

INTEREST GROUPS IN THE GALAPAGOS

Introduction to the Galapagos Islands

LOCATION

600 Miles west of Ecuador in the Pacific Ocean

SIZE

7882 sq km of land spread across 50,000 sq km of ocean

POPULATION

26,000 People



Endemic Giant
Galapagos Tortoise

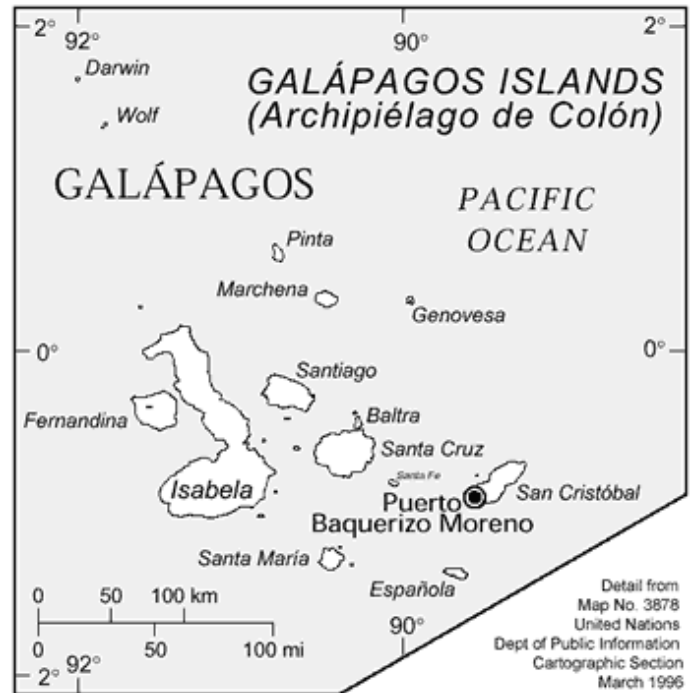
The Galapagos Islands are an archipelago of 13 major islands, six small islands, and numerous islets. The chain of islands, located along the Equator, are part of the Republic of Ecuador.

The islands began to form 5-4 million of years ago when underwater volcanoes began erupting and rising above the ocean's

surface. The islands are located at the intersection of two tectonic plates (Nazca and Cocos) and sit above a tectonic hotspot. The Galapagos Islands continue to be tectonically active to this day.

The first recorded discovery of the island came in 1535 when a Spanish ship traveling between Panama and Peru went off course. In the centuries that followed the islands became places for pirates, sealers, and whaler to shelter and acquire wood, water, and food. The giant Galapagos Tortoises, which the islands were named after, could be stored on a boat for up to a year without water. No permanent residents lived on the islands till the early 1800s. In 1835 Charles Darwin spent 5 weeks studying Galapagos, and many of his notes and collected specimens from the islands were used to formulate his theory of evolution.

Although they reside on the Equator, the islands do not resemble what one might expect to find along the tropics. Some of the islands lack vegetation altogether, rather that be due to a lack of precipitation or volcanic activity. Scientists know that every plant and animal species in the Galapagos originally came from a different location hundreds to thousands of miles away.



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Species, mainly from South America and the Caribbean, traveled by wind, air, or water currents. Once on the islands, each species adapted to the individual environments on the separate islands with little interruption due to the physical isolation of the islands and a lack of predators. The islands are treasured for the variety of **endemic species** that exist there, meaning they exist nowhere else on earth. The Galapagos are considered to be a **biodiversity hotspot** due the quantity and diversity of plant and animal life, specifically those endemic to the islands. In more recent years, invasive species such as dogs and goats, have been introduced by people.

In 1934 the Ecuadorian government set aside some territory in the islands for a wildlife preserve, but it wasn't till 1959 that the islands were declared a national park. The park covers approximately 97% of the landmass of the islands, with the remainder of the territory composed of urban areas and farms that existed before 1959. The Charles Darwin Research Center, which promotes conservation, opened in 1964 and the Galapagos National Parks Service began operating in 1968. The Galapagos Marine Resource Reserve was added to the park in 1986 and includes 133,00 sq km of water territory.



During the 1950s a little over 1,000 people lived in the Galapagos and few tourists visited the islands. Over the last 50 years those numbers have dramatically changed. Despite government restrictions, the islands now have over 26,000 residents with a population that grows at an annual rate around 10% to meet the needs of the tourism industry. Around 180,000 tourists visit the islands each year, many of which spend their time on one of the over 85 boats with sleeping accommodations.

The islands are facing numerous current issues. **Invasive species**, plants and animals not native to the islands, are a major concerns. Other issues include habitat destruction, overfishing, endangered species, and water scarcity.

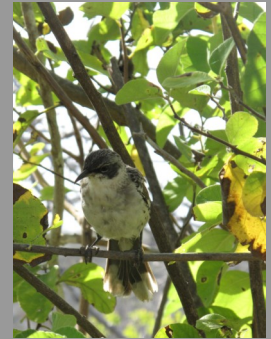
The Galapagos Islands have great significance to many people, and protecting and preserving them requires a delicate balance among numerous groups. Among the groups most involved are conservationists, the residents of the islands, tour operators, fishermen, and the government of Ecuador. In the following activity you will learn about these groups and their relationships with the islands.

EXAMPLES OF ENEMIC SPECIES

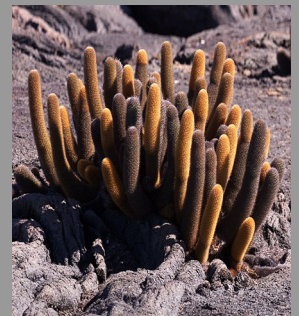
Galapagos Marine Iguana



Darwin Finch



Lava Cactus



Moorish Idol

