

# Preface

The Galapagos Archipelago has been the source of inspiration to many individuals, and over the human history of the archipelago, many different views and opinions have been the source of debate around the world. I will not try to match those brilliant minds who have done great jobs in portraying Galapagos for the benefit of mankind, but I will try to tell my story and my history, and perhaps through my eyes the reader will feel the same passion that has driven me and forged my efforts to contribute to the maintenance and improvement of the conservation of this unique archipelago, a place that I have the honor to call home.

The authors of the chapters in this book are a perfect example of that passion that Galapagos inspires in all of us. In each chapter there is a tremendous amount of research, which is the result of dedicated passion for Galapagos, and perhaps together we might find a way to better understand the concept of sustainability that is so badly needed worldwide.

I was born on Floreana Island, of the four inhabited ones, the smaller island, both geographically and in the number of people living there. I believe I was born with an interest in the natural history of the islands, not in a conscious way, but very interested in all terrestrial life forms that occur on the island. Since my childhood, I have witnessed great changes in the islands; positive ones and some others not so positive. But one constant element over the years has been the tremendous resilience of the native and endemic species to cope with those changes—from feeding habits, behavioral choices to settle on new habitats, ability to cope with the arrival of new species, the street lights, traffic noise, speed boats, oil spills, and to the many visitors who constantly arrive to see the natural wonders that apparently inspired Charles Darwin in the thinking of the theory of evolution.

Also, another constant element that I have witnessed is the status of conservation of the Galapagos Islands that gets better each year. The Galapagos are one of the last few well-conserved tropical archipelagos in the world, which is home to numerous endemic species, and since Darwin's 1835 visit, the archipelago has been the focus of critical research on natural selection and evolution. This extraordinary archipelago has inspired countless visitors, and I'm not going to try to rewrite any of those descriptions, but instead narrate the changes that I have witnessed during my life,

which in turn relates to the well-researched chapters that the different authors have put together in this book. Some of those chapters are the results of research that has been overlooked in the past; needed research, indeed, if we are to manage Galapagos as a socio-ecosystem, which has been the case since 1832 when Ecuador took possession of the islands. Since then, the islands have gone through a series of changes that have shaped the present, and I'm sure, the future of the archipelago.

Galapagos was one of the first World Heritage Sites inscribed by UNESCO in 1978, because of the archipelago's outstanding universal value and its integrity as a complete ecosystem that can ensure ecological and evolutionary processes. World Heritage recognition was extended to the Galapagos Marine Reserve in 2001, because of its endemic diversity, multifaceted oceanic currents, unusual biogeography, and complex marine communities that are linked to the terrestrial ecosystems.

The Galapagos Archipelago has been in the eye of the world due to its unique endemic species and, in the last century, the world has come to believe that Galapagos will not survive, thus sending expeditions to collect as many samples as possible of the endemic species to save them in collections cabinets for future generations. So far, the status of conservation of the archipelago is better than a century ago. But it is also true that the threats that the Galapagos faces are greater than before.

Islands are ecologically, economically, politically, and socially different from the rest of the world. In reality, islands should be kept "at risk" forever due to the loss of the original isolation that is the basis for the existence of the endemic species as well as those evolutionary processes that are so strong in isolated islands. We (*homo sapiens*) have been able to break those natural barriers. Today, the Galapagos Islands are visited by several planes each day, and also by several cargo boats each month. In each of those events, as it has been in the past, new species arrive that are aided by the easy transportation to the islands. And, there is an ever-increasing risk that with each plane or each boat, new invasive species could arrive and settle in the archipelago. The effects of globalization are not always good and, in this case, it could be the tipping point for the future of Galapagos.

I have been able to witness changes in Galapagos during my life. Since I'm one of the fortunate ones to have the honor to be a "native" growing up and working in what I call home, it has allowed me to observe and be part of a series of positive and negative changes. I'll describe some of them, but in reality each chapter in this book is a sample of how changes are occurring in the Galapagos and their possible meaning to the Galapagos.

I have experienced a life of change in the Galapagos: from no electricity to cable TV, through eventual contacts with the outside world, to now over 150,000 visitors each year; from a mail system that took several months if not years for letters and packages to arrive, to Internet and e-mail systems; from the happiness to know that Lonesome George was found, to his death as I write these words; and from the discovery of the pink iguana, a large vertebrate that is totally new to science. The islands have gone from introducing herbivores to eradicating them, as one of the most successful projects worldwide; from elementary schools to universities; and from importing skills to exporting advice in many areas and to many parts of the world. These changes show that Galapagos is a growing community aware of its

unique environment and that Ecuador and the world are still keeping an interest in and care for this unique archipelago.

I truly hope that this series of publications will help to disseminate the challenges that Galapagos faces and will be a great tool to the decision-making process to have a better Galapagos for future generations. The death of Lonesome George should remind us that extinctions are forever, and, therefore, we should be inspired to do all that we can and more to prevent future losses of unique species.

Galapagos, Ecuador

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