

# Keeping 'green' in the Galapagos

By **MELODY WREN**  
Special to *The CJN*

It took some time to find biodegradable sunscreen in my hometown, but I didn't want to be responsible for contributing to the erosion of the coral reefs in the Galapagos Islands.

That was one small starting step on a trip during which conservation was a daily issue. On our brief flight from Guayaquil, Ecuador, to San Cristobal Island with AeroGal airline, flight attendants sprayed the overhead storage bins and along the length of the floor edges to prevent the invasion of unwanted pests to the islands.

On our arrival, the briefing to our small group included instructions to take "short, marine-type showers" to conserve water. After hours spent in the sun hiking and snorkelling in saltwater, it was difficult to comply, but the importance of these efforts was emphasized continuously and rightly so.

The conservation efforts in the Galapagos Islands are not only mandatory, but entirely transparent. The lengths taken to keep the islands pristine are imperative and impressive. Without stringent regulations in place, it wouldn't take long for the coral reefs to erode, the wildlife and sea life to be compromised and tourism to plummet.

It is precisely the unspoiled environment of each island and the proximity to the wildlife totally unfazed by humans hovering nearby that attracts tourists. Only a small number of the islands can be seen by tourists, the rest remain largely untouched.

Approximately 150,000 people visit the islands per year, but even the tourist traffic is limited as timing strategies that

would shame London traffic cops are used. We rarely came across other tourist groups on the islands we visited and, when we did, their route was completely opposite to ours, obviously synchronized by our guides.

When we think of conservation in the Galapagos, we think of marine conservation, but other conservation measures began in 1998, when the population of the islands grew because people from the mainland were moving there. Now, to be able to move to the islands, a person has to be born there or marry a local.

There are only four inhabited islands, and according to our guide, Karina Lopez, the locals feel the islands are being overvisited. They also believe that if their products were better managed, not as many cargo ships would be required. As the local population depends on imported food transported by ship, often under precarious conditions, health risks increase with the possibility of the introduction of invasive species to the islands.

The changes made in the last 10 years are numerous, and now that immigration is limited and waste is being dealt with more stringently, conservation has been made the top priority. According to Lopez, it took a long time for the Galapagos National Park to realize that work is needed most where humans are living, not just in the national park, "because where humans are, there is waste to deal with."

The expedition yacht we travelled on in the Galapagos, a 67-foot boat named Eric, is owned by Ecoventura, a private company that uses alternative energies for its operations. Eric is the first hybrid-energy vessel in the Galapagos. It boasts



**Eric, this 67-foot boat, boasts 40 solar panels and two wind turbines.**

*[Melody Wren photo]*

40 solar panels and two wind turbines, and produces enough power to replace approximately 18 per cent of the energy previously produced by two diesel generators. Less diesel fuel is needed as a result, and any used diesel fuel is recycled on the mainland.

The company is looking for more of this "greening" to take place within the cruise industry. "We always have sun and wind so we'll always have energy for the solar panels," Captain Peter Vallejo said.

The crew has been well trained in waste management and energy conser-

vation, and participates in weekly energy training drills.

The yacht accommodates 20 guests and has 10 fully air-conditioned outside staterooms with private bathrooms. The dining room features Ecuadorian and international cuisine. Much of the food eaten onboard is locally sourced, including fruits and vegetables from San Cristobal, cheese from Santa Cruz and fresh fish. Staples and other groceries are purchased on the mainland.

"A cruise actually leaves a smaller ecological footprint because you are not contributing to the construction of hotels, bars, roads and restaurants on these fragile islands," Santiago Dunn, the president of Ecoventura said. "The United Nations and the government of Ecuador have both recognized that growing land-based tourism is a threat to the islands and their delicate ecosystems."

Local residents are aware of the history of the islands and the situation today, and how much work there is still to be done.

Galapagos people have always worked the land and fished the sea. Conventional skills are being replaced by new ones: hands that used to fish for a living now welcome tourists from all over the world.

*Wren's trip was sponsored by Ecoventura. www.ecoventura.com*

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