

CONSERVATION GETS PERSONAL

By: Heidi M. Snell

September 1995 began like any month in the Galápagos until Saturday, 3 September, when we began hearing rumors about planned closures of the airports on Baltra and San Cristóbal; offices of the Galapagos National Park Service on Isabela, San Cristóbal and Santa Cruz; and the Charles Darwin Research Station (CDRS). Apparently some residents of the Galápagos wished to repeat the protests of January 1995. Chantal Blanton, director of the CDRS, had been in Quito for meetings of the Charles Darwin Foundation (CDF) the previous week and was scheduled to return on Sunday, 3 September. To avoid being completely stalled in case the threats were realized, several Station scientists who had heard the rumors came to their offices over the weekend to pick up work for home. Since the Station had been closed by protesting fishermen for an entire week in January of 1995, they felt there was some reason to believe the local gossip.

On Sunday morning, 3 September, protestors had blocked the main road that crosses Santa Cruz and provides access to the Baltra airport. Jim Pinson set out in a bus to Baltra, to assure the safe return of his wife Chantal. By Sunday afternoon townspeople began gathering at the gate of the entrance to the Charles Darwin Research Station and the Galápagos National Park Service (GNPS). While at the airport Chantal and Jim had been alerted of possible problems with ground transportation on Santa Cruz, so they travelled to Puerto Ayora on the ship, *Delfin II*, and then came by panga (skiff) directly to the CDRS dock to avoid a confrontation with the protestors. Chantal contacted the Port Captain of Puerto Ayora and requested that he clear the entrance to allow CDRS/SPNG personnel and visitors access. Personnel at the Port Captain's office related a rumor that the protestors were threatening to take hostages. After hearing this, personnel remaining at the CDRS were reluctant to return to their homes in town through the CDRS entrance, so they left the station by pangas and went to the dock in town. At 4 pm, an E-mail message was sent to CDF officials informing them that the Park Headquarters were 'occupied' by protestors who arrived via the GNPS dock, and thus bypassed the GNPS guards at the gate. That evening Chantal turned away a group of students who came to occupy the CDRS dock and block access to the only other route to and from the Station. During the January 1995 protests the blockage of the CDRS dock had severely restricted access to the CDRS. Chantal was persistent and turned the students away twice before she chained and locked the gate on the road to the dock.

Throughout the world Monday mornings seem the beginning of the most hectic and troublesome day of the week and this one was no exception. Employees of the CDRS and GNPS arrived for work at 7 am and were de-

nied access by the protestors at the gate. Chantal went to the entrance and met with a group of angry protestors, including Fanny Uribe, the Santa Cruz alternate to Diputado Eduardo Véliz (the Congressional Representative for the Province of Galápagos). This sort of protest, where an independent agency is closed by outside protestors, is strictly illegal in Ecuador. However, it is customary for law enforcement personnel to "allow" the protests as long as there is no violence nor property damage. This protest was no exception to that custom, and the local law enforcement personnel did not remove the protestors and informed us that they would act only in the case of harm to people or property. Several police were watching the entrance and the Park Headquarters where there was a large group of protestors. Having "learned" the customs during past protests, Chantal asked that food be allowed in for people and animals, and that key CDRS workers be allowed access. The protestors stated they were in complete control, no food would be allowed in for tortoises, iguanas, or people (later they negotiated that issue and eventually food for captive animals was allowed to pass), and no personnel who lived outside the CDRS or GNPS grounds would be allowed in. This same Monday morning, the road to the airport on Baltra was again blockaded, and the airport of San Cristóbal was shut down by another group protestors (the San Cristobal airport may have been shut down on Saturday also).

The occupation of the offices of the GNPS and the main gate to the GNPS and CDRS grounds by the protestors developed throughout Sunday and Monday. By mid-day Monday the area behind the gate was inhabited by as many as 50 people living under tarps and cooking over small fires. As the protest continued, most of the cooking activities were moved to open areas among the offices of the GNPS, some 500 m from the gate. The gate was reinforced with wooden planks and brush. A small opening remained in this barricade through which a single person could pass by bending low under a plank of wood. The protestors maintained effective control of who could pass the barricade by threatening anyone attempting to pass under the plank and through the opening.

By midday Monday we realized there was a greater potential potential for violence than we had thought. The CDRS comedor (dining room) is located near the dock past a locked gate. The police stationed at the the main CDRS/GNPS gate 1 kilometer away were given meals at the comedor. At noon several of them went through the gate and locked it behind them. They were followed by about 7 protestors carrying machetes and clubs and acting very aggressive. The locked gate did not deter them as they lifted it off the hinges and threw it aside. They were stopped at the Comedor door by a policeman and

the CDRS cook Andrés. After looking at everyone dining and stalking around the dock area they finally left. We later heard they had been searching for the head of the National Park, Lic. Arturo Izurieta.

At the same time many people were listening to the congressional representative Eduardo Véliz on the local radio, as he attempted to incite people to riot against the National Park Service and the Charles Darwin Research Station. He encouraged the protestors to break out windows, sack buildings, and create havoc. It was hard to believe these were the words of an elected official of the government! The basic demands of the protestors and representative Véliz were not aimed at the CDRS or the GNPS. The majority of demands dealt with dissatisfaction with a presidential veto of a somewhat pro-development law ushered through congress by representative Véliz. The CDRS and the GNPS were simply strategic targets for the protest. These two agencies may have been chosen for because of a combination of great visibility and operations that most inhabitants of Puerto Ayora would not miss if they were closed.

As the day progressed, the situation got worse. During the day the diesel generating plant for Santa Cruz was seized. Meanwhile, two visiting scientists collected data from the tortoises in the GNPS/CDRS captive breeding program during their last day in Galápagos. It was helpful to have their presence around the tortoise corrals since there were few people about to keep an eye on the CDRS grounds. Even though no employees or visitors were allowed onto the grounds by the protestors, the protestors themselves moved freely about the installations, often accompanied by reporters.

Late Monday afternoon additional rumors and news increased the tensions felt by everyone. By five PM we had heard from a Park employee that oil and diesel were being moved onto the Park grounds and placed near buildings. The Park vehicles had been moved to open places and wood and other combustible materials were stuffed under the chassis. Several individuals claimed the protestors planned to burn the CDRS souvenir shop and other buildings during the night. They also warned us of threatened beatings. The Port Captain phoned and asked that the CDRS personnel on the grounds be kept together and not be wandering around. He said there might be a military response to the protest, but asked that this information be kept confidential. We decided to have everyone gather later in the central conference building which also houses the museum collections and library. We felt that this would provide the most protection for people and the irreplaceable archives. Some individuals remained in their homes rather than join the group in the conference building. Some of those that remained in their homes refused to be threatened easily and others did not believe any actions would be directed against them.

Uncertainty increased as the evening grew darker and nothing more was known. Several people were concentrating on the logistics of sending the two visiting scientists

home from Galápagos the next day. The first challenge was to get them out of the Station, and then to the airport. One of the goals of the protest was not only to close the Park and the Station, but to cause a general shutdown throughout the islands. On Santa Cruz this was accomplished by blockading the only road across the island, slowing down general transportation, and more significantly closing down the land route to the airport on Baltra. The only alternate route to the airport was via boat. So, the CDRS vessel, *Beagle*, was readied and the scientists with their equipment and data were smuggled directly aboard from the CDRS dock by panga under the cover of darkness and left late that night for Baltra.

As the scientists were transported to the *Beagle*, a misty, cold and wet garua settled in obscuring visibility on land and sea. Station personnel inside and outside were trying to communicate by phone and VHF radio among themselves, the neighboring islands (to assess the situations there), and to the outside world. Protestors interrupted many VHF radio transmissions with continued threats. At one point everyone heard lot of shouting from the direction of the National Park offices and we could see the glow of fire. Speaking on the Station's radio frequency, Chantal asked anyone listening to please contact the Port Captain and inform him of the fire. This last transmission caused many CDRS personnel still at the Station to recant their decision and an evacuation was called for. Two scientists and a resident of Puerto Ayora came to the Station dock in pangas, and we transported students and families to a hotel on the other side of the bay. A small group of dedicated people decided to stay and watch over the Station and the animals despite the threats and commotion. During the night a group of 26 Ecuadorian Marines entered the Park grounds via another route. They remained there to prevent violence and protect the buildings. Nearly all the Park officials and their families had evacuated during the day leaving the GNPS nearly empty of personnel. Later during the night we found that the fire was a pile of diesel-soaked wood and debris, rather than a building or a vehicle.

Prior to the evacuation of the CDRS personnel a fishing net was discovered across the channel through the reef to the Station dock. The last panga out became entangled, but because the drivers had been alerted the panga was able to continue on after freeing the fouled propeller. The situation on the Station and Park grounds remained extremely tense throughout the night. Nobody was able to rest, some managed to doze off with their radios as pillows, but it was an uncomfortable and uneasy night. As Chantal was an obvious potential she and Jim avoided the Director's residence and spent the rainy night out in the bush watching over the Station and the goings on. Thankfully nothing more serious occurred during the darkness.

The following Tuesday morning all non-resident Station personnel once again were denied entrance to their workplace. The protestors were hostile towards them as

they waited near the barrier at the front gate. The protestors claimed they exercised complete control over the situation. A man with a wooden club loomed over the small opening in the barrier and threatened any one wishing to pass. Other times a group of people would just move forward, physically blocking any opening. It was sufficiently daunting that was willing to see what the reaction would be if they walked through despite being verbally denied access. On the inside, there were military personnel guarding the homes and buildings at the Park, and largely due to their presence, nothing had been damaged during the night. However, they were not allowed to pass to the Station and post people there. The situation was tense but the evacuees returned to the Station via panga and some attempted to carry out their normal work routines, but most found that simply keeping the Station running consumed all their time and energies. The phones rang constantly with calls from reporters, worried parents and families. Many of the callers were CDRS personnel stuck outside who needed information and materials to continue their work as well as apprising those within the CDRS of how the situation was developing in town.

Chantal continually tried to ensure the safety of the people and property of the Station and repeatedly asked that key support people be allowed entry to carry out essential maintenance work, a burned out water pump, a faulty incubator for the tortoise eggs, and the key people to deal with the nesting Española tortoises. She also made it clear that the daily food supply for the tortoises, iguanas and the Ecuadorian military personnel could not be obstructed. Some staff managed to get through once in a while simply because they were personal acquaintances of protestors guarding the gate.

Wednesday morning dawned much brighter for those inside when they met with nine military "Rangers" who arrived at the Station during Tuesday night. They kept a low profile for the first few days but were quick to assure everyone they would remain throughout the situation. It was a great relief to have them at the Station. That same morning protestors finally relented when Chantal was filmed by a prominent reporter from Ecuadorian television and radio, while making her daily requests for food for people and animals to the secretary of the protest group, Mrs. Gulnara Garcia. Mrs. Garcia was quick to assure to the media that the needs of people and animal would be met. At mid-day personnel within the station received a call from some of the CDRS personnel in town reporting that in town protestors were reputed to be actually gathering guns and saying that they would burn the GNPS offices on Friday if the government did not meet their demands. This report increased tensions within the CDRS greatly, and the remaining individuals were relieved to have the Rangers on the grounds. Wednesday night three American consulate members and bodyguards arrived in Puerto Ayora, in response to several requests for help that were made to the American Embassy in Ecuador.

Despite the desire of the protestors to completely disrupt the activities of the CDRS, many of the CDRS personnel were committed to maintaining a functioning research station. They effectively divided themselves in a small group of scientists remaining within the CDRS who dealt with the administrative and scientific responsibilities, and another group of employees that operated remotely from the CDRS in Puerto Ayora. The logistics for visiting scientists were some of the most challenging issues. Maintaining contact and making arrangements was extremely difficult. Everyone was aware that failure to meet the needs of arriving scientists would destroy plans for research in the islands, and because many of the research parties had invested years of effort and great expense to get to Galápagos we wanted to prevent such failure. For the individuals remaining at the CDRS one of the most frightening aspects of the protest was the sense of isolation and the lack of information about efforts to curtail the protest and protect the GNPS and CDRS installations. To alleviate this isolation, the employees in town also spent time assessing the changing situation, attending town meetings and apprising those within the CDRS of the general goings on. Everyone felt the intense frustration of being unable to do their jobs well. On the inside, the Education & Interpretation Departments and Teniente Gavilanes, the leader of the Ranger unit, began an information campaign to counter the propaganda sent out by the protestors. Meanwhile an inciting speech by representative Véliz had been taped and was transmitted to Quito for broadcast by television and coverage in the national press.

Beyond the borders of Galapagos, further actions were being taken against the protestors. In response to the messages sent from the CDRS immediately at the beginning of the protests members of the Charles Darwin Foundation (CDF) had begun acting to alert influential parties as to the situation and they demanded action. It was obvious that pressure to counter the protest had to come from beyond Galápagos because few residents of islands appeared willing to speak out against representative Véliz.

The presence of Dan Johnson (United States Consul to Ecuador), Bill Hunt (United States Navy) and Dennis Ravenshaw (US Embassy Security, Quito) created some pressure on the protestors. On Thursday there were several meetings of this group, Chantal, and others. After one meeting, held at the Station, the group and some press people were escorted to the barrier at the gate for another meeting in Puerto Ayora. Before reaching the main gate the body guard of the US Consul found molotov cocktails hidden within a secondary barrier on the road, at the turn-off to the GNPS offices. The presence of bombs confirmed to us just how serious an intent to do damage existed. The protestors were immediately questioned about the bombs and offered a confusing array of statements before settling on a consistent explanation. They claimed the incendiary devices had been hidden there by an Israeli

tourist, whom they had allowed past the barriers to search for her lost passport.

As the long days and nights of the protest continued, pressure and worry never left the people within the CDRS. The scholarship students and volunteers found themselves without supervision and with little guidance, but they did a great job of filling in for missing staff. They had immediately assumed responsibility for the care and maintenance of the captive tortoises and iguanas. The daily deliveries of fresh food collected in the highlands of Santa Cruz had to be moved by hand over the two barriers set up by the protestors. At each barrier the students were harassed by protestors as they unloaded several hundred pounds of vegetation from wheelbarrows, carried it over the barrier, and loaded it into wheelbarrows on the other side. The whole process involved moving the food by hand and wheelbarrow for more than a kilometer and loading and unloading it all twice. Later in protest, after several direct threats to kill Lonesome George (the only living tortoise known to be from Isla Pinta), they took shifts to keep a continual watch over the grounds and the tortoise pens in particular. Students guarded the tortoise corrals 24 hours a day, but stayed closest to George. Heavily-armed marines kept constant watch over everyone. It was definitely not a normal sight to see combat-ready military patrolling the Station grounds!

Edison Encalada, an Ecuadorian student-volunteer was in charge of coordinating animal care. He also had the responsibility of monitoring the nesting Española tortoises and protecting the eggs in incubation. During the third night of the protest a heater in one incubator short-circuited and burned up. Thanks to Edison's constant observation, the fire was discovered before the incubator could burn. Edison transferred the incubating eggs to a second incubator, which prevented their deaths. This incident is only one example of the constant efforts by staff and students which prevented the protest from being as damaging as it could have been.

As the protest and occupation continued, some opposition began forming within the Galápagos community. A local group formed in Puerto Ayora called the "Comite de Paz y Bienestar" (Committee for Peace and Well-being), who opposed the protestors. They held meetings and a march demonstrating to the townspeople there were some residents who did not agree with the disruptive tactics favored by representative Véliz. The Ecuadorian press and television began showing both sides of the issue and local tour companies reported cancellations. The airport at Baltra was the only one functioning (it is a military base and so was not closed by the protestors), so both TAME and SAN airlines operated their daily flights from there. Tour boats changed itineraries and avoided the towns as much as possible. The San Cristóbal airport remained closed by the 40 or so people who occupied it, including representative Véliz. The National Park Service offices in San Cristóbal remained open but the vehicles were stored at a Navy base for security. On Isabela, at the

town of Villamil, GNPS offices had been occupied by protestors since Sunday, and a GNPS vehicle was kept by them as well. This meant that food for the tortoises in the Isabela breeding center had to be delivered from the highlands in a private truck. On Santa Cruz, the Station was the base for the few remaining National Park Service personnel, student volunteers, CDRS residents and the Ecuadorian Rangers. The CDRS dining room served 3 daily meals to about 50 to 60 people. Meanwhile with things so well tied up in the clamor, the illegal fishing for sea cucumbers, sharks, and other species apparently continued unchecked.

The days seemed to go on and on without a change in the situation. About the time things would become moderately tranquil, there would be a meeting or a march and promises that representative Véliz would arrive from San Cristóbal to give strength to the protest. He apparently never did come to Santa Cruz, and even though his speeches were frequently read over the radio to the public, it finally seemed as though momentum was waning. Nine days after the closure of the Station, twelve employees came to work by panga. The following day employees again came to work by panga. We were finally able to get a few more employees back in the offices to try and pick up the pieces and carry on with their work. The traditional team spirit of the CDRS strengthened and our spirits began to lift, only to be dashed to a new low. A little after noon on Wednesday, 13 September, Chantal received word from Isabela of the accidental death of Don Arnaldo Tupiza. He had been an employee and representative of the Darwin Station for 25 years. Station employees gathered at the main building and received the shocking news. It was a serious blow to the morale of everyone. The rest of the day was spent arranging everything from a coffin to money for the family and a boat to carry Station people and materials for the funeral to Isabela.

On Thursday, employees again came in by panga and a few others bypassed the barrier at the gate by climbing over an unguarded wall. Unfortunately they were seen by the protestors. This triggered a formal, menacing letter which stated that the Station had to respect the closure and stop using pangas to move people past the blockade or the protestors would not be responsible for the consequences. At the same time arrangements for the funeral of Don Arnaldo Tupiza continued and a group of people led by Chantal prepared to attend in Isabela.

Friday dawned with Chantal and a number of CDRS employees on Isabela for the funeral after traveling there overnight by boat. The Station closed in an official day of mourning for Don Arnaldo, and everything remained quiet. The department of Environmental Education from the CDRS had broadcast several special radio programs about Don Arnaldo, his life, his contributions, and his special stewardship of Isabela. In the early hours of Saturday, a very subdued group returned from Isabela.

Had it not been for the tragedy which occurred on Wednesday, the morning of Saturday, 16 September,

would have been reason enough for celebration, the protestors had ended their siege and were taking down the barriers. Representatives from the GNPS, Ranger Special Forces, CDRS, and the protest committee jointly checked over the GNPS area to assess property loss or damage. Apparently stolen items included a Geographical Positioning System receiver, a computer, a marine radio, gasoline and other supplies, but at last everyone was free to come and go at will. While our freedom of access had been curtailed for only a relatively short two weeks, it was long and tense enough to cause our reflection on what that freedom meant to us.

Many of the students and staff celebrated the end of the protest by throwing themselves into the International Coastal Cleanup Program held worldwide on that day. The group centered at the CDRS collected about a ton of garbage from the coast on the north east side of Academy Bay. The CDRS team also had the help of some of the Rangers! That night the Marines moved to the Naval base in Puerto Ayora and kept guards posted at the front gate, because there were some protestors apparently eager to renew the occupations and protest activities.

As the days turned to weeks, without a renewal of the protests, the Station and Park slowly came back up to speed in attacking the problems that concern us most in the islands. We had all fallen drastically behind in the basic research and conservation programs. For me, the Galápagos Islands lost their innocent status and openly became a pawn for frustrating monetary and political ambitions during the two weeks under siege. While the threats and potential danger that we experienced during the strike were minor compared to parts of the world

experiencing great levels of terrorist activity, I won't take my personal safety for granted again.

Conservation is defined as: *a careful preservation and protection of something; planned management of a natural resource to prevent exploitation, destruction, or neglect.* This is a word conoting action that we all take pride in, and it is what we have based our values for Galápagos on. Little did we realize how much we could be hated when the wrong mix of politics and agitation stirred up a local populace. Many of the people who dedicate their efforts to the Charles Darwin Research Station and the Galápagos National Park have an intense sense of commitment. Understandably it affects all of us when these deep convictions can cause such hatred to be thrown against us by one sector of the community. Having faced such a common danger, several of the groups that were occupied and threatened during the strikes and protests have gained an increased sense of unity. Cooperative programs between the National Institute for the Galápagos Islands (INGALA) and the CDRS and SPNG now reinforce a greater awareness and readiness for action on the part of many townspeople to assure the peace and well-being of Galápagos. Today the economic and political interests in Galápagos are increasing at an ever accelerating rate. In order to achieve our goals of conservation of these incredible islands we must all show continued strength of commitment evidenced by the students and everyone else during the strike. We can not allow greed and ignorance to determine the future of this unique archipelago.

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