

Survey finds tourism frustration: A majority of residents favor limiting the number of visitors

By [JOHN BURNETT Hawaii Tribune-Herald](#) | Wednesday, June 2, 2021, 12:05 a.m.



An online survey commissioned by the University of Hawaii's Public Policy Center has found Hawaii residents want a more regulated visitor industry and for tourists to pay a higher share of the state's infrastructure costs.

The online survey polled 700 respondents between April 16 and May 3, and the margin for error for the sample size is plus or minus 3.7% with a 95%

confidence level, according to the executive summary released today.

"I think the big takeaway from this survey is that people want more direct management and regulation of the industry, and they're perfectly happy for that to include new fees and taxes on the visitors," said Colin D. Moore, director of the policy center and co-author of the study with John D. Knox, president of John M. Knox & Associates, a Honolulu-based socioeconomic research organization.

On Monday, there were 25,761 trans-Pacific air passengers arriving at the state's four major airports, with 2,975 of the arrivals in Kailua-Kona. That compares to just 1,268 trans-Pacific air arrivals on May 31, 2020, exactly a year earlier and in the midst of the restrictive traveler quarantines. Only 95 of those arrivals were in Kona.

"I think that there was already a lot of frustration after tourism numbers peaked at 10 million in 2019. But the ability to compare that to living with relatively no tourists, I think, did affect the results," Moore said. "I think it convinced folks there needs to be a new approach here. And experiencing life without tourism overcrowding meant people are willing to say, 'We've got to find a way to regulate this better.'"

The survey found residents, by a 2-to-1 margin, want government to regulate tourism — the state's No. 1 industry — more than other businesses. Roughly 80% "strongly" or "somewhat" favored regulating tour operations in public parks and green-energy requirements for resort areas.

A sizeable number, 38%, supported rental car surcharges to help defray some of tourism's impacts, with only 19% opposed. And many residents, 40%, favored so-called "green fees," which are visitor taxes specifically for natural resource protection, with only 18% opposed.

And a majority, about 52%, favored limiting the number of visitors, with the numbers even higher on the Neighbor Islands and among Native Hawaiians.

But when asked to choose between a cap on visitor counts or managing “hot spots” — areas and attractions with high visitor counts — residents were more in favor of the former, 57%, than the latter, 37%. And 78% favored charging visitors an entry fee to visitors to use popular parks and beaches during peak hours.

Moore noted that overcrowding led to fees on out-of-state visitors at Haena State Park on Kauai.

“I think that this shows that there is a need for more direct management,” Moore said. “It shouldn’t have to take local residents being up in arms in that way to get some results. This is something that the state should get in front of.”

Ross Birch, executive director of the Island of Hawaii Visitors Bureau, said he’s not surprised by the survey results. He said the survey’s release coincides with recent conversation he had with a fellow guest at a high school graduation party about tourism and green fees.

“The person I was talking to was almost line for line what the majority sentiment is,” Birch said.

While Moore said 2019 was a tipping point that caused frustration with tourism among Hawaii residents, Birch instead pointed to 2010 as “a turning point.”

“That’s when vacation rentals started in residential neighborhoods,” he said, adding that created “way more inventory of tourist accommodations.”

“It’s the pure economics theory: supply and demand,” Birch said. “The

supply has increased as the demand has increased. In previous years, with only so many accommodations available on island, you get to a point where you're filling those accommodations, we're at 85, 90% occupancy. Prices are going through the roof, and people say, 'Guess what? It's way too expensive to take a vacation in Hawaii. I'll wait another couple of years.' That starts to turn things back down, occupancy starts to drop, prices start to drop."

Birch said the current shortage of rental cars — caused by rental companies selling inventory to stay afloat during the pandemic — is having somewhat the effect a lack of accommodations would have on visitor numbers here.

"People I know have been calling me and saying, 'Hey, do you know where I can get a rental car? We have plans to come to Hawaii, but we're going to have to cancel if we can't get a car,'" he said

According to Birch, the vacation rentals "have created a visitor who wants to live like a local ... for one week."

"That mentality is created because that accommodation is available," he said. "When you have a visitor who stays at a resort with all of the elements of a resort in place, like security and sharing space with other individuals, that mentality goes away. And that right of entitlement is what we've seen from the visitor that tends to live like a local for a week and stay in somebody's house.

"It's been brought up more than once, and people are starting to see it. If we could manage the vacation rental in the residential areas, that would solve a multitude of some of these issues — even the hot-spot issue."

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