Galápagos Islands: Lessons in Island Living

Last week, my wife Linda and I had the opportunity to visit the Galápagos Islands. It was a fascinating experience. While we enjoyed a close-up view of a wide variety of plant and animal life found only on those remote islands, we also came away with some valuable lessons about what happens when man and nature compete for habitat on dots of land in the middle of the ocean.

The Galápagos are an archipelago of 13 volcanic islands, plus a collection of islets and rocks, which lie right on the equator about 600 miles west of Ecuador, South America. Just like the Hawaiian Islands, the Galápagos are still being formed by a volcanic hot spot at the western end of the island chain. Visible volcanic activity is common, and an eruption was going on while we were there, producing a red glow on the horizon and filling the air with dense haze that nearly blotted out the late afternoon sun.

A variety of plants and animals have found their way to the Galápagos Islands over the past several million years, and, as noted by the great English naturalist Charles Darwin, many species gradually evolved in form and function until they became completely distinct from their cousins on the South American mainland. The classic example is the Galápagos giant tortoise, which is not found anywhere else on earth. Even within the Galápagos, the tortoise species vary from island to island.

Other notable examples of evolution can be seen in birds, penguins, sea lions, and iguanas, as well as in many plants.

Man's first recorded visit to the islands occurred in 1535, when a ship carrying the Bishop of Panama to Peru, recently conquered by Spain, was becalmed and carried by ocean currents into the Galápagos. Following that, English pirates used the islands as a base from which to raid Spanish galleons shipping Inca gold and silver from Peru back to the home country. People tried to settle the islands, fish, and raise crops, but none were really successful until 1935, when five brothers, Carl, Gus, Heinrich, Johannes, and Kurt Angermeyer, set sail from Hamburg, Germany, to escape conscription into the Nazi army. Four ended up in the Galápagos and led a Robinson Crusoe-like existence all the way through World War II and beyond.

During World War II, the U.S. government leased land in the Galápagos from Ecuador and established a military camp with a landing strip on desolate Baltra Island as an outpost to protect the Panama Canal. When the camp was finally closed, the barracks were given to local citizens who disassembled them and rebuilt them on nearby Santa Cruz Island.

Over the years, pirates, fishermen, farmers, and visitors have, intentionally or not, introduced outside species into the Galápagos Islands. These pigs, dogs, rats, mice, and cats had no natural enemies and proliferated. They attacked native species, devastating the foliage and threatening the survival of the tortoise, turtle, iguana, and native bird populations. Serious eradication programs have reduced the numbers of introduced animals significantly, but the danger remains.

Today's biggest threat comes from people. In 1959, when the Ecuadorian government designated 97.5 percent of the land area a national park, there were only 1,000 to 2,000 residents in the islands. Today, that number has jumped to around 30,000 legal and an unknown number of undocumented illegal residents. Most live in or around the town of Puerto Ayora on Santa Cruz Island, and many are involved in fishing or serving the roughly
100,000 tourists who visit each year.

On arrival, most visitors are immediately transferred to one of the approximately 85 cruise boats of all shapes and sizes which handle 15 to 90 passengers each. The cruise boats go to assigned anchorages around the island chain and use Zodiacs to take their passengers ashore, where they can get remarkably close to the fascinating creatures that abound on the beaches and shorelines.

The Galápagos Islands face many challenges today. Given the limits of the environment and available land and water, they may be approaching maximum capacity for residents and visitors. Fishing, legal and illegal, may also be near sustainable limits. On the other side of the coin, local residents are looking for job opportunities, better education for their children, and some way of preserving their unique lifestyle. This includes Daniel Fitter, the grandson of Johannes Angermeyer, a skilled photographer and dedicated naturalist, whom we had the pleasure of meeting while we were in the Galápagos.

It all sounds very familiar.

When you think about it for a moment, Outrigger/OHANA Hotels & Resorts is a company that specializes in providing the finest in hospitality services in a number of island chains across the Pacific Ocean. Our locations in the Hawaiian Islands, Society Islands, Mariana Islands, Fijian Islands, the islands of New Zealand, and soon on the island of Bali in Indonesia, all have a great deal in common with the Galápagos Islands.

• The islands are all volcanic, many with active volcanoes.
• The environment is fragile.
• Many, if not all, of these islands have unique species of flora and fauna not found elsewhere.
• The introduction of human habitation and non-native plant or animal life can have severe, if not fatal, impact on the indigenous species, environment, and even geography of these fragile islands.

The environment, local plant, and animal species, job opportunities for residents, safe and prosperous communities, and reasonable returns on investment all compete for priority. As innkeepers in these areas, we must constantly strive to balance these many factors.

As one of the last island chains to be brought into the modern world, the Galápagos Islands are really struggling with these issues.

Puerto Ayora has one deluxe hotel, the Royal Palm, with 17 suites, villas, and studios. The rest of its hotels might rate one or two stars, leaving the market wide open for some modern three- and four-star properties.

Will there be an Outrigger or OHANA Galápagos hotel in the near future? I doubt it.

But somebody will build some mid-market hotels in Puerto Ayora in the foreseeable future. When that day comes, for everyone’s sake, I hope the developers, the hotel operators, and the community can work together to strike a reasonable balance between all the competing demands and preserve this unique archipelago for people to marvel at for many generations to come.