

The Ecological Society of America

JUDY MEYER, President
Institute of Ecology
University of Georgia
Athens, GA 30602-2602
(706) 542-3363

STATEMENT OF THE ECOLOGICAL SOCIETY OF AMERICA CONCERNING THE ECOLOGICAL CRISIS IN THE GALAPAGOS ISLANDS

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Sr. Sixto Duran Ballen
Presidente de la Republica de Ecuador
Garcia Moreno 1043
Quito, Ecuador

Estimado Presidente Duran,

The Ecological Society of America, a non-profit, professional scientific society with more than 7,000 members distributed throughout the world, is deeply concerned about the current ecological situation in the Galapagos Islands that threatens both the integrity of the Galapagos ecosystems and the health and safety of scientists and other people. These unique ecosystems have played a vital role in the history of the biological sciences worldwide, and investigations carried out in the archipelago have contributed greatly to the development of the field of ecology.

The future of scientific research on the islands and the safety of scientists were both threatened on January 3, 1995, when masked fishermen calling themselves "Pepineros," armed with clubs and machetes seized control of the properties of the Charles Darwin Research Station and Galapagos National Park Service boat.

Millions of sea cucumbers are believed to have been harvested during the past 18-24 months during which the illegal harvest of sea cucumbers has dramatically increased. The scale and location at which sea cucumbers are being harvested threaten the future of many endemic Galapagos organisms.

The largest concentrations of sea cucumbers are found in the sublittoral zone adjacent to Fernandina and Isabella islands where illegal processing camps have been established, using mangrove wood as the major fuel. Harvest of mangroves threatens the rare Mangrove Finch, which is confined to mangroves on Fernandina and the west side of Isabella. Fernandina is the only large island in the archipelago that lacks black rats and one of two places in the entire archipelago where native rice rats still survive. Continued fishing and processing activity in the area virtually guarantees that black rats will colonize Fernandina and eliminate the native rice rats. Fernandina is also the main breeding location for the endemic Flightless Cormorant and the Galapagos Penguin.


Ever since the visit of Charles Darwin, the Galapagos Islands have played a major role in the development of the biological sciences. The finches of the Galapagos have been the objects of the most important and comprehensive studies of evolution in action in which evolutionary changes have been measured precisely and the agents of natural selection have been identified. Evolutionary radiations of other groups of organisms, including giant tortoises, mockingbirds, iguanas, cacti, and members of the sunflower family, are the objects of continuing studies of ecological and evolutionary processes.


Semipopular articles written about the results of scientific research on the islands have been read by millions of people, contributing to a better understanding of evolution among the general public and generating international interest in the islands. Among the results are a major influx of ecotourists who come to the islands to witness first hand the remarkable organisms that live there and a flow of financial support for projects of all kinds being carried out in the islands.

The spread of illegal fishing in the Galapagos Islands, combined with a major influx of people whose livelihood depends upon the illegal and unsustainable exploitation of the natural resources of the archipelago, threatens the future of the unique organisms and ecological communities of the Galapagos Islands and the ability of scientists to continue studies to yield additional insights into ecological and evolutionary problems. The Galapagos Islands are truly a global environmental source whose degradation would constitute a serious scientific and educational loss to the world community and to the people of Ecuador.

The Ecological Society of America commends the Ecuadorian government for its excellent long-term efforts to preserve the biological diversity of the Galapagos Islands. As a result of those efforts, the Galapagos Islands have the best preserved biota of any major oceanic archipelago. The Ecological Society of America further urges the Ecuadorian Government to strengthen its efforts to provide for the safety of scientific researchers on the islands, to terminate all illegal exploitation of the island's natural resources, and to stop all activities that threaten the survival of the unusual species and the functioning of the ecological communities that are found nowhere else on the Earth.

Sincerely,


Judy L. Meyer
President


Gordon Orians
President-elect