

LETTERS FROM THE GALAPAGOS

1. Fray Tomas de Berlanga

Fray Tomas de Berlanga, spiritual head of all the known and unknown Spanish territories in the Americas, was sent to Peru by the Pope to investigate conditions under the governorship of the conquistador Francisco Pizarro, especially charges that Native Americans were being treated cruelly. During eight days with no wind, en route to Peru, crewmembers sighted one of the Galápagos Islands and decided to go ashore for water.

6 April 1535, Berlanga's report to Charles V, the Holy Roman Emperor:

The water on the ship gave out and we were three days in reaching the island on account of the calms, during which all of us, horses as well as people, suffered great hardships. The boat once anchored, ... some were given charge of making a well. From the well there came out water saltier than that of the sea. ... With the thirst the people felt, they resorted to a leaf of some thistles like prickly pears, and because they were somewhat juicy, although not very tasty, we began to eat of them and squeeze them to draw all the water from them. [Before fresh water was located, on the third day ashore, three men and ten horses died of thirst.]

On a second island we saw many seals, turtles, iguanas, tortoises, and many birds like those of Spain, but so silly that they do not know how to flee, and many were caught in the hand. On the whole island, I do not think that there is a place where one might sow a bushel of corn. It is as though God had sometime showered stones; and the earth there is worthless, because it has not even the power of raising a little grass.

2. Captain John Cook

In the 17th century, Spanish ships carrying wealth from South America were tempting prey for pirates. Pirate Captain John Cook called his ship the Bachelor's Delight, and his crew of buccaneers the "Merry Boys." He found the Galápagos, for all their inconveniences, ideal places to hide while waiting for a passing ship.

8 March 1684, from Cook's journal:

We landed at Lobos to mend our caravel [ship] and spy for galleons. After we had been watching for about a week we sighted three tall Spanish treasure ships. Because we had the advantage of surprise, we were able to overpower them easily. We captured 100 prisoners, but when we ransacked their stores we found no gold, but only much timber, 1500 bags of flour, and eight tonnes of quince marmalade. One of the prisoners

laughed in our faces and told us that his ship, the flagship of the fleet, had left Lima with 800,000 pieces of eight. When they landed at Guanchoco for water and fresh provisions, however, they heard that our caravel had been sighted, so they left the gold pieces there for safekeeping.

When we came to anchor in a very good harbor, lying toward the northernmost end of a fine island under the equinoctial [equator]. This was one of the islands the Spanish call enchanted islands, saying they are but shadows and no real islands. Here being great plenty of provisions, as fish, sea and kind tortoises, some of which weighed at least 200 pound weight, which are excellent good food. We put in at many other islands, but we could find no good water on any of all these, save on the San Salvador Island. Some Of the Spanish cargo we left in caves on the islands another time that we have need.

3. Captain James Colnett

The whaling industry dominated shipping in the 18th century. By the end of that century so many whales had been killed that they began to be scarce in the Atlantic. Great Britain's Royal Navy loaned the services of the experienced Captain James Colnett to a whaling company interested in exploring the Pacific. On one of his many voyages around the Galápagos, Colnett may have set up the post office barrel on Santa María Island. To this day visiting ships check the barrel for outbound mail.

1792, Colnett's journal entry (no day or month noted):

I frequently observe the whales coming, as it were, from the main and passing along from the dawn of day until the night in one extended line, as if they were in haste to reach the Galápagos. It is very much to be regretted that these isles have been so little known but only to the Spaniards.

On reaching the South point of San Salvador Isle I got sight of three other islands which I had not seen before. The Southernmost, which I named Barrington Isle, is the largest and was the greatest distance from me. ... This isle appears to have been a favorite resort of the buccaneers, as we found not only seats, which had been made by them of earth and stone, but a considerable number of broken jars scattered about... in which the Peruvian wine and liquors of that country are preserved. We also found some old daggers, nails, and other implements.

4. Captain David Porter

During the War of 1812, the United States was the underdog. As underdogs have always done, American strategists looked for indirect ways to harass their opponent—in this case the superior, but overextended, British Navy. One of the most successful of such operations was led by Captain David Porter and based in the Galápagos. With only one ship, the Essex, Porter managed to capture more than half of Great Britain's

whaling fleet. Letters intercepted from the post office barrel on Santa María Island helped him to accomplish his mission.

1812, from Porter's report to his superiors:

Although we knew from the letters that ships were to be expected, we waited two anxious weeks in the Galápagos before we saw the first sail. The prized [captured] ships were worth our wait, however, containing many provisions of which we stood in great need. We obtained an abundant supply of cordage [rope], canvas, paints, and tar, all of the best quality. We found on board of them also fresh meat to furnish our crew with several delicious meals. They had been in at James [San Salvador] Island, and had supplied themselves abundantly with those extraordinary animals which properly deserve the name of elephant tortoise. The most valuable item of all we captured, however, was water, even though it was contained in the oily casks of the whale-ship, and from them derived no very agreeable taste or smell.

I would advise every vessel visiting the Galápagos to lay in good store of that necessary article, for all the fresh water in the islands owes its existence to temporary rains, and cannot be relied upon. We did however find fresh food to counteract the scurvy, both an herb resembling spinach and other fresh herbs. We found prickly pears in great abundance, stewed them with sugar, and used them to make excellent pies, tarts, etc., which helped to keep the men healthy.

5. Charles Darwin

In 1835 Charles Darwin spent five weeks in the Galápagos. What he saw there was to occupy his mind for the rest of his life and influence the thinking of all future generations. His first impression of the islands, however, like that of most visitors, was rather negative. When his party landed a boat on San Cristóbal Island, the black sand burned their feet right through their shoes.

1835, or later, Darwin's Diary notes:

The black rocks, heated by the rays of the vertical sun like a stove, give to the air a close and sultry feeling. The plants also smell unpleasantly. The whole country was like we might imagine the cultivated parts of [hell]. The rocks on the beach are frequented by large (2–3 ft.) most disgusting clumsy lizards. They are as black as the porous rocks over which they crawl and seek their prey from the sea. Somebody calls them "imps of darkness." They assuredly will become the land they inhabit.

6. Early Galápagos Settler

William Beebe's 1924 book about the islands, *Galapagos, World's End*, was an international bestseller. The idea of living astride the equator was particularly appealing to people in cold northern climates. Many Norwegians responded to an advertising campaign mounted by the unscrupulous Harry Randall,

who charged potential emigrants large sums of money for resettlement in the Galápagos. Within two years, all but a handful of the settlers had died or gone home.

1927, from a settler's letters home:

As you know, Klaus and I paid Mr. Randall a total of 6,000 kroners, our life savings. Then we borrowed from both our families and sold everything we owned to purchase cows, chickens, seeds, tools, timber, a tractor and fishing equipment. I even sold my wedding ring to buy a drill, since Randall told us there were diamonds to be mined in the islands. After a long and dangerous journey, we landed on Santa María Island. You cannot imagine the scene that met our eyes! There was nothing but hideous, bare, black rock, with grotesque animals, spiny cactuses, and a cold, soaking rain over everything.

The next day we went to work and began building houses, roads, and dams to store water. In the morning the rains came again, and washed everything away. When there is no rain, our stored water leaks out through the cracks in the rock. This is a land that makes people go insane. The only creatures that thrive are the cattle and chickens we brought, and the pigs and dogs that other families brought with them. The animals of the islands are monsters not fit to eat, though they seem not to mind our intrusion. How I long for all of you at home!

7. World War II Nurse

World War I had little or no impact on the Galápagos, but as World War II approached and the importance of air power grew, the islands were recognized for their strategic location. In 1938, American President Franklin Roosevelt visited the islands, which had come to be known as the Achilles' heel (or weak spot) of the Panama Canal. In 1942 the U.S. Air Force built a base on Baltra Island (located just north of Santa Cruz), both to shield the Canal and to prevent the islands from being used as a base by the Japanese. After the United States abandoned the base in 1947, its materials were recycled into homes all over the islands, and the Ecuadorian Air Force established its own headquarters on the island. Most visitors to the Galápagos now arrive on Baltra, and depart from there.

1942, letter written by an American nurse:

Never has this island heard such noise—at least not since the last time the volcano erupted! Our engineers are using tons of dynamite to blast the lava level enough for an airstrip. For two of them, in fact. Plans call for a pair of landing strips, each 1800 meters long (about a mile). There have been some accidents, of course, but nothing worse than the loss of a few fingers. I doubt if any of the hearing loss the crew has suffered will be permanent. Our corps is also building hospitals, such as the one where I will work, roads, and a water distillation plant, so we'll no longer need to fill up our living space with bottled water. I suspect that once the work is done both crew and officers will find this service boring, but perhaps by that time the war will be over. Here,

though we keep watch 24 hours a day for Japanese planes, we are so far away that we can almost forget the bloodshed.

8. Dr. Carole Baldwin

The El Niño events are an opportunity for some scientists and a setback for others, just as they were a boon to some species and a disaster for others. The rhythm of nature was thrown off course, and so was the rhythm of work at the Charles Darwin Research Station (CDRS). Life gradually goes back to normal, but after the 1982–83 El Niño there was so little rain that when fires broke out in 1985 there was not enough water to put them out. The CDRS burned that year, along with most of its contents. Fires on Isabela Island raged from February to July. In 1998–99 the Smithsonian and Imax Ltd. led expeditions to the islands to make their 3D film Galapagos. Below is a journal entry from Smithsonian marine biologist Dr. Baldwin, made during that the 1999 trip, noting the after-effects of the 1997–98 El Niño.

10 February 1999, Puerto Ayora:

A lot has changed in the six months that we've been away. After the heavy rains of El Niño, it is now about as dry as it gets. Local naturalist Godfrey Merlin told me yesterday at CDRS that this dry spell following El Niño happened in the severe 1983 episode as well. One extreme to the other—truly a tough set of circumstances for the animals and plants. So now, the finches are not nesting, the vegetation is dying (although the Acacia trees are simply brilliant with their masses of orange or yellow flowers), upwelling has apparently resumed leading to large growths of algae (we shall soon see for ourselves), and the marine iguanas are looking nice and fat!

Got a good picture yesterday of a marine iguana on the rocks outside my hotel room. I had just read that one species of finch acts as a "cleaner" of marine iguanas. During cleaning, the iguana apparently stands on all fours like a cat. When I got close enough to the iguana outside my room to get a full-frame shot, there was a finch hopping around on him and picking up things, presumably parasites. This lifestyle of "cleaners" has evolved many times it seems at least in birds and fishes. While it's fairly easy to understand how such a relationship between a finch and a vegetarian iguana formed, it's much more difficult to conceptualize the events that led to, for example, a small fish being able to swim safely inside and "clean" the mouth of a large, fish-eating fish!