

Concern in the Galapagos

A report from Sea Shepherd Captain Paul Watson

The Sea Shepherd conservation research ship **Farley Mowat** arrived in Puerto Ayora, Galapagos on the morning of May 6, 2004. As the ship was clearing Customs and Immigration, a fishing boat passed close by, escorted by Park rangers. On the deck were a number of recently slaughtered Galapagos sharks.

It was a timely arrival. It was the eve of a threatened strike by fishermen that promised more violence against the National Park. The fishermen who have already laid waste to entire areas of sea cucumbers demanded an extended season to further exploit the surviving numbers of the species.

At one dollar an animal, and with the demand climbing from the Asian market, the sea cucumber has been under intense pressure from exploitation for many years. As the numbers decrease, the demand and the price increase.

The Galapagos National Park is very much aware of how dangerously threatened the sea cucumber is. Each year, hundreds of thousands of these small creatures are confiscated from poachers, unfortunately all dead.

In preparation for the strike, the rangers had strung up barbed wire barricades at the Park office entrances on Santa Cruz and Isabela Islands.

Eighty fishermen marched through the streets of Puerto Ayora on the morning of May 7th, brandishing signs and loudly screaming through megaphones for the government to give them what they wanted.

And what they wanted was to take more than the biologists considered ecologically safe to take. In fact the biologists had warned that none was too many!

The decision was to be made at noon on the mainland in Ecuador.

Out at anchor, the crew of the **Farley Mowat** saw a large Ecuadorian tuna seiner, the **Rocio** enter the bay, it came straight towards us. Her shape was familiar, similar to the dolphin killing tuna seiners we have long clashed with in the Eastern Tropical Pacific.

She circled, took aim at us and then dropped her anchor as close as she could. Her crew were jeering and when spying our female crewmembers began to make obscene



*Out at anchor, the crew of the **Farley Mowat** saw a large Ecuadorian tuna seiner, the **Rocio** enter the bay, it came straight towards us. Her shape was familiar, similar to the dolphin killing tuna seiners we have long clashed with in the Eastern Tropical Pacific.*





A Park Ranger examining confiscated sea cucumbers. (Sea cucumbers are related to sea urchins and starfish.)

gestures.

According to the Park rangers, the tuna seiners were claiming a medical emergency although we witnessed no one being removed to shore for medical care. One of the rangers confided in me his suspicion that they were in the Bay to support the strikers.

At noon, the strike did not materialize. The government in Quito had capitulated to the fishermen's demands without resistance and had



As the ship was clearing Customs and Immigration, a fishing boat passed close by, escorted by Park rangers. On the deck were a number of recently slaughtered Galapagos sharks.

allocated to them the extension and the quota they were demanding. Forty five days to loot four million pepinos (sea cucumbers) from the sea. Despite this there was grumbling among the fishermen that they should have demanded more.

On the conservation side the feeling is that none is too many. On the exploitation side the position is that four million is not enough. This alone illustrates the vast chasm between nature defenders and nature

destroyers. And for those who say that I reveal my bias when I call the fishermen destroyers, I say come to the Galapagos and see for yourself how subsistence has been replaced by systematic plundering of the seabeds for pepinos and ruthless looting of the marine reserve for shark fins.

Both sharks and sea cucumbers are being exterminated to satisfy the insatiable demand for shark fin soup and sea cucumber delicacies in Asia.

The tuna seiner left Admiralty Bay later in the afternoon but not before our crew witnessed them smuggling a boatload of large fish ashore in the daylight within full view of the Port Captain's office.

As the sun set in the evening of May 7th, I contemplated the changes that I have seen in these islands since we first began our project in 2000.

Four years ago, the town of Puerto Ayora was quiet, prices were low, there was one internet cafe, and a policy that a car could only be brought to the island if an old car was removed. Marine iguanas sunned themselves on the sidewalk, blue footed boobies dove into the Bay by the score, lava lizards and red crabs scurried excitedly over the shore rocks, frigate birds circled the town on thermals.

The first telephone was installed as recently as 1993. Today the U.S. company, Bell South is well

established with pay phones, internet access and cell phones.

I have watched each year as the town has grown with migrants from the mainland arriving every day. There are three times as many cars and trucks and four wheel all terrain vehicles roar down the street and into the bush. Whereas TAME airlines once flew to the island every three days, there are three TAME flights from and to the mainland every day. A second airline AeroGAL has also begun operations to the mainland. There is no problem finding an internet cafe, restaurants and hotels are plentiful, and the menus boast of seafood cornucopias ranging in diversity from shellfish, lobsters, grouper, tuna, barracuda and shark. The hillsides of the islands breed cattle and goats to provide the restaurants with meat.

Last year, a record of 95,000 tourists visited the Galapagos. The number is expected to be greater this year.

We are witnessing the Hawaiianization of the Galapagos.

A society is evolving that has four distinct divisions. There are those who are here to protect the Park and the Marine Reserve and to pursue the objectives of science. This includes the Park rangers, the scientists at the



Many express surprise when informed that between 20,000 and 30,000 people now live in the islands. The first telephone was installed as recently as 1993. Today the U.S. company, Bell South is well established with pay phones, internet access and cell phones.

Darwin Research Center and representatives of non-profit organizations like the Sea Shepherd Conservation Society and WildAid.

The second group are those who are employed in the tourist industry. This includes licensed guides, scuba diving, guided tours, eco-tourism boats, restaurants, hotels and internet cafes. Amongst the guides there are two categories. The first are the guides who are involved because of their love and their passion for nature. The second category are relatively new guides from the mainland who see profit as their first priority.

The third group are the fishermen. This group can be divided into the original subsistence fishermen and the much larger group of recently arrived migrants from the mainland of Ecuador who

see the islands as a temporary place to plunder before returning to South America. It is these fishermen who are causing the most damage to the resident species and it is this group that is spearheading the destruction of the Galapagos.

The fourth group is the Ecuadorian military.

Most of the rest of the world if they think of the Galapagos at all envision a natural paradise populated with giant tortoises, magnificent iguanas and unique species of birds. Many express surprise when informed that between 20,000 and 30,000 people now live in the islands, that there are a half a million feral goats on Isabela Island, that the baby tortoises must be captured and raised at the Park station until they are large enough to be returned to the wild when the rats can no longer threaten them.

They would be surprised also at the number of dead iguanas lying dead after attacks by domestic dogs and cats, at the number of chickens running around competing with wild birds for food and the number of small birds lying dead on the roads where hundreds are struck down every day by cars, trucks and buses.

And they would be horrified to witness the number of shark fins routinely confiscated from poachers, of Galapagos seals mutilated for their genitalia to be sold to the Asian markets, of dead hammerhead and Galapagos sharks decomposing on the bottom of dive sites after having their fins ripped off while still alive and then tossed back into the deep to die a slow death.

The Galapagos are in serious trouble and under heavy assault by those who see these enchanted isles as nothing more than a place to be exploited for profit.

The Sea Shepherd Conservation Society has been working to support the efforts of the

Galapagos National Park for four years now. Our contribution of the fast patrol vessel *Sirenian* has led to the intervention and capture of numerous illegal fishing activities.

The *Sirenian* is supported by the patrol vessel *Guadalupe River* and a third vessel the *Sierra Negro* is being built to reinforce the enforcement fleet.

But we need to do more. The Parks need materials, equipment, law enforcement instruction and of course - money.

The Galapagos National Park and the Galapagos Marine Reserve are World Heritage sites and the responsibility for the protection of these incredible islands must be an international effort.

The Sea Shepherd Conservation Society is pledged to continue to devote time and funding to the Galapagos. It is our line in the sand. If we cannot save the Galapagos, how can we save the rest of the world's threatened places?



Sea Shepherd Conservation Society welcomes your support.

To learn how to support our conservation work, please visit: www.seashepherd.org/donate.shtml .