

Experts Alarmed Over Recent Discovery Near The Galápagos Islands
Mathew Cohen - The Night Daily



KOREA NOW / YouTube

Almost 600 miles off the coast of Ecuador lies the Galapagos Islands. The islands are invaluable due to their diverse range of plant and wildlife species, many of which can't be found anywhere else on the planet.

But one day in the middle of 2020, the UNESCO World Heritage Site was rapidly approached by a barrage of foreign and very unwelcome ships that had the potential to forever damage the island's already fragile ecosystem.

Making headlines



Photo by Paul Marotta/Getty Images

Lenín Moreno, the President of Ecuador, took to Twitter in July of 2020 to post a video about the Galapagos Islands. He stated that the site is “one of the richest

fishing areas and a seedbed of life for the entire planet.” But what prompted the president to create awareness about the nature site?

On high alert



Photo by Tim Graham / Getty Images

The president's alarm traced back to suspicious activities picked up by the Ecuadorian navy that occurred near the site. Unfortunately, the precious group of islands has seen its fair share of danger over the years, with 2017 marking the most recent emergency.

The invasion



South China Morning Post / YouTube

On August 13, 2017, the Ecuadorian navy discovered an unidentified ship crossed into the protected waters of the Galapagos Islands. Not only was this ship entering illegally into the world heritage site's proximity, but it was unclear what kind of cargo this enormous vessel had onboard. Both the Ecuadorian government and conservation organizations knew that they had to act fast.

The identity of those onboard



Parque Nacional Galápagos / YouTube

After the Ecuadorian navy apprehended the vessel, it was identified as the Fu Yuan Yu Leng 999. The ship, manned by Chinese nationals, carried over 300 tons of fish in its freezers. Soon enough, it was clear that illegally crossing into the waters of the Galapagos was just one of several crimes they'd committed.

Caught in the act



Parque Nacional Galápagos / YouTube

Of all the marine life stored onboard, a large proportion were endangered species, including illegal hammerheads and threatened silky sharks. While it was unlikely that the crew members of the ship were the fisherman responsible, as they found no fishing gear onboard, they still faced severe punishment for aiding in the poaching.

Justice is served



Parque Nacional Galápagos / YouTube

The crimes of the Fu Yuan Yu Leng 999 were no small matter. Not only did the Ecuadorian government hand down a \$5.9 million fine to the owner of the vessel, but they also sentenced the captain to four years in prison, along with several other crew members. Considering that the vessel was part of a fleet consisting of hundreds of ships, the danger was far from over.

One key mistake



Photo by Carlos Arias/Agencia Press South / Getty Images

But how did the Ecuadorian navy even notice the Fu Yuan Yu Leng 999? Well, they caught on to its presence by detecting the signal from its Automatic Identification System (AIS). While many ships turn their AIS off to avoid detection, no one knows why this vessel left its AIS on. Nevertheless, as a safety measure, the Ecuadorian navy decided to carry out further reconnaissance to see if there were any more threats.

There were many more



Parque Nacional Galápagos / YouTube

During its aerial reconnaissance mission, the navy astonishingly uncovered more than 100 additional vessels belonging to the ship in question. While the wildlife on the Galapagos Islands remained untouched, discovering so much suspicious activity nearby convinced the navy to remain on high alert. Low and behold, remaining vigilant proved to be the right move.

A new threat emerges



Photo by Paul Marotta/Getty Images

Fast forward to 2020, and one can understand the Ecuadorian president's concern for protecting the UNESCO world heritage site. Subsequently, the Ecuadorian navy sounded the alarm over another critical threat facing the Galapagos Islands.

The panic begins



KOREA NOW / YouTube

In what seemed like a flashback, the Ecuadorian navy identified a fleet of approximately 260 ships in international waters, wading increasingly closer to the 188-mile wide exclusive economic zone (EEZ) around the Galapagos Islands. This time, the public outcry was tenfold.

A panicked response



worldwaterweek / Wikimedia Commons | CC BY 2.0 | CC BY 2.0

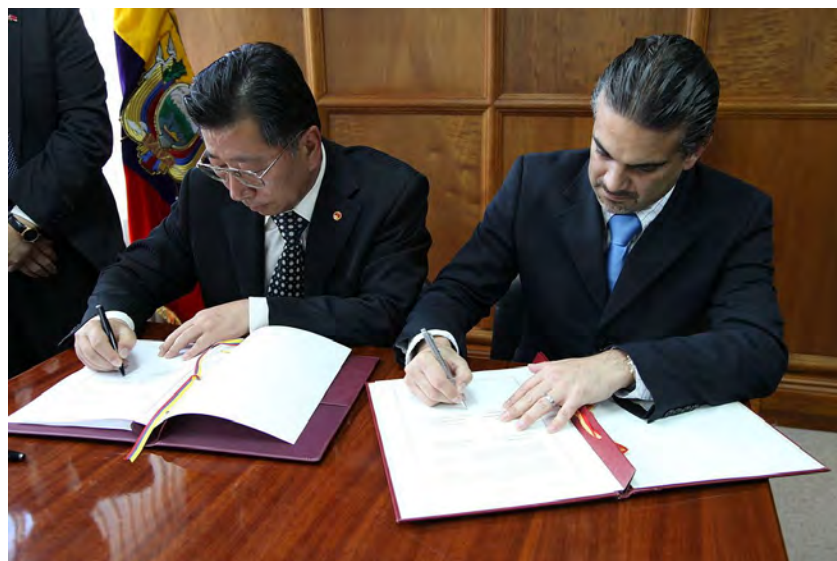
Immediately after the fleet's discovery, former Ecuadorian environment minister Yolanda Kakabadse expressed dire concern over the situation to the international press. "This fleet's size and aggressiveness against marine species is a big threat to the balance of species in the Galápagos," she declared in an interview with The Guardian. Ecuador didn't take this threat sitting down.

Planning a response



Photo by Chris J Ratcliffe/Getty Images for Lumix

Kakabadse, together with the ex-mayor of Quito Roque Sevilla, was put in charge of developing a "protection strategy" for the islands. Immediately, they set out to begin diplomatic efforts to pressurize the Chinese-flagged ships into withdrawing from the area. Soon enough, Sevilla revealed that his team was looking to enforce international agreements aimed at protecting the islands' migratory species. On the brink of an international incident



Cancillería Ecuador / Wikimedia Commons | CC BY-SA 2.0

According to the Chinese ambassador to Ecuador, the fishing vessels followed international fishing regulations strictly and didn't commit any illegal activities. What's more, the Ecuadorian government announced that the fleet hadn't entered its waters. What they did not realize, however, is that technology would soon debunk this claim.

Deception at its finest



USA Military / YouTube

Contrary to the aforementioned claim, data analytics company HawkEye 360 discovered the Chinese fishing fleet had indeed crossed into Ecuadorian territory — they'd only turned off their AIS systems to remain undetected. The fleet's failure to continuously transmit AIS signals within Ecuadorian waters violated the law.

Escalating the situation



U.S. Navy / Wikimedia Commons | {{PD-US}}

Despite the lack of proof of illegal fishing, the fleet's invasive behavior provided enough information for the Ecuadorian navy to monitor vessels by air and sea. After all, Hawkeye 360 explained that while there are legitimate reasons for AIS signals to get lost, there were over 43 occasions on which the ships went dark. Surely, that was more than a coincidence.

Approaching the mainland



Juan Ramirez/Agencia Press South / Getty Images

If you thought that the involvement of the Ecuadorian navy would be enough to dissuade the ships from hovering around the Galapagos Islands, you'd be wrong. Unbelievably, 14 of the vessels made their way inside the Ecuadorian EEZ during the six-week period from mid-July until August, and they weren't finished yet.

Ecuador's response



Google Maps / YouTube

Immediately, Kakabadse's team moved forward with a motion to extend the EEZ of the Galapagos Islands to a 350-mile circumference. In essence, they closed off the corridor of international waters wedged between the islands and the Ecuadorian mainland. Still, this response didn't solve the issue of how to handle vessels already within the region.

Taking action against the invaders



Ambiente & Medio / YouTube

Milko Schwartzman, a marine conservation specialist with the Argentine organization Circle of Environmental Policies, stepped up to help with the Ecuadorian mission. He sprung into action, compiling a list of 303 ships in the fleet. Then, he uncovered illegal activities committed by at least 139 of them. Still, they continued their suspicious movements.

Moving on



WION / YouTube

By that stage, the fleet was comprised of more than 400 ships. Though ultimately, the majority of the ships left the waters of the Galapagos Islands and headed south. While the UNESCO site was no longer in danger, these ships soon caused concern for fellow South American nations Peru and Chile.

It's Chile's problem now



Channel 4 News / YouTube

With the fleet hovering close to the Chilean coastline, the navy sprang into action by conducting an extensive reconnaissance mission. When all was said and done, they determined eleven ships had infiltrated Chile's EEZ. While they showed no signs of illegal fishing, the ships in question were looking at dire consequences.

The bigger picture



Free High-Quality Documentaries / YouTube

Some might argue that the fleet didn't actually commit a crime, but their presence still put many of the endangered species of the Galapagos Islands in danger. Continuing their voyage of controversy, upon arriving in Peru, the fishing vessels troubled Peruvian fishermen, who had concerns about overfishing the local squid and depleting their livelihood. Clearly, future preventative measures were necessary.

An international commitment



Photo By Getty Images

To combat illegal fishing and conserve their already endangered ecosystems, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, and Peru issued a joint statement committing to working together to curb the problems in the region. With so many precious species already extinct, we can't afford to waste time when it comes to protecting others at risk, and other nations are just as dedicated to these efforts.