

## TRAVELLERS' CLUB MEETING 9<sup>TH</sup> SEPTEMBER 2007

### THE GALAPAGOS ISLANDS SPEAKER : DR. EILEEN KENNEDY

Eileen is a veteran of several GSNSW Study Tours and attracted some fellow veterans as well as new members on a sunny day despite our hopes for rain. The recent exploration of the 19 Galapagos Islands with her husband was a pilgrimage to a shrine for the Biological Sciences - Charles Darwin's visit in 1835 inspired his research and Theory of Evolution.

Her presentation comprised :-

- an introduction with facts, figures and history of this World Heritage Site;
- a cruise to several islands inhabited only by unique flora & fauna aboard the "San Juan", maximum 20 passengers with its brilliant cook/skipper and continuous south American music (human habitation prohibited on 15 islands where visitor numbers kept low via an expensive visitor fee of \$US100);
- highlights of Quito, the city from which Ecuador Airlines flights connect with the Galapagos 1000km westwards.

The volcanic geology of the islands and submerged ridges/connections with the mainland derive from collisions of the undersea Cocos and Nazca plates. The unique giant tortoise and iguana are popular icons/symbols for this place. The shape of the tortoise shell looks like a galapagos (Spanish for saddle) hence the name of the islands. Since 1536 when the islands were discovered and named by the Bishop of Panama, intermittent habitation and frequent visitation by pirates, buccaneers and whalers resulted in the near extinction of the tortoise. Tortoise meat was a delicacy to the extent that several giants would be taken on board to be slaughtered during the voyage.

The 20,000 population is confined to four islands. We saw photos of **Santa Cruz** Island including the Charles Darwin Research centre and numerous sea lions. **Floreana** Island boasts the largest population and crop farming. Before the 1950 declaration of the Galapagos National Park, the Ecuador national jail was located on Floreana which was also the site for the 19<sup>th</sup> century whalers' post office/box (look through for anything addressed to your crew members and deposit mail for other whalers to collect when they sail in).

Now began our treat of flora and fauna photos with a focus on those unique to the islands, accompanied by comments with a biological slant. We started with the finches – different beaks on each island! Sally Lightfoot crabs have camouflaged babies – black like the rock. Sea lions cuddling, lots of pelicans, beautiful flora including Darwin's Poppy and Yellow Parkinsonia also aroused our interest.

Next we visited **Espanola** Island with its 20m high blowhole, mocking birds, frigate birds and booby birds. There are three types of boobies – we were shown mating dances, chicks with a special posture to conserve energy whilst waiting for food/parents. Only chicks who stay in the nest can avoid raiding iguanas who target the chicks forced to stay outside because they have grown too large to squeeze in with their siblings. (Hey you parents, how about building bigger nests?) The unique Waved Albatross breeds only on Espanola. The Marine

Iguana, which spends part of its day in water (diving for seaweed) and changes color (black, teal, red) at different stages, is here. It is the only sea going lizard in the world.

Onwards to **Santa Fe** Island with its unique species of vegetarian land iguana – colored yellow with a diet of prickly pear and flowers. Understandably prickly pear is also protected here. Some good shots of Darwin finches and Galapagos Doves came from Santa Fe.

**North & South Plaza** Islands have different species of land iguanas. It was explained that in hard times there is interbreeding between land and marine iguanas but the offspring are sterile. Other photos here were of oyster catchers, luxury boats and sea lions.

**Isabella** Island photos focused on recent lava flows featuring colonizing pioneer plants.

**North Seymour** Island is a favourite breeding ground for Frigate Birds who can't swim but fly over water and capture surface fish with their hooked beak as well as pirating food from other birds. We were fascinated to see and hear about the male frigates with huge distended red throats to attract females at breeding time.

Quito is the capital of Ecuador which first proclaimed independence from Spain in 1809 and finally achieved it with the help of Simon Bolivar in 1822 and laid claim to the Galapagos Islands in 1830. The highlights selected by Eileen included 16<sup>th</sup> Century churches, the main square, a statue of the Virgin on the highest point in the city. The famous Ottovalo town market yielded photos of marzipan, dolls, toys and “gorgeous women in traditional dress”! Of particular interest was a group of statues of the people who worked out where exactly was the equator, a church and monument located on the equator and the information that a popular marriage event was the bride standing in the northern hemisphere and the groom in the southern hemisphere as they took their vows.

It was so refreshing to listen and see the Biologist's slant on the extraordinary Galapagos where animals, birds and plants are properly protected from human interference. Sincere thanks to you Eileen!