

The Galápagos: Enchanted Islands or Political Spoils?

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Preservation of Ecuador's Galápagos Islands is threatened by the corruption and instability of the institutions entrusted with the archipelago's management, while over-exploitation of resources goes unchecked, say critics.

QUITO - The Galápagos Islands, a paradise in the middle of the Pacific Ocean and declared heritage of humanity, have been victims the past two years of Ecuador's political ups and downs, which threaten the archipelago's fragile environmental balance and unique biodiversity.

In the past 20 months has seen a succession of eight people at the helm of the Galápagos National Park, based in Puerto Baquerizo on San Cristóbal Island. The directorate is in charge of managing natural resources, including the Galápagos Marine Reserve. Instability in the leadership has been accompanied by two labor strikes by the local fishing communities and one by the park's rangers.

"There is political management of the islands instead of technical decision-making. This is like a volcano about to erupt," Rosario Mejía, president of the National Association of Tourism Operators in Galápagos, told Tierramérica.

In February and May, the 970 family fishing operations on the islands -- organized under four cooperatives -- staged strikes. They took over public offices and tourist sites, and threatened to burn them down if the government did not attend to their demands: lift restrictions on harvesting sea cucumbers (*Holothuria sanctori*) and overturn the fishing regulations.

The sea cucumber is an invertebrate that recycles nutrients and oxygenates the marine depths. Sea cucumber species face extinction, in part because of human activities and over-exploitation. It is in high demand in some Asian countries, where it is considered an aphrodisiac.

The local fisherfolk have been known to capture sea cucumbers during banned periods and to take smaller, younger specimens. They also over-exploit the shark population, which otherwise serve to balance the marine ecosystem. The fisherfolk sell the shark fins, which are in high demand as a delicacy, and also an aphrodisiac.

In 2003, Galápagos National Park authorities seized 5,343 shark fins and 23,846 sea cucumbers that locals had caught illegally.

One kilo of shark fin fetches 220 dollars and one sea cucumber 55 to 110 dollars on the local market. The price of the latter reaches 330 dollars outside Ecuador.

But according to the Ecuadorian Committee for the Defense of Nature and Environment, an umbrella of dozens of local environmental groups, the government has in practice given the green light to sea cucumber fishing.

The law "limits the number of fishing permits, but in 1999 they issued 254, in 2000 it was 417, and in 2002 it was 446," said tourism spokeswoman Mejía.

However, Environment Minister Fausto Valdivieso assured Tierramérica that "fishing for sea cucumbers is banned nearly all year long."

There is authorization "only" for capturing "four million between Aug. 12 and Oct. 12," and they must be a minimum of 20 cm long fresh and seven cm in brine in order to preserve this natural resource, he said.

In the last fishing season the fisherfolk faced serious economic problems because "they caught just 2.5 million sea cucumbers," Valdivieso added.

The third strike this year, in September, was organized by 300 park rangers and lasted 17 days. They protested the continuous change in leadership of the national park, the designation of Fausto Cepeda as director (he served as advisor and attorney for the local fisherfolk), the lack of funds and job instability.

The strike ended when the fishing community, backed by other local residents, forced out the park rangers -- with some incidents of violence -- and put Cepeda in charge.

Minister Valdivieso says the conflicts in the Galápagos are nothing new, but today are simply more visible to the outside world.

"The government uses internationally recognized technical standards in designating the islands' officials. And to put an end to the strikes it removed the new park director (Cepeda) and is in the process of selecting a replacement," he added.

On the "enchanted islands" of the Galápagos there are an estimated 900,000 species of flora and fauna, and at least 74 are in danger of extinction. These include the Galápagos giant tortoise (*Geochelone elephantopus* or *Geochelone nigra*), found only in this archipelago. In 1535 there were 500,000 of these unique creatures -- which live more than 100 years -- but in 1900 the population had fallen to 250,000, and today there are just 15,000, reports the World Wildlife Fund-Ecuador.

The Galápagos Marine Reserve, founded in 1998 and extending over 133,000 square km, is home to 19 species of sea birds, 13 coastal birds and 30 migratory bird species. Two species of sea lions -- totaling 20,000 animals -- also make their home there.

Species unique to the islands include the rhino iguana (*Cyclura cornuta*), the flightless cormorant (*Nannopterum harrisi*), the Galápagos penguin (*Spheniscus mendiculus*) and waved albatross (*Phoebastria irrorata*).

The reserve also serves as a refuge for threatened species of whales and for the east Pacific green turtle (*Chelonia agassizi*).

Because of the instability of park leadership, "policies on conservation and human population growth haven't been taken into account. There is a great deal of ignorance and procedures aren't being respected," Elizabeth Bravo, activist with the non-governmental group Acción Ecológica, said in a conversation with Tierramérica.

The Ecuadorian Congress went so far as to blame President Lucio Gutiérrez for the problems on the islands.

Twenty thousand people live on the Galápagos, and the islands comprise Ecuador's smallest province. Its decentralized administration retains 95 percent of the revenues generated by tourism as a means to fund local environmental defense institutions.

But environmental and tourism groups charge that the two legislative deputies representing the archipelago exchange their parliamentary votes for concessions and political designations.

"The Galápagos are political spoils. If there isn't a change in technical management we are going to lose the islands. Since the 1998 approval of the law on sustainable development for the province, nothing has been done to effectively ensure that the fishing community has access to alternative productive activities," said Mejía.

"The tourism sector is subject to many oversight mechanisms and we have to present reports on a regular basis. But that is not true for the fishing community," she said.

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