

CRISIS IN THE GALAPAGOS

JACK GROVE

PRESIDENT, CONSERVATION NETWORK INTERNATIONAL, INC. 146 N. SUNRISE DRIVE TAVERNIER, FLORIDA 33070

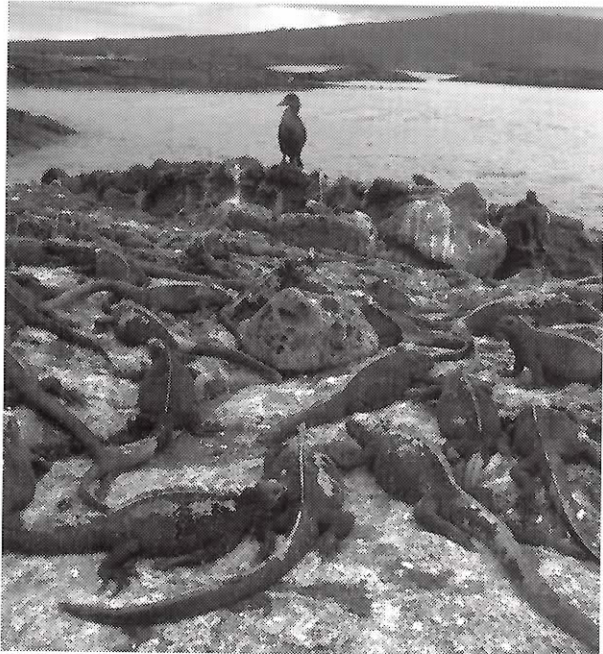
Masked Ecuadorian fishermen (calling themselves “pepineros” or sea cucumber collectors), armed with clubs and machetes, seized control of the Charles Darwin Research Station (CDRS) and the facilities of the Galapagos National Park Service on Tuesday, January 3, 1995, in the community of Puerto Ayora, Galapagos. The launch of the CDRS was sunk and access to and from the airport was cut off by the vindictive pepineros. The seizure lasted three days.

The CDRS and Park personnel were confined to buildings. Those who live within the Park and Station campuses were rarely allowed to leave. In effect, the two institutions, their staffs, the facilities and the breeding groups of giant tortoises and land iguanas were held hostage. The fishermen threatened to kill tortoises and set fires on the islands if their demands were not met. Apart from a broken arm and an unconfirmed report of an unexploded bomb in a Park Service boat, the level of violence has attracted only minimal attention in the international press.

Captive breeding programs have been successfully carried out at the CDRS for both the giant tortoises and land iguanas for many years. This program was initiated for re-stocking the reptiles on their respective islands, many of which have been plagued with introduced rats, dogs, cats, pigs and goats. The reptile breeding program is one of the many success stories of the CDRS. The threat posed, when violent fishermen took over the station in January, was enormous. The crisis prompted Darwin Station officials to place “Lonesome George,” the famous tortoise and last known survivor of his race, into protective custody. George remains behind bars that are designed to keep people out. One hates to think of the damage that could have been inflicted if the fisherman had carried out their threats to kill George, or destroyed even a small portion of the breeding tortoise and iguana populations at CDRS.

Those who realize what is at stake recognize that if the Ecuadorian government continues to sub-

mit to the black market demands of these fishermen, the world will lose its largest virgin island (Fernandina) as well as what may be the last significant population of scalloped hammerhead sharks. In addition to shark fins and sea cucumbers, used in Chinese and French cooking and in Asian medicine, these people are also harvesting sea horses, snails, sea urchins, and the endangered black coral. They are even killing sea lions for their penises, which are being sent to Japan as aphrodisiacs!



Endemic to the Galapagos Archipelago, marine iguana populations may be imperiled by increased human activities and any fishery activities that disturb the algal communities upon which they feed. Birds such as the flightless cormorant (in background) and Galapagos penguin live nowhere else, and are likewise vulnerable to repercussions from the fisheries industry.

In recent months, Conservation Network International (CNI) has confirmed that:

- Uncontrolled lobster and fishing boats carrying chickens and/or goats (and inevitably rats and mice) are pillaging the coasts of western Isabela and Fernandina Islands. If these animals are introduced to the islands, the

ecological impact will be devastating. The fishermen are harvesting everything marketable from the sea floor, and many of them have spearguns, which are supposed to be illegal. They are also cutting mangroves for fuel to boil their catch, and there are floating brothels for entertainment.

- An “experimental” sea cucumber fishery and a shark fishing industry were endorsed by the government on June 23, 1994. A limit of 550,000 sea cucumbers was set by the authorities. No means of regulation were established, and an estimated 6 to 10 million were taken before the government finally tried to stop the “experiment.”
- The CDRS made clear their opposition to the sea cucumber industry, which opened anyway. Now supported by a team of international fisheries experts, the CDRS has also expressed their ecological rationale for not introducing a sport fishing industry. Presently, the sport fishing proposal has been drafted as a “Mandato” and will soon become law, unless international pressure can stop it.
- The remains of 84 freshly killed tortoises were found on Isabela. Although no one has been apprehended, it is likely that the tortoises were slaughtered by vindictive fishermen who were angered by the closing of the sea cucumber industry.
- Immigration to support the fisheries has dramatically increased. The expanding human populations will undoubtedly stress the fragile ecosystems further.

The reason for the violence and hostage situation is that the fishermen demanded the reopening of the sea cucumber fishery. Federal troops and a promise to reopen the fishery by October, 1995, brought the crisis to an end—or has it?

Why is the government giving in to the demands of a few fishermen? Apparently there is some big money behind it. CNI has confirmed that 1 billion Sucres (approximately \$40 million US) were transferred through two Galapagos banks; one fisherman cashed a US \$50,000 check!

Consider for a moment how many sizable



Feral dogs greatly decimated land iguanas on the island of Santa Cruz during the 1970's. Iguana populations are now at greater risk on Fernandina and Isabela, not only from the pets of fisherman but from stowaways as well, including feral rats.

islands there are in the world that are truly virgin (i.e., unoccupied and unscathed by the effects of human presence). In the sub-Antarctic, perhaps, there may be a few islets that have no introduced mammals. But what of the tropics? Man has impacted virtually every island in the world, especially in the low latitudes. Where man has been, by accident or design, there are now rodents—or worse—left behind. Where there are feral animals, many indigenous life forms cannot compete. One of those rare exceptions has been the jewel in the crown of the Galapagos ecosystem, Fernandina, the westernmost island in the archipelago. As fate would have it, the sea cucumber fishery is now centered along the west coast of Isabela (to the east) and along the shore of Fernandina. In July of last year, the British Broadcast Corporation produced a documentary entitled, “Galapagos: Paradise in Peril,” and indeed it is. In the documentary they filmed an estimated 100 sea cucumber fishermen camped on the “virgin” shores of Fernandina—where marine and land iguanas, as well as penguins and flightless cormorants, also can be found. But there is still hope: the Ecuadorian government may change their attitude in response to international pressure.

Conservation Network International will con-

tinue to support the local Galapagos naturalists who are now risking their lives to stop the exploitation. Formed in July of 1994, CNI has no employees, it has no affiliation with the CDRS, and all contributions are invested directly to the cause. Our intentions are to draw public attention to the ever escalating crisis in the Galapagos, to stop the exploitation of natural resources from the Galapagos, and to do whatever is necessary to insure the long term preservation of this delightfully unique World Heritage Site.

WHAT CAN YOU DO TO HELP?

1. Write a letter to the President of Ecuador:
 Pres. Sixto Duran Ballen
 Garcia Moreno 1043
 Quito, Ecuador
2. Send copies of the letter to CNS as well as to:

Ab. Gustavo Gonzales Subsecretario de Pesca Quito, Ecuador	Lic. An-nando Espimel Ministerior de Informacion y Turismo Guayaquil, Ecuador
Lic. Jorge Barba Director INEFAN Quito, Ecuador	Sr. Director Diario EL COMERCIO Quito, Ecuador
Sr. Director Diario EL UNIVERSO Guayaqil, Ecuador	Lic. Arturo Izurieta Valery Intendente del Servicio Parque Nacional Galapagos Puerto Ayora Islas Galapagos, Ecuador
3. Call your travel agent and any journalists who might be interested in this concern, and feel free to refer them to Conservation Network International.
4. Support the efforts of CNI to expand our publicity campaign and stop the exportation of shark fins and sea cucumbers from the Galapagos.

NOTE FROM THE EDITORS: We urge all interested persons to pass on copies of this sobering article; however, if reprinted in a publication, CNI requests that a copy be sent to them to help document the success of their publicity campaign.

IGUANA NEWSBRIEFS

SAGA OF A LOST PET

In Port St. Lucie, Florida, a family pet iguana escaped from the screened-in back porch of the family's home during his natural mating season. The iguana, "Juan," about 30 inches long, wasn't reported missing because the family thought that he had fallen prey to cold weather or one of the cats in the neighborhood.

But two months later, Mary Morgan, the owner of Juan, recognized her old pet in a Fort Pierce pet store. Juan was distinctive because of a crippled right front claw and missing spikes on his neck. Morgan says that Juan recognized her, but looked rather sick.

The manager of the pet store said that a 12- or 13-year-old boy had sold it to him for \$50. Although he was trying to sell the iguana for \$100, he told her she could have it for \$60 in spite of his skepticism. But she refused his offer, only to learn that the store owner had sold the same iguana on the very next day.

Morgan has been fighting to get Juan returned to her. "He's worth more than a million bucks to us," she was quoted as saying. In the meantime, she hopes her treasured pet, no longer a bright green color, will make it.

Source: Port St. Lucie Tribune

RESCUE NETWORK BENEFITS IGUANAS

The Reptile and Amphibian Rescue Network (RARN), based in Los Angeles, California, takes ill or injured animals and nurses them back to health. They also attempt to place them in the hands of responsible adopters. From a list of their recent work, it would not surprise iguana enthusiasts to learn that iguanas comprised nearly 50% (23 of 48) of the rehabilitated pets. Due to their specific dietary needs and required exposure to UV light, iguanas in the hands of poorly informed owners are especially prone to become ill. Furthermore, many people lose interest in their pets as they grow from cute babies into adults that require more space and are less easily managed. Clearly, members of I.I.S. should work together to better inform the iguana-buying public of the responsibilities and realities of iguana ownership.

Source: Southwestern Herpetologists Society Newsletter

UNCREDITED PHOTOS

In the last issue we featured several photos for which no credits were given. The two green iguanas that appeared on pages 14 and 15 should have been credited to Stephen Nordlinger, Orlando, Florida. We apologize for our oversight.

The Editors