Ecuadorian Government Agrees to Review Galapagos Fisheries Regulations Following Seizure of Park Facilities by Fishermen

Editor’s note: The social and political unrest facing the Galapagos Marine Reserve, described in the article below, holds serious potential consequences for one of the world’s best-known MPAs. It also reflects challenges this MPA shares with other sites worldwide, including the continual pressure to realign the balance of resource use and conservation amid changing economic and ecological circumstances.

In late February, the Ecuadorian government agreed to review and potentially change fisheries regulations in the Galapagos Marine Reserve as part of a negotiated agreement to end the latest in a series of protests by local fishermen. Several dozen fishermen seized and blockaded access to the premises of the Galapagos National Park Service and the Charles Darwin Research Station on 19 February and held the facilities for eight days, insisting that the government address a list of demands. The demands included that the regulations that govern fishing in the reserve, negotiated among stakeholders over four years and issued in 2003, be abolished.

Under the pact with fishermen, Ecuadorian Environment Minister Cesar Narvaez agreed to form a committee to review the fisheries regulations over 60 days and recommend appropriate changes. The committee would be composed of federal officials and a national representative of the fishing sector, and would also review other demands of Galapagos fishermen, including that longline fishing be permitted in the protected area. (Industrial fishing is banned inside the 140,000-km² Galapagos Marine Reserve, but “artisanal” fishing - using smaller, locally based boats and various fishing techniques - is allowed in most areas.)

However, the future of this committee is already uncertain: Minister Narvaez resigned from his post on 3 March, citing personal reasons. Speculation among environmental groups and Ecuadorian media suggested Narvaez was forced out due to national and international pressure on Ecuador to strengthen, not weaken, protection for the Galapagos Islands. Such pressure included a formal reminder from the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) that the Galapagos Marine Reserve, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, could be placed on the “World Heritage in Danger” list if events led to a reduction of the site’s conservation standards.

In another sign that Ecuadorian officials might be reconsidering the agreement, the international Charles Darwin Foundation - which cooperates with the Ecuadorian government to provide technical and scientific advice to the Galapagos National Park Service through the Charles Darwin Research Station - was invited on 1 March to provide the government with a technical response to the agreement. Officials of neither the Darwin Foundation nor the Park Service had been invited to attend the February negotiations between government and fishermen. (The Park Service oversees management of terrestrial and marine protected areas in Galapagos.)

Despite the political upheaval, the fishermen who led the protest expect the agreement to be honored, and for their demands to be met. If not, said one group leader to an Ecuadorian newspaper, a new and “real” protest would occur.

Responses to the agreement

The February protest was the latest in a string of conflicts between fishermen and park officials dating back to 1992 upon development of lucrative sea cucumber fishing in Galapagos, about 1000 km from the Ecuadorian mainland. Owing to that fishery and a growing, illegal shark-fin fishery, income for the Galapagos fishing sector surged in recent years, attracting a rush of immigrants from the mainland. The increased demand for resources led to sustainability concerns among managers, forming the basis of the conflict. Violent episodes included riots in November 2000 (MPA News 2:6) and the shooting of a park official in 1997.

Park and Darwin Foundation officials, fishermen, tourism operators, NGOs and other sectors worked through the 1990s to establish a framework of participative management, aiming to generate greater stakeholder support for management activities. This participative framework was enshrined in Ecuador’s Special Law for Galapagos in 1998, featuring multistakeholder bodies for decision making. Edwin Naula, director of the Galapagos National Park Service, says the system has raised awareness of management responsibilities among resource users, and needs to be upheld. “Strengthening this system and solidifying its effective legal framework for sustainable management of the islands are important for the Galapagos National Park,” he says.

Peter Kramer, president of the Charles Darwin Foundation, says the Ecuadorian government appears to be in the process of determining how to proceed. “The agreement was a mistake,” he says. “The circumstances under which it was negotiated and agreed were dubious.” In fact, he says, the agreement is not even in the best interests of the fishermen who negotiated it. “The worst scenario, for everyone, is that the whole system of regulations and negotiations among stakeholders gets dismantled, and each sector constantly has to fight for its own share of the resources in the marine reserve.”

Cecilia Falconi of WildAid, one of a group of international NGOs that have allied on Galapagos management issues, says the fishermen are following the lead of large tourism companies, which worked with government in January - also outside the required participatory channels - to revise the Galapagos regulatory framework for tourism. “The fishing sector started planning to eliminate the fishing regulation and impose the adoption of longlines after witnessing how the tourism sector got what it wanted without playing by the rules,” she says.

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BOX: Features of Galapagos agreement

According to the pact negotiated between Ecuadorian officials and the Galapagos artisanal fishing sector on 27 February, the federal government agreed to do the following, among other actions:

- Form a committee to review the regulations that govern fisheries and sanctions in the Galapagos Marine Reserve, and suggest any changes within 60 days. The committee would also examine the use of longlines for fishing in the marine reserve.
- Examine whether changes should be dropped against several Galapagos fishermen accused of past crimes.
- Ensure priority to fishermen in cases where there were opportunities for individuals to enter the tourism sector. Under Galapagos tourism law, fishermen are supposed to receive such priority, but regulatory revisions introduced by the government in January 2004 threatened to take that away.
- Provide a line of credit to the artisanal fishing sector in Galapagos.

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