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Benefits and problems of highly visited volcanic geoheritage sites: the Canarian National Parks.

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The Canary archipelago (Spain) formed by seven volcanic islands and located near the east Saharan coast, is one of the most extensively protected territories in Europe. It has 141 nature protected areas, four of which are National Parks (NPs), which are placed in different islands (Lanzarote, Tenerife, La Gomera and La Palma). These NPs host a valuable volcanological geoheritage that brings to these areas some important benefits but also impose some significant problems that have to be addressed. They all receive more than 6 million of tourists per year (www.gobiernodecanarias.org/istac/), which makes to consider these volcanic regions as critical areas to protect and conserve. The high number of visitors to the Canarian NPs derives in a significant economic benefit. In the case of Lanzarote, for example, the entrance to the park has a fee per visitor, and in all cases NPs constitute one of the main reasons to attract visitors, being tourism the main source of income for the islands. Other collateral advantages are related to the enhancement of the volcanological heritage. Unfortunately, tourism in these protected NPs can also be a source of disadvantages, especially if they are not adequately managed. A constant flow of visitors can, for instance, undermine the beauty, uniqueness character, and social coherence of these volcanic landscapes over time, being necessary to contribute to their conservation. For that, it is essential to increase the scientific knowledge of these areas, providing suitable and updated information of their values, which implies to invest in preparing people that transmit the legacy of these areas with quality outreach to the visitors. Here, we analyze the consequences of highly visited geoheritage sites, as they are the Canarian NPs, identifying their main strengths and weaknesses and providing some guidelines to help protecting and managing these volcanic geoheritage sites.