

# EYEWITNESS

**A dramatic confrontation** between conservationists and fishing interests in one of the world's most sensitive environments ended last month. The Ecuadorian government effectively lifted an increased annual catch of lobsters from the marine nature reserve around the Galapagos Islands for the lives of some of the islands' unique giant tortoises. The tortoises were being held hostage by lobster fishermen, who also vandalised an outpost of the Charles Darwin Research Institute on the island of Isabela.

Conservationists say intensive fishing could jeopardise the reserve, which was enshrined in Ecuadorian law in 1998.

However, researchers at Portsmouth University's Centre for the Economics and Management of Aquatic Resources believe commercial and environmental interests are not always in conflict. The centre's research in the Turks and Caicos Islands, funded by the Department for International Development, indicates marine parks and fishing zones can co-exist with few problems. "By creating marine protected areas, fish populations in fishing

zones can benefit (their nursery areas and brood stocks are protected)," said Arthur Neiland, the project's leader. "It is quite feasible that the increase in lobster catch will have no impact on the sustainability of the wider stock but, without data, this is impossible to verify."

Their research suggests that it is possible to reconcile the potentially conflicting interests. "A platform for discussion and decision-making is needed so that all stakeholders on the islands are able to arrive at a mutually satisfactory decision based on accurate stock assessment data and biological evidence," project officer Elizabeth Bennett said.

She added: "The Galapagos is suffering from a classic case of trying to maintain the golden goose, while recognising that tourism is a vital revenue earner and that there is a population on the islands that needs to earn a living through fishing. It is perhaps the role of the international community to initiate a real and participatory process between the islands' stakeholders and the state to find a workable solution."

**David Jobbins**

## GIANT TORTOISE KIDNAP TRIGGERS GALAPAGOS CONSERVATION SCARE

**Turks and Caicos:** Delicate ecological balance of the islands and demands of fishing, conservation and tourism industries create conflict. Low-level and low-impact conflict is endemic and formal conflict management institutions are absent but the small population means problems are resolved quickly and easily.

**Ecuador:** Traditional village chief structure means there is a well-established and stable local-level conflict management structure while the government has set up some important national initiatives to resolve conflicts.

**Bangladesh:** Island fisheries affected by increasing numbers of fishermen and declining catches. Weak enforcement and corruption prevents local needs from being heard by a wider audience. Lack of local level participation in decision-making processes is by far the most important issue.

Conservationists called on **Enrique Noboa** **Bojórquez**, Ecuador's president, to declare a state of emergency and enforce the 1988 special law designed to protect the **Galapagos Islands** and establish precautionary principle for exploitation.

The number of fishermen taking sea cucumbers from the Galapagos increased by 74% between 1999 and 2000, from 795 in 222 boats to 1,387 (417 boats), but the daily catch per diver fell by 41%. Fishermen seeking spiny lobster increased by 89% over the same period, from 509 to 938, catching the same tonnage (54 tons) in two months rather than four.

Fishermen held giant tortoises for which the islands are famous and attacked tourists in their demands for an extension of the fishing season and a bigger quota.