookery below it. This colony consists of males unable to obtain breeding sites on three islands located in front of Cabo Polonio' (Vaz Ferreira & Ponce de León, 1984). The peak in tourist numbers coincides with the breeding season, when pinnipeds congregate on the islands, and is consequently when the highest number of animals is found at the continental colony. The rookery continental haul out is freely visited by tourists. There is no oversight of this activity, so people can observe the animals whenever and for as long as they desire. In 1997, a wire fence was installed and remains the only management strategy designed to limit human access to the colony (Cassini et al., 2004). Despite some boards with a 'no trespassing' warning are attached, the fence is easily scaled, so it serves mainly as a symbolic limit rather than an actual restriction.

Cabo Polonio should be considered a typical 3S (sun, sea, sand) touristic site, with people emphasis on hedonism and massive search for its sea, sand and sun during the summer. There are no guided tours to visit the pinniped colonies or any other wildlife-watching service. There are no scientific outreach channels towards the tourism structure. The only exception is a small information centre with almost no information about the pinnipeds biology, which is located outside the Cabo, where people take the transport for entering the Park. Stable population is less than one hundred people. During the summer, they are mainly occupied in providing services to the thousands of tourists that arrive, preparing food, serving in the few general stores available in the town, cleaning houses or selling handicrafts. Even with all these enormous limitations that appear to prevent a truly ecotouristic approach, Cabo Polonio is a unique place because of the decision of the community (locals and tourists) of living without modern comfort, regardless of cars, electricity or running water.

Our objective was to evaluate the experience of visitors to the pinniped continental colony in Cabo Polonio National Park. We used questionnaires to determine the information used by tourists and their attitudes towards the conservation of the colony, including their experience of approaching the animals. We tested two contrasting hypotheses: (1) lack of guards providing information and controlling tourist behaviour, produces an inadequate response of most tourists that threatens the sustainability of wildlife-watching tourism in Cabo Polonio and (2) tourist auto-control is a widespread phenomenon in Cabo Polonio, due to the exceptional characteristics of this touristic site that predispose visitors to take care of nature and wildlife. In the latter case, sustainability can be still threatened because, even when most tourists might behave properly, the impact of inadequate behaviour of a few can be enormous.

## Materials and methods

Cabo Polonio National Park (34°24'S, 53°46'W) is located in north-east Uruguay. In the last few years, it has been one of the most visited beach tourist centres of the country with a total of 81,205 visitors in 2015 (unpublished data of the National Park Administration). The park consists of a portion of coast, an oceanic sector and islands within the latter, totalling 25,820 hectares. The town of Cabo Polonio is located inside the park. The climate of the region is humid subtropical with maritime features, presenting

well-marked seasonal variations in temperature as well as a risk of prolonged drought. Between July and August, temperatures are at their lowest and maximum temperatures are recorded in January (Chouhy, 2013; Panario & Gutiérrez, 2005). Rainfall is more abundant during winter, with an annual average of 1277 mm; the average annual temperature is 16.4°C.

Convenience sampling method was used to collect data for this study. We conducted an on-site survey among visitors to Cabo Polonio from November 2014 to February 2015. The only way to leave Cabo Polonio (apart from walking) is in 4 × 4 trucks that depart every half-hour from a point in the centre of the village. In the evening, large groups of tourists wait there for a truck in which to leave the National Park. A semi-structured questionnaire was administered to a random sample of visitors waiting for the arrival of the trucks during November and December 2014, and another semi-structured questionnaire was administered during January and February 2015 (Appendix). Data were collected using a survey questionnaire written in Spanish. Once selected and approached, an individual was invited to respond orally to the questionnaire. Nobody rejected to participate in the interview. All interviews were conducted by the same interviewer: C.T.C. The questionnaire had a simple design. Finally, a total of 25 questions from the two questionnaires were analysed, and 84% had a yes/no type of answer.

This interview was designed to assess the degree of information they had about pinniped biology, the type of information that should be provided in the future, their reasons for visiting this pinniped continental colony and possible ways of improving it. Due to the descriptive nature of the study and the simplicity of the questionnaire, there were no statistical analyses applied to data, and results are presented as percentage of total responses.

From 20 November 2014 to 5 February 2015 and from 08:00 to 19:00, we also conducted direct observations of the behaviour of tourists and sea lions during the visits. Most of the results of this study will be part of another manuscript and published elsewhere, however here we report results on frequency of visits and number of times that tourists crossed the fence. These data provide with a validation of the information provided by tourists during interviews.

## Results

From November to December, 60 interviews were conducted, and 47 more were conducted during January and February. The results of these interviews are shown in [Table 1](#). The majority of tourists were visiting Cabo Polonio for the first time (57.4%), but a large number was already familiar with the area. Almost all tourists (95.0%) visited the colony. The average length of the visit was 45 min and the average group size was 2.2 people. The great majority were seeing a pinniped colony for the first time (92.2%). The vast majority declared they had not jumped the fence (96.7%). These results enable characterization of the visits and visitor profiles.

Information available for tourists was poor. Not one of the tourists had received expert information, that is, they did not interact with park guards or guides, received no brochures or other sources of supervised material. Less than 15% of tourists received information from local people, mainly hostel owners or the lighthouse keepers, who are Uruguayan soldiers. More than half of the tourists did not know that Cabo Polonio was

**Table 1.** Questionnaire results.

Responses	Mean
<i>Data on the visit</i>	
Days in Cabo Polonio (SD)	7.8 (17.7)
First time in Cabo Polonio	57.4%
The interviewee visited the continental rookery	92.2%; 97.9% <sup>a</sup>
Minutes of the visit (SD)	45.8 (30.2); 43.3 (26.4) <sup>a</sup>
Group size (SD)	2.2 (1.2)
The colony was the preferred attraction (vs. lighthouse, village, beaches)	23.4%
The interviewee crossed the fence	3.3%
The interviewee had visited other pinniped colonies	19.1%
<i>Opinion</i>	
The presence of people disturbs the animals	29.8%
Pinnipeds can cause damage to local people (e.g. artisanal fishery)	8.5%
The colony is an important touristic attraction of Cabo Polonio	97.9%
There is a risk in getting too close to the animals	27.7%
The level of protection (i.e. the fence) is excessive	4.3%
<i>Handling information</i>	
The interviewee did not know about the colony before arrival	40.4%
The interviewee received information from local people	13.3%; 14.9%
The interviewee received information (from guards or brochures, etc.)	0%; 0%
The interviewee knew that Cabo Polonio is a National Park	42.6%
The interviewee knew that there are thousands of pinnipeds in the islands	33.3%
The interviewee knew how many species of pinnipeds are in Cabo Polonio	13.3%
The interviewee knew what the animals do during the summer	3.3%
<i>Tourist suggestions</i>	
The interviewee would like to approach the animals more	11.7%
The interviewee would like to receive more information on local wildlife	100%
Tourists should be aware of the risk of approaching too closely to pinnipeds	100%
The interviewee would like to receive information in brochures or posters	100%
The interviewee would like an information centre close to the colony	100%

<sup>a</sup>The question was included in the questionnaires of November/December 2014 and January/March 2015.

a National Park, assuming that it was a village associated with beach enjoyment like others on the Uruguayan coast. The majority did not know how many species of pinnipeds live in the area (86.7%), nor that the islands contain large colonies (57.4%), and only 3.3% knew that these colonies serve for species reproduction.

In relation to tourist opinions, experience and expectations, most people saw the rookery as an important touristic attraction of Cabo Polonio (97.9%), while it was the most preferred one for 23.4%. The ranking of preference was: south beach, lighthouse, rookery, north beach and village, suggesting that the observation of pinnipeds was preferred over the use of one of the two sandy beaches available in Cabo Polonio.

There was total consensus (100%) about the requirement for information on wildlife, natural ecosystems and the cultural traditions of the region, and more specifically on pinniped biology. Furthermore, responses to the possibility of building an interpretation centre inside the cape, so tourists could receive information *in situ*, were 100% positive.

Another conclusive result provided by interviews was the tourists' opinion in relation to the level of protection of the continental rookery. Almost all of them (95.7%) considered that there was an adequate level of protection, that is, they accepted the existence of a fence that kept the animals at a distance. This point of view was maintained even though most of them believed that human presence did not disturb the animals (29.8%) and that pinnipeds were not dangerous when approached at close quarters (27.7%).

A total of 902 hours of observations of tourists and sea lions at the colony were conducted. During November and December 2014, a total of 1059 visits to the colony were

recorded. During the January and February, the presence of tourist in the colony was almost constant, so it was impossible to count separated visits. During the total study period, only 17 times, tourists crossed the fence (there were another 77 instances of tourists approaching sea lions and less than 10 meters in sector that did not have the fence, so it is not relevant to the purpose of validation of interviews).

## Discussion

A large number of wildlife populations suitable for tourist visitors are located in low- and medium-income countries. Economic and political difficulties often limit the possibilities of developing strategies for sustainable management of nature-based tourism in these countries. Research on the expectations, attitudes, knowledge and behaviour of tourists is relatively cheap and affordable even with low financial resources and may provide information that facilitates the definition of priorities and action plans in these countries.

This study is the first attempt at analysing the human dimension of the activity of wildlife viewing tourism in Uruguay. Cabo Polonio is, at the same time, one of the most famous and popular resorts, the first National Park, and one of the most biodiverse spots in the country.

Cabo Polonio has an efficient entrance system, and by park guards are usually oriented to this control. Other functions of the administration are related to camping control and other policing functions. In contrast, educational and recreational functions are almost absent. Our results showed clearly the lack of information available for the people that visit Cabo Polonio. They arrived at the rookery without knowing how to behave and about the risks to the animals or themselves if they scaled the fence that surrounds the colony. Most of them were ignorant of basic information on the animals they were observing, including the number of species. Many tourists spent several days in the area without even knowing that it was a National Park. Level of specialization has been used as a core dimension for categorizing and describing different visitors in wildlife situations (Moscardo & Saltzer, 2004). Based on the results of this study, visits to the continental rookery of Cabo Polonio can be considered an extreme case of novices/generalists form of wildlife-watching tourism (Duffus & Dearden, 1990).

Some visitors were aware of the situation and demanded more information; they agreed with the idea of creating an information centre in the village close to the colony. One type of management response on the tourist pressure increase, related on the natural environment, lies in educating tourist (Orams, 1996). Several publications include planning frameworks for interpretation (e.g. Ham, 1992; Knudson, Cable, & Beck, 1995; Sharpe, 1982). A number of these approaches could be utilized in developing an interpretative programme in Cabo Polonio.

Ecotourism involves multiple initiatives with a wide range of characteristics which were clearly described by Weaver (2005) who classified them into hard and soft types. In addition, the economic benefit for local community is also one of the key factors which define any ecotourism proposal. Therefore, considering the social characteristics of this wildlife spot, the communitybased tourism approach could be another notion to explore. All of these notions could reinforce the strategy of the truly sustainable tourism initiative into a protected area like Cabo Polonio.



In relation to tourist attitudes, even when people travelled to Cabo Polonio mainly to make use of its exceptional beaches, almost all of them visited the pinniped colony and found it to be an important touristic attraction. A relatively large proportion of people found the rookery even more enjoyable than the beaches. They spent a relatively long time observing the animals, even when they did not receive any information on how to make the most of their visit. For a large proportion of tourists, it was their first experience of close interaction with marine mammals. Therefore, we may conclude that Cabo Polonio offers a unique opportunity for improving knowledge of and sensitivity towards marine mammal conservation issues.

Despite the lack of available information and authority presence, most visitors respected the animals and were also supportive of protective measures. Only a very small proportion of people scaled the fence; the majority did not approach it and preferred to observe the animals from a distance. Almost everybody agreed with the presence of the fence and preferred not to approach the animals any closer. Data on direct observation of tourist behaviour validated these results of the interviews: only a few visitors cross the fence, with a total of 0.002 crosses per hour of observation. However, it is worth taking into account that approaches to the animals in areas without fence occurred and can have significant negative consequences to the colony.

In summary, visitors were supportive of protective measures and behaved accordingly. There are at least two possible explanations of this positive attitude. The first one is that the fence acts as an effective deterrent of irresponsible behaviour. The second and the more probable is related to the atypical socio-cultural nature of Cabo Polonio. People who spend their holidays there accept the discomfort and welcome the communal experience of closeness with nature. It is not something undertaken by only a few very experienced travellers that reach remote places of the world, but attracts massive numbers of tourists searching for a summer holiday on the beach. In this sense, Cabo Polonio is a unique place that deserves to be investigated as a phenomenon of truly sustainable tourism. In this socio-cultural context, it is expected that most people will have a spontaneous predisposition to take care of nature, including colonies of pinnipeds.

Unfortunately, this positive attitude of the majority does not prevent some visitors climbing over the fence and upsetting the animals, with negative consequences for the colony. In a study conducted the year after the erection of the fence, Cassini et al. (2004) showed that the most stressful pinniped behavioural responses had been reduced, but tourists still approached the animals, affecting the behaviour and distribution of the animals.

In summary, this study showed clear trends in the human dimension of tourist-pinniped interactions in Cabo Polonio: there is no control over the interactions, tourists receive little information to guide their visit, and most people behave properly and respect conservation measures. It is recommended that the National Park administration develops an interpretation programme and provides staff *in situ* to prevent approaches to the animals by tourists, informing people about the species and the park, and stimulating positive attitudes towards marine mammal conservation issues.

### Geolocation information

Cabo Polonio National Park, Uruguay (34°24'S, 53°46'W).



## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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## Appendix: Questionnaire, original in Spanish

### I. Questionnaire of November/December 2014

- a. Did you visit the sea lion colony? If you didn't visit it, ¿it was because you were not interested, because you didn't have time or because you didn't know about it?
- b. If you visited it, ¿How much time did you remain there (min.)? How was the size of your group (number of persons)?
- c. Did you cross the fence, did you approach the boundary of the fence, or did you see the animals from the rocks (behind the fence)?
- d. Did you see animals outside of the protected area? How many?
- e. During your stay here, did you receive any type of information about the fur seal colony? Who provided you this information? Could you tell me some of it?
- f. Do you know what is in the islands in front of the Cape?
- g. Do you know how many species of fur seals live in Cabo Polonio?
- h. Do you know what are sea lions doing in the rockery and in the islands in front of the Cape during the summer?
- i. Would you like to get closer to the animals or, in the other hand, do you think that we would have to give them more protection with a fence which could not be crossed?
- j. Would you like that more information about fauna and flora from Cabo Polonio was available?
- k. Do you think that is necessary to alert tourists about the risks of approaching sea lions, both for the tourists and animals?

### II. Questionnaire of January/February 2015

- a. How much time have you spent in Cabo Polonio (days)?
- b. Is the first time that you visit Cabo Polonio?
- c. Which places have you visited? (South beach, North beach, lighthouse, colony, village)
- d. Which places you like more?
- e. How did you know about the existence of the sea lion colony? (Once here, before arriving here)
- f. Have you received any information about sea lions? Who gave you it?
- g. Have you visited other sea lion colonies in Uruguay or in other countries?
- h. How long have you been watching sea lions (min.)?
- i. Do you think that the human presence disturb sea lions?
- j. Do you think that sea lions can damage a local activity (e.g. local fishery)?
- k. Do you think that the colony is an important tourist attraction of Cabo Polonio?
- l. Do you think that there is any risk in getting too close of the animals?
- m. Do you think that protection level is sufficient, insufficient or excessive?
- n. Would you like receiving more information about sea lions in brochures or posters?
- o. Do you know that Cabo Polonio is a Natural Park?
- p. Would you like to have an interpretation centre in Cabo Polonio with information about its nature and culture?