



In Darwin's Wake – The Galapagos: The Evolution of a World Class Fishery

From the grassy hillocks, even the most ancient of the Galapagos tortoises would not remember the first time billowing white sails had appeared over the horizon when HMS Beagle brought the young naturalist, Charles Darwin to these shores in 1835. It had been 300 years since the Bishop of Panama had been blown off course to land there in 1535. In 1832, three years before Darwin landed on the Galapagos, Ecuador had annexed the islands and started a penal colony along with a few farms. The 13 main volcanic islands, six lesser islands and more than 100 rocks and islets were called the Archipelago of Ecuador. The name "Galapagos" is derived from a Spanish term describing the saddle like shape of the shells of the giant tortoises found there.

Between September and October of 1835, Darwin would study the islands' flora and fauna which are isolated from the mainland by 600 miles of open ocean. He would continue on his five year voyage around the world, carrying evidence of differing physical features between members of a species of finch based on selecting differences in their environment.

Darwin would wait until 1859 to

publish his Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection because of fear of reprisals from the church. Exactly 100 years later, in 1959, the government of Ecuador made 97.5 percent of the archipelago a protected national park. The Charles Darwin Foundation (CDF) was created the same year, its headquarters is in Brussels.

But now the story of how sport fishing took root within the second largest marine reserve on the planet becomes a tale of goats rather than fish. There had already been a long and checkered history of strife over com-



mercial offshore fishing, lobstering and taking of the abundant sea cucumbers.

In the late 1990's Tim Choate tried to establish an operation in the islands with Braden Escobar. Choate's Artmarina enterprise had been the go-to for fishing in those days in Guatemala. Escobar, an outfitter for deer hunting throughout South America also had started bringing in hunters to shoot feral goats.

It had been the practice of early whalers, mariners and the pirates who preyed upon them to stock pigs and goats on remote islands in Oceania so they could obtain stocks of fresh meat on long voyages. In the Galapagos the goats had flourished by the tens of thousands and come to threaten the environmental resources of the native species of animals.

The director of the Galapagos National Park, Eliecer Cruz also had a side business with goat hunting with his brother guiding the trips. This was the start of bad blood between the two factions. According to Braden Escobar, tension mounted with Cruz, who became head of the Charles Darwin Foundation. The CDF is the biggest gorilla in the ring in the Galapagos, and gorillas tend to make rather troublesome sparring partners. The hunting became large scale with helicopters as the main tool for aerial

hunts. Cruz incited Greenpeace and other organizations to take sides.

If you think this was a small project, think again. In 2000, the United Nations and the World Bank approved \$13.3 million dollars for invasive species eradication in the Galapagos. According to an article on the project published in The Journal of Wildlife Management in 2009, between six and seven million was spent on the aerial hunting of goats just on Santiago Island. Braden Escobar relates that the money didn't stay in the Galapagos.

Escobar and Choate shifted their focus to fishing, but there were dark days ahead. Over the next half decade or so their efforts were undermined legally and otherwise. They won an expensive lawsuit only to have it overturned by the Ecuadorian supreme court. There was no more money to fight this. What followed was two years of "outlaw fishing."

"Hey amigo, it's only four in the morning. Where are you off to at this hour?"

"I'm going bird watching."

"Yeah, right."

A meeting with the president of Ecuador was arranged. They were



told they had to resolve it with the park. By this time, the Galapagos National Park had experienced pressure from fishermen who wanted access. Braden Escobar also found an ally in Pedro Zapata, the mayor of Puerto Baquerizo Moreno, who believed in the socioeconomic viability of the enterprise. There were numerous parties in play, from the local tour

operators to the International Game Fishing Association.

"They thought we couldn't pull it off, that's why the park went along with it. It would be too expensive and it would wither and die," Escobar recalls.

In 2006, the Galapagos National Park authorized Artisanal [traditional] Vivencial [experimental] fishing as a tactic to sidestep legalizing sport fishing. This required both the boat and operator to license with them and stands as a monument to political drivel which far overshadows the bronze statue of Darwin, which stands at the harbor in San Cristobal.

The doors were opened for a new industry as well as access to a world class striped marlin fishery. It's been a winner for the islands. Licensure requires that only natives can be hired to work on the boats.

"The fishermen used to support themselves by illegal means including shark fishing and unlawful taking of lobsters and sea cucumbers," according to Braden Escobar. "Now every captain and mate are taught protection of resources as well as catch and release." They also provide

THE GALAPAGOS ISLANDS

The Galapagos captains originally based their boats on Isabela, but have shifted their operations to San Cristobal. The underwater structures which are so prevalent here are more productive to the east and have the names left from the days of English sailors such as "Black Sheep Bank," "White Rose" and "The Hancock."

If you go, you'll love the mild weather and gentle seas. The Miconia Hotel on San Cristobal is a friendly place which is centrally located and sports a small gym and wi-fi. Like most fishing destinations, this is thirsty country and I recommend a mojito at the Casa Blanca. There's a small garden of mint and the barman will pluck your's fresh for each drink. Don't miss the octopus grilled hibachi style at the table.

It would be of good spirit to lift a glass for Charles Darwin too, for he was a fisherman at heart. He spent many a sunny afternoon angling on the River Severn during his youth in Shrewsbury, England. Like a fisherman he benefited by a strong current of good luck. The governor of the Galapagos pointed out the evolutionary differences of the local finches to him upon his arrival. The basis of the theory he employed is actually attributed to the Greek, Aristotle from the fourth century B.C. Alfred Wallace was preparing to publish the same conclusions as Darwin from his work in Malaysia, but Charles cast his bait just in front of him.

THE MARLIN OF THE GALAPAGOS

"Because that's where the money is!" This famous answer to a judge's question by prolific bank robber Willie Sutton is a natural fit for what essential element creates a world class fishery. Although blue marlin are frequently hooked in the Galapagos, it is the large number of striped marlin that's the money for this fishery. Double digit days aren't just a possibility, but an expectation. What we have learned of striped marlin over the last half century comes largely from two sources. After recovering from World War II, Japan's longline fishing fleet began to spread across the Pacific. They kept careful records of the number of marlin caught, but also location and length from eye to fork of the tail. The fish's length of course would also correlate to its age. In 1954, the first tagging program also began in the Pacific.

For years it was suspected that these "wandering fish" migrated from areas east of New Zealand to the Pacific coast of the Americas. This was based on larval stage individuals only being encountered far to the west and progressively larger fish caught or tagged as the sampling moved eastward towards the most intensely populated sites of the Galapagos and Cabo San Lucas. Then they would move west again into the northern Pacific.

More recent studies indicate many of these fish do not migrate so far. Many marlin move back and forth from Cabo and the Galapagos to the mainland. Genetic studies indicate that the marlin populations above and below the equator are generally separate groups. These sites keep some residence of marlin year round. The local captains maintain the Galapagos' stripies are larger and more abundant than in Cabo. Although this is debatable, there is an obvious, colossal difference in fishing pressure.

"Go where the money is...and go there often!"
Willie Sutton

another set of eyes patrolling the edges of the park. So all peaceful in paradise? Well, no...

"They don't know the good we do," says Pete Santini. Pete is an IGFA rep who owns a tackle store in Boston. He also brings clients to fish for marlin several months of the year in San Cristobal. Although a competitor of Braden Escobar's they have a collegial relationship and dinner and drinks usually means a pleasant evening with both men. Pete is jovial and quick witted; it's impossible not to like him.

"Three years ago I spotted a boat shark fishing off White Rose Bank. I came in and reported them to the SEA SHEPARD. A tourist overheard me and said, 'You're just as bad as they are.' Man, it almost came to blows. This is who you're dealing with."

"Our clientele are high end. They

stay a short time and spend a lot of money, 70 percent of which stays in the Galapagos. The rock huggers spend very little here," Escobar maintains.

Walking along the promenade of the harbor at night, there is no whisper of political strife. Humidity is low, the air is cool and the constellations overhead are different but friendly and bright. The beach is strewn with sleepy sea lions who have also spilled up to bed upon the park benches like beat poets who drank too much wine. This reminds us that the problems in the Galapagos aren't with the iguanas or the turtles, but with the homo sapiens.

Braden Escobar's ECUAGRINGO operation is hitting on all eight cylinders. He outfits about two thirds of all the fishing trips in the islands as well as wing shooting and big game hunting across South America. He is adding more boats and newer equip-

ment constantly. They continue to raise daily double digit marlin like no one else. And what happened to park director, Eliecer Cruz after laying the hammer on fishermen in the past, he became head of the World Wildlife Fund.

At the edge of the hemisphere we find true stewardship of the fishery lies in the hands of the fishermen, who are poorly understood by the conservation community. Although placing themselves on a moral pedestal, conservationist organizations rely on warm hearted donors who are largely blind to their inner workings. Large sums of money warp human institutions like huge masses of matter distort Einstein's universe, it's gravity as powerful as the arrogance of authority. In other words, it's just like home.

Don't forget that your tax dollars are at work here, too. Our government funds legal activity by conservation groups. According to the Western Institute for the Study of the Environment, over the five year period of 2003 through 2007, \$4.7 billion tax dollars were spent on attorneys' fees alone. This was for hundreds of suits and appeals which cluttered the courts by environmental groups. The winnings from these suits went into their pockets and the government apparently keeps no records of this. This by far eclipses funding and legal activity on behalf of sport fisheries. In the end we are the only conservationists who matter for sport fishes.

"...it is always advisable to perceive clearly our ignorance."

Charles Darwin



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