Chapter 10. Humans: Part III

In 1950, there were just over 1,000 people living in the Galápagos. By 1990, there'd been roughly a tenfold increase to almost 10,000. Up until this point, any Ecuadorian national—from Azogues to Zamora—was free to move to the Galápagos, just as one might decide to move from London to Manchester or from New York to San Francisco. Non-Ecuadoreans found it easy to get the necessary paperwork too. By 2000, the population had reached nearly 20,000.

New Build
Where did all these people go? Very few tourists will venture beyond the main seafront strip of Puerto Ayora, but a ten-minute walk to the north and east of the town's touristic hub gives the answer. One arrives in a part of town called La Cascada, named after a waterfall that tumbles off the nearby cliff when it rains. This neighbourhood, however, is far from the beatific idyll its name suggests. From the mid-1990s onwards,
newcomers were able to purchase plots from the Santa Cruz municipality and build on them as they saw fit. As a consequence, La Cascada is a rather schizoid neighbourhood, where it's possible to find a well-constructed two-story home butting up against a flimsy Lean-To with a corrugated roof. The streets are impossibly narrow, many with no pavement and barely wide enough to accommodate a pickup truck, let alone a fire engine. Only after buildings went up did the municipality get around to thinking about electricity, water supply and how to deal with sewage. Needless to say, planning for this kind of infrastructure should take place before the first brick is laid. Doing it the other way round is quite patently ridiculous, not to mention expensive, and has effectively guaranteed the residents of this neighbourhood a set of second-rate municipal services prone to dysfunction. This kind of backward development also explains some bizarre statistics that fall out of Ecuador's national census, like the fact that the proportion of Galápagos homes serviced with a networked sewer did not increase between 2001 and 2010. It fell from 30.8 to 26.8 percent. La Cascada is clear evidence of an absence of long-term thinking on the part of the Santa Cruz municipality.

During the 1990s, there was increasing tension between elements of the human population and the conservation community. Things came to a head in 1995 when a group of disgruntled fishermen bore down on the offices of the Galápagos National Park Service (GNPS), unhappy about quotas the conservationists were imposing on the extraction of sea cucumbers and hence their livelihoods. There were rowdy stand-offs, Molotov cocktails and death threats, notably against then-GNPS director Arturo Izurieta. The unsightly display of violence filled column inches of local, national and international print and was captured on radio and television. This kind of unrest rumbled on for another decade, with conservationists and fishermen coming head-to-head each season until the eventual collapse of the sea cucumber fishery.

**Special Law**

This kind of conflict was getting nobody anywhere. In 1998, Ecuador passed the Special Law for Galápagos, an explicit acknowledgement of a simple fact: what goes for the other twenty-three provinces in Ecuador might not be appropriate in this extraordinary archipelago. The special law is a long document. We've already heard of one of its achievements (the creation of the Galápagos Inspection and Quarantine System, or SICGAL). Here are a few more: it saw that all the revenue from the entrance fee to Galápagos National Park remained in the islands rather than being siphoned off to the central government in Quito (as had been the case); it marked the formal creation of the Galápagos Marine Reserve (all 133,000 km² of it); there was also an effort to resolve the conflict over the marine reserve's resources, bringing all those with a stake in them (including representatives of the fishing, tourism and conservation sectors) around the same table; perhaps most importantly, the special law introduced measures to contain domestic immigration. After 1998, it was no longer possible for just anyone with an Ecuadorian passport to relocate to the Galápagos, and it became harder for non-Ecuadorians to obtain the necessary permits. There were new conditions.

Yet, for all its good intentions, the Special Law for Galápagos proved impossible to implement. Ecuador was in economic meltdown, triggered in part by the collapse of world oil prices (its main export) in the 1980s. The national currency, the sucre, tumbled in value and was eventually abandoned altogether in 2000 in favour of the American dollar. As inflation soared out of control, presidents came and went. In the decade from 1996 to 2006, Ecuador had eight different leaders. There was mass unemployment, unrest and emigration, with more than one in six citizens fleeing in search of a more predictable future elsewhere.

The political chaos rippled its way down the chain of command, eventually washing up on the rocky shores of the Galápagos. Between 1998 and 2006, there were six different ministers of the environment, six provincial governors of the Galápagos and eight directors of the Galápagos National Institute (INGALA), a body created in 1980 to oversee the human side of the Galápagos. At the GNPS, the situation was worse still, with more than ten directors and acting directors over the same period. There is no revolving door to the offices of the GNPS. But if there had been, it wouldn't have stopped spinning.

It was not just lack of leadership. The 1980s witnessed 'the bureaucratisation of the Galápagos', with just about every department of Ecuador's central government replicating itself—in miniature—in the islands. By 2006, there were more than fifty central government organisations
operating in the Galápagos, representing everything from fishing, tourism and the environment to health, education and welfare, not to mention dozens of national and international nongovernmental organizations. With so many voices, all clamouring for attention and all with a different stake in the islands, it’s not that surprising that the vision for the Galápagos as enshrined in the special law got lost along the way.

**United Nations**

All of this was of considerable concern to UNESCO’s World Heritage Committee, which sent a crack team of assessors to the islands for a week-long, fact-finding mission in early 2006. They did not like what they saw. Their report runs to almost fifty pages and gives a stark sense that things were out of control. Here’s a view of the Galápagos (as the UNESCO assessors saw it) in 2006.

In spite of the regulations on domestic migration introduced by the special law, the Galápagos population continued to expand at almost 7 percent a year, making it the fastest-growing province in Ecuador. One in five of these residents was an irregular or illegal migrant without the necessary paperwork. In the 1960s, there had been just two commercial flights a week; now there were more than thirty. Visitor numbers were increasing at an incredible 12 percent per year. There was a risk of oil spills, an issue that came to the fore when the tanker Jessica ran aground in 2001, releasing 285,000 gallons of fuel into the Galapagos Marine Reserve. A cruise ship carrying around five hundred passengers had been granted a permit to operate in Galápagos waters. The Inspection and Quarantine System (SICGAL) was struggling; from 2002 to 2010, the number of inspectors decreased by 25 percent (from forty to thirty), whereas imports increased by 60 percent (from around 35,000 to more than 55,000 tons). There was a rapid increase in the number of hotels; in the fifteen years from 1991 to 2006, the number of places to stay more than doubled from twenty-six to sixty-five. A new airport went up on Isabela without appropriate consultation. The prospect of sports fishing loomed. Political infighting was rampant. Conclusion: ‘Galápagos is shifting into an economic development model that is fundamentally at odds with long term conservation and sustainable development interests.’

UNESCO distilled this report into a list of fifteen recommendations and called for a multi-stakeholder meeting to be held by March 2007 at the very latest. In the end, this took place in the Galápagos in April 2007. The UNESCO representatives noted that none of the fifteen specific issues from 2006 been acted on. ‘On the contrary,’ they reported, ‘there were clear indications that the situation was getting worse.’ It reads a little like a school report.

If Ecuador’s newly incumbent president Rafael Correa (who came to power in January 2007) felt patronised, he didn’t show it. He responded immediately by issuing a bold statement of intent towards the Galápagos. On 10 April, in the middle of the meeting, he and elite members of his cabinet signed a decree declaring the archipelago ‘in a state of risk’ and a ‘national priority’. In view of this, the UNESCO World Heritage Committee decided to stick the Galápagos on its list of properties ‘in danger’, citing the combined threats of invasive species, unbridled tourism, immigration and overfishing. It was, they said, a measure intended ‘to draw attention to its state of conservation and mobilise international assistance’. In the opinion of leading conservationists in the Galápagos, Correa’s call to action in 2007 offered ‘the local, national, and international communities what might be the last opportunity to implement a strategic change in direction in Galápagos’. It drew a stark line in the black volcanic sand.

In 2007, INGALA began efforts to deport illegal migrants from the Galápagos and to tighten its control on immigration. The GNPS put a stop to the arrival of more big cruise vessels, a clear acknowledgement that some tourism activities are more suitable than others. It also began a shake-up of the way that Galápagos tourism operates, starting work on a new, self-sustaining tourism model for the islands. A new constitution, passed in 2008, made Ecuador the first country in the world to grant rights to nature—if nothing else, an important symbol of intent.

In recognition of these steps, the World Heritage Committee agreed to take the Galápagos off the list of properties ‘in danger’ in 2009, though many conservationists felt this was premature. The unbridled growth of tourism in the islands goes to the heart of the matter. It’s been estimated that around 10 percent of all international visitors to Ecuador visit the Galápagos, but they are of far greater value to the national economy,
bringing hundreds of millions of dollars into the country, which is equivalent to more than half the gross national income from tourism.

This extraordinary fact explains why there has never been a cap on the number of tourists visiting the Galápagos. The influx of tourists to the archipelago is responsible for the kind of economic growth that most politicians can only dream of. Between 1999 and 2005, the Galápagos had one of the fastest-growing economies anywhere in the world, with the total income coming into the islands increasing by 78 percent (equivalent to an average annual growth rate of almost 10 percent). No surprise then that unemployment in the Galápagos should be far lower than in mainland Ecuador. Not only that but the employed majority is able to earn, on average, more than three times what they could on the continent. Other indicators, like the treatment of women, levels of education, health care and access to the Internet, all suggest that Galápagos tourism has significantly raised the standard of living in the archipelago. Since the implementation of the Special Law for Galápagos, the visitor fee (currently $100 if you’re not Ecuadorian and $6 if you are) has also been put to good use, being distributed among several key institutions, including the GNPS (to the tune of 45 percent).

There is a flip side of course. With the Galápagos promising jobs, personal wealth and a relatively high standard of living, emigration from the mainland has continued apace. Though the Special Law for Galápagos sought to contain this human traffic, there are several ways to get to live and work in the Galápagos. If you can demonstrate that you are bringing skills that cannot be met by the existing labour force, you’ve got a good chance of securing temporary residency. With few permanent residents interested in cement mixers and breeze blocks, for instance, the construction industry is overwhelmingly made up of this migrant, manual workforce. Another way of staying within the letter of the special law (though not its spirit) is to marry a permanent resident. It’s hard to know how common this is, but it is happening. In 2007, there were thirty-eight marriages registered in the Galápagos. In 2010, that number had shot up to 232. Over the same period—2007 to 2010—the number of divorces rose from precisely none to sixty-four. If a sham marriage seems a bit much, it’s always possible just to turn up on a tourist permit (which gives you ninety days in the archipelago), then hide. There are plenty of employers prepared to turn a blind eye to a glaring absence of paperwork. Others take a more clandestine route into the Galápagos, so their name doesn’t enter the system at all.

Whatever the route, whatever the balance between permanent, temporary and illegal residents, the rapid influx of people to the Galápagos over the past two decades means that a large proportion are recent migrants (74 percent according to the Ecuadorian National Census of 2010). There are at least a couple of reasons why this might be of concern. First, there is a feeling that recent migrants don’t appreciate the challenges of island living like lifelong islanders, but come with mainland mindsets that end up changing Galápagos culture. To emphasise this point, a 2009 survey of over 1,000 households across the four inhabited islands found that more than half identified with an ‘expansionist’ mentality, showing ‘a strong motivation for development, through mainland and island transportation, tourism, and construction’. Second, rapid immigration has radically altered the age structure of Galápagos society, with the twenty-something bracket notably distended. So, even if there were no more domestic immigration, period, the population is still likely to grow as all those biological clocks count down to zero.

Into this painful social transition walked Raquel Molina, a biologist by training who became the director of the GNPS in 2006. Apart from her gender, which some in the still patriarchal Galápagos society may have had issues with, Molina stood out for her uncompromising attitude towards environmental protection. She was, one might imagine, just the kind of tough-talking, no-nonsense leader that the Galápagos was crying out for. But the way in which her term of office unfolded gives pause for thought.

Shortly after her appointment, Molina set the tone for her tenure in an interview published in Ecuador’s El Comercio newspaper, accusing a wealthy and influential local businessman of fishing illegally in the Galápagos Marine Reserve and levelling death threats at one of her staff. A few months later, in March 2007, just prior to the multi-stakeholder meeting, she and several colleagues were assaulted by members of the Ecuadorian navy whilst trying to clamp down on an illegal tourism operation on Baltra. In spite of a couple of months in hospital, Molina waded into even deeper political water the following year, confronting
Ecuador's minister for the environment (technically her boss) over a permit for a tourist vessel. Marcela Aguinaga pulled rank and fired the insubordinate Molina, citing her inability to 'adapt to the daily routines of the job and the ministry's priorities'.

A memo from the US consulate in Guayaquil back to Washington, DC, offers a rather less opaque explanation for the sacking. 'Molina's true crime was not incompetence; instead, it was her unwillingness to turn a blind eye to corruption and unlawful activities in the park,' wrote Consul General Douglas Griffiths in his confidential report, which was published by WikiLeaks in 2008. According to Griffiths, Metropolitan Touring (one of Ecuador's largest tour operators) had entered into an agreement with a couple of Galápagos vessels that would see their sixteen-passenger permits transferred to La Pinta (Metropolitan's newly refurbished luxury yacht). Molina declined to sanction the step, citing regulations that prohibit a single ship bundling up multiple permits. In an effort to bypass the obstructive Molina, Metropolitan appealed to the higher authority of Minister Aguinaga. In her former career as a lawyer representing Galápagos tour operators, Aguinaga had counted Metropolitan as one of her clients, and she ordered Molina to sign off on La Pinta's permits. 'Everything's been arranged in Quito,' an employee of Metropolitan Touring crooned to the US consulate. When the GNPS director stood firm, Aguinaga—asserting the legality of the permit—decided to call time on Molina's career. 'As a result of her unwillingness to compromise her principles, she had many enemies amongst those looking to exploit the economic opportunities the islands offer,' wrote Consul General Griffiths. La Pinta is now a registered tour vessel with a permit to operate at its full forty-eight-berth capacity.

It's hard to know what to make of this. Maybe it's accurate; maybe it's just one version of events. Whatever the truth, there is no denying the widespread perception that a new species is now endemic in the Galápagos: corruption. 'Despite clear legal limits on the number of fishing licenses, boat permits and resident visas issued in the Galápagos, corruption has allowed many to skirt the regulations, and resulting environmental consequences have been terrible,' concluded Griffiths.

Quite clearly, the Galápagos is no longer just a biological laboratory; it is now a social, political and economic laboratory too. The results of experiments conducted in other island labs, such as the Seychelles, the Mascarenes, Hawaii and New Zealand, have rarely turned out well for the native flora and fauna. Yet, in spite of all that's happened, the Galápagos is still one of the least-touched, best-preserved natural wonders in the world. This is partly because humans came late to the islands, only showing a real interest once the whaling industry got going in the early nineteenth century. It is also because the archipelago has been blessed by an incredibly powerful brand. The link with Charles Darwin gave the Galápagos a certain symbolic appeal in the minds of the pioneering conservationists of the 1950s. Come 1959 and the centenary of the publication of On the Origin of Species, Ecuador embraced the cause, marking out 97 percent of the Galápagos land mass as national park, thereby confining any human population to just 3 percent.

It is understandable that much of the popular news coverage of the Galápagos should zero in on what humans are doing to the islands. It is this, after all, that poses the greatest threat to the future of many of the archipelago's unique species. Yet the only reason this is news at all is because there is still so much to marvel at in the Galápagos, still so much to lose. At this moment it seems appropriate to ask, What if? What if the international community had not kept a spotlight on the islands? What if Ecuador had not afforded this far-flung territory any protection at all? How would it look today?

In some senses, not so different. There would be international tourism. There would be a significant resident population. There would be a thriving local economy. But the negative consequences of human occupation would probably be far greater. It's likely that we would have taken over just about every inch of the species-rich highland habitat with the inevitable extinction of thousands of species. We would have occupied most of the major islands. There would be more roads, more cars, more traffic. All manner of alien species would have taken root or gained a foothold to the detriment of the native ecology. Looking to the horizon, there would be a steady stream of cruise liners and huge fishing vessels struggling to reap the last of the archipelago's rich marine resources.

As it is, there are still pockets of relatively intact highland habitat to marvel at. Humans occupy only four of the islands. With the 30,000-strong population concentrated in just two towns (Puerto
Baquerizo Moreno and Puerto Ayora), the most damaging consequences of human settlement are confined to just two islands (San Cristóbal and Santa Cruz). On the other two occupied islands, Floreana and Isabela, the resident population is sufficiently small that it’s been possible to contain, even reverse, some of the damage that humans have caused. On many islands, invasive donkeys, pigs, goats and rats have been removed. There is a moratorium on cruise liners. Fishing is tightly regulated. In short, the situation in the Galápagos could be so much worse.

This is not a reason for complacency, but it’s very important to acknowledge. To do so is to recognise something so obvious it is often overlooked: the decisions we have made in the past have guided the Galápagos into a very different, more isolated, pristine present than the one that might have been. For those who care about the future of the Galápagos, this should be an uplifting admission. With a long-term vision for the archipelago, it is surely possible to protect much of what makes it unique. Islands like Floreana, which is the focus of a concerted restoration initiative, are even likely to recover some of their ecological innocence. On islands like San Cristóbal and Santa Cruz, where this may not be possible owing to the heavy human footprint, a lot can still be done to slow the attrition.

Since humans first set foot in the Galápagos almost five hundred years ago, these islands have had a considerable impact on human thought. In the words of Robert Bowman, an ornithologist who carried out a survey in the islands on behalf of UNESCO in 1957, ‘No area on Earth of comparable size has inspired more fundamental changes in Man’s perspective of himself and his environment.’ We still have a lot to learn from the Galápagos. With the global population placing an ever-greater burden on the world’s natural resources, there is an urgent need to come up with better ways of managing the conflict between humankind and nature. In the Galápagos, this has been the explicit goal for more than fifty years. There have been failings. There have been triumphs. We can learn from both. The future that Ecuador and the international community are forging for the Galápagos is by no means certain. It will be fascinating to see how it unfolds.