

June 2004

Sea Shepherd Lands Crew on the Beaches of Galapagos National Park during dispute with angry fishermen.

D-Day in the Galapagos: Sea Shepherd Lands Crew on the Beaches of the National Park

The illegal and violent occupation of the Galapagos National Park continues as mobs of disgruntled fishermen on five islands continue to hold the Park hostage to their demands.

At 0600 Hours on the morning of June 6, the Sea Shepherd Conservation Society landed a crew of six at the Darwin Research Station behind the lines of the fishermen barricading the Park entrance.

Their mission was to check on the welfare of Lonesome George and the hundreds of tortoises in the breeding facility in the Park.

Lonesome George is the last surviving member of his sub-species. He is over one hundred years old although his exact age has not been determined.

The four crew plus two members of a documentary team from Canada moved through the Park undetected and were able to investigate the tortoises. They found that the tortoises were unharmed but it did not appear that they were being fed.

The crew then decided to walk out of the Park and approached the main entrance.

The surprised and clearly angry fishermen threw rocks and attacked Jordan De Vann and Alex Cornelissen from the Netherlands, Graham Cantellow from Britain, Jared Rubin and Edward Curran from the United States and Cameraman Paul Kell of Canada. The Sea Shepherd did not retaliate nor did they say a word although they were repeatedly struck with sticks and stones. Paul Kell filmed the entire incident.

Ecuadorian Marines at the gate leveled their guns at the fishermen and escorted the crew out of the main gate.

Shortly after returning to the Farley Mowat, the Port Captain sent a launch to the Sea Shepherd ship to demand that Captain Watson report to the Port office.

He did so and arrived to find Pablo Salas the chief of marine enforcement for the National Park, along with dozens of Naval officers and about twenty armed marines.

Jordan De Vann and Alex Cornelissen arrived to support Captain Watson.

Captain Watson angered the Captain of Marines when he asked Pablo Salas, "Who is this guy?" He was referring to a man in shorts and a T-shirt who looked like a fisherman.

The man replied in English, "I am the Captain of the Marines and you people have caused a serious problem here for us."

The Port Captain, Freddy Endara, and Captain Cajas of the Marines informed Captain Watson that his crew had broken the law by entering the National Park.

"What law have they broken?" Captain Watson answered. "We were never informed that we could not enter the Park."

Captain Cajas replied, "The fishermen told you that you could not enter the Park."

Captain Watson laughed, "When did the fishermen start making the rules here? I don't take my orders from a criminal mob. You tell me to not enter the Park and we will not enter the Park. If the Park Director tells me to not enter the Park, we will not enter the Park. We will not take orders from the fishermen nor should you."

The Captain of Marines angrily replied, "This is an Ecuadorian problem, it is not your problem. The fishermen are Ecuadorian and you are not."

"This is a United Nations World Heritage Site and the protection of the Galapagos is the responsibility of all the people in the world," Captain Watson replied.

This answer clearly made the Captain of Marines angry. "That is not the case, this is Ecuador and the Ecuadorian government is in charge here."

Captain Watson replied, "That is not true, the fishermen with their clubs are in charge here. Don't you realize how embarrassing this is that an armed mob is holding these islands hostage to their demands and you are doing nothing? You're not in charge here, those thugs are."

At this point some of the fishermen came into the Port Captain's office to swear a complaint that our crew had assaulted them.

Captain Watson reminded the Port Captain that the entire incident was filmed and demanded to know how fishermen who were occupying government property

could march into the military base and complain about anything. "Have you all gone completely loony tunes?"

The Captain of the Marines said that they were thinking of jailing Captain Watson for three days.

Again Captain Watson laughed. "Really, oh please do. That would be incredible. You would jail me for looking into the welfare of the tortoises and yet you do nothing against an armed gang of thugs in possession of the Park offices. I really do hope you jail me. What a hell of a story that would be."

The Port Captain demanded that the entire crew that entered the Park be brought to his office. He then informed Captain Watson and his crew that they would not be jailed but would be ordered out of the Galapagos immediately.

"We cannot go without fuel. We have already paid for the fuel, and we cannot and will not leave without it."

The Port Captain said that the Farley Mowat would have to leave Santa Cruz and could proceed to the island of Baltra to the fuel station and that no crew would be allowed ashore.

Captain Watson agreed but could not resist saying, "I suppose you are merely relaying the orders of the fishermen."

Back on the Farley Mowat, the crew could plainly see the National Park offices where the fishermen were in complete control and making a mockery of law enforcement in Ecuador.

The crew of the Farley Mowat are being expelled from the Galapagos for investigating the conditions of the tortoises, yet the military and the police do absolutely nothing to stop the on-going siege of the Park by a violent mob. The authorities also point blank refused to address the complaint of our crew backed-up by video footage of the fishermen assaulting them.

Tourists should take note that according to the Ecuadorian military, only Ecuadorians have rights in the Galapagos and assaults against foreigners will not be investigated, let alone punished.

It remains a mystery how six Sea Shepherd crew could successfully land at the Park headquarters and check out the facilities, and yet the Ecuadorian military and police have been unable to gain access to the Park and to bring it under control of the law.

The reason for this was plain to see at the gates of the Park where the soldiers and the fishermen were sharing the same barbeque and drinking beer, talking and laughing together.

It represents all that is wrong with the Galapagos. Greedy fishermen and corrupt military are bringing this unique eco-system down. The tourist industry and conservation interests appear not to be represented. The tourist industry appears to be afraid to rock the boat and is saying very little despite dozens of cancellations of bookings for tours.

We are seeing the beginning of the end for this incredible natural ecological treasure. The fishermen will most likely win their impossible demands. Resignations will be asked for from Park officials. Naval personnel and politicians will pocket their bribes, and the natural indigenous species of these enchanted islands will continue to diminish in numbers and along with them, the majority of people whose livelihood depends on tourism and conservation will suffer.

All this so Asian weddings can serve sharkfin soup and Asian gourmets can dine on the increasingly rare sea-cucumber. For every dollar made from this illegal and immoral trade, a hundred dollars will be lost for the tourism industry.

As Shakespeare once wrote, "What a piece of work is man. . ."

On the Galapagos this D-Day, the invasion by the government to retake the National Park did not happen, and the forces of illegal and immoral occupation continue to hold these islands and the future of the good people who live here as hostage to their unreasonable and avaricious demands.

The Ecuadorian military stands in stark contrast to the courage demonstrated sixty years ago on the beaches of Normandy. That was a day of honor. Today in the Galapagos, the Ecuadorian military should hang their head in shame for lacking the courage to uphold law and order, to protect the citizens of the Galapagos and the National Park and all its wonderful and unique species of wildlife from ignorant thugs who have demonstrated that all it takes is mob violence or bribery to get what you want in the Enchanted Islands.

Today was the opportunity for the Ecuadorian Navy and Marines to act with honor, with courage and with determination.

Instead they have demonstrated inaction with dishonor, cowardice and a lack of morality and justice. They have been defeated, embarrassed and humiliated by a small gang of thugs.

Not Ecuador's finest hour.

The Sea Shepherd flagship, Farley Mowat, has been ordered to leave by the end of the day.

More news tomorrow.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

Send letters, emails, faxes and phone calls to the Ecuadorian government and the Media to express your outrage on how Ecuador is handling this situation and allowing mob rule in the Galapagos. Tell the government officials that you want Ecuador to enforce the rule of law and fulfill their duty to protect this historical, vital World Heritage Site and Marine Reserve from rampant, short-sighted commercial destruction.

Please visit the Sea Shepherd website (<http://www.seashepherd.org>) for information on how to contact Ecuadorian officials, embassies and consulate offices.

More contacts available at Ecuador's official website: <http://www.ecuador.org>

Sea Shepherd Conservation Society welcomes your support. To learn how to support our conservation work, please visit: <http://www.seashepherd.org/donate.shtml>.