

ECUADORIAN WHALE REFUGE

By: Godfrey Merlen

I am disposed to believe that we were at the general rendezvous of the spermaceti whales from the coasts of Mexico, Peru, and the Gulf of Panama, who came here to calve.

— Captain James Colnett, 1794

Thus began the slaughter of the sperm whale population around the Galápagos Islands, first by the British, then by the New England whalers. By the 1860s, the Galápagos grounds were destitute of whales, the ships moving on to new grounds to harvest the valued spermaceti oil used in the manufacture of smokeless candles. While the whaling industry rampaged through the oceans of the world, the Islands reeled from the ecological wounds, some of which would never heal: several tortoise populations became extinct from the depredations by the whalers, the fur seals were butchered for their skins to the point that the species was near extinction in the early 20th century, and the sperm whales were gone.

It was a black period, but slowly, throughout the years of the 20th century, the world, and especially Ecuador, which owns the Galápagos Islands, began to realize that the Islands were a priceless treasure of wildlife and natural processes, the magnificent shield volcanoes, unequaled in their symmetry of form, being home to a unique flora and fauna. From the 1930s onward, a series of decrees and regulations came into effect to offer ever increasing protection to the Archipelago. One of the greatest acts was the creation of the Galápagos National Park in 1959, limiting such damaging activities as uncontrolled access to breeding colonies of seabirds and instituting the removal of introduced animals that were competing with and excluding native ones.

As time went by, it was realized that, although the terrestrial ecosystem was protected, the marine environment, on which so many of the native animals depend, was not. This environment not only contains a high degree of endemism amongst its fishes (about 24%), but also represents an extraordinarily rich oceanographic setting amidst the generally low productivity of tropical waters. As more observers

travelled between the Islands, a knowledge of the cetacean was slowly gathered. An intensive study, begun in 1985, rediscovered the sperm whales off the western Islands. The sight of many young animals has given credence to Captain Colnett's observation of Galápagos as a breeding ground for this species. But it is more than this, for it is also an important feeding ground for many species of cetacean, large and small.

Although the interrelationships of organisms within the oceanic realm are not clearly understood, the importance of maintaining a balance between predators and prey, whether planktonic or mammalian, was recognized as being a fundamental factor in the well-being of the ecological system. Thus, in 1986, the Galápagos Marine Resources Reserve was created precisely to help reach this goal and still allow traditional fishing to occur in and near the Archipelago.

During these years of increased protection in Galápagos, the whaling industry had done enormous damage to whale populations worldwide. Mostly, it was a greedy, short-term boom, which burst in the 1970s and 1980s when it was realized that, even after the International Whaling Commission was established in 1946 to regulate the whaling industry through research, monitoring, and management plans, whale numbers were still sliding to ever new depths. Some populations, perhaps, would never recover.

Because of the lack of useful research resulting in reliable methods of estimating whale numbers and because of increasing worldwide discontent with killing techniques and the whaling industry in general, a moratorium was declared in 1985. It was to last 5 years and cover all whale species. Through a loophole called "scientific whaling," the whaling industries of several nations did not die and as the end of the moratorium in 1990 approached, some of these nations expected to continue whaling, although the "scientific whaling," which should have given reliable new data on whale populations, has failed to do so.

However, during this period of relative peace, while the sperm whale gave birth in the tranquil waters of

Galápagos, the dolphins delighted the many visitors with their exuberance displayed in superb acrobatic capers, and the humpbacks cruised off the low desert coasts of Ecuador with their calves, an uneasiness about the future of the many cetacean species that occur in all Ecuadorian waters began to emerge. Japan's interest in the rich Eastern Pacific waters and in its whaling fleet is of grave concern, the fear of further ruthless exploitation of whale resources paramount. With this in mind, a document was prepared and presented to the Ecuadorian Government of Rodrigo Borja requesting that a whale refuge be created to protect cetaceans against an unknown future.

The Government, in the face of the terrible destruction that is occurring within the ecosystems of South America, is receptive to new initiatives and itself declared the 1990s as a Decade of "Ecodesarrollo" (undertaking any new development plan with an attentive eye to compatibility with environmental preservation). Thus, the presentation of the proposed whale refuge was received with enthusiasm and immediately was accorded the approbation of the Government. The refuge offers protection to all spe-

cies in all Ecuadorian waters, that is, 200 miles from the coast of continental Ecuador and 200 miles from the periphery of the Galápagos Archipelago, a considerable body of water.

That the Ecuadorian Government can give its time to consider the well-being of its whale species is an extremely meritorious act when there are so many financial and logistical problems facing this equatorial country. It is a symbol of mounting concern over the fate of these remarkable marine mammals. Ecuador is not a member of the International Whaling Commission for economic reasons, so that this independent move is made without the influence of other nations and rejects the advances that could be made by pelagic whaling fleets.

It is known, however, that many cetacean species have oceanic migration patterns, many of which are poorly known, but, no doubt, some will cross the borders of neighboring countries. Perhaps this action by Ecuador could help to create a consensus of opinion by west coast American countries to protect their rich marine ecosystems against indiscriminate harvesting and influence from marauding outside nations. **Godfrey Merlen, Isla Santa Cruz, Galápagos, Ecuador.**

