

## | CHANGING PLANET



## Science for Conservation at the Edge of an Erupting Volcano

In [Changing Planet](#) Tags [Julio Ignacio Rodríguez Stimson](#), [Sciencetelling Stories](#) September 19, 2017 [0 Comments](#)



[Julio Ignacio Rodríguez Stimson](#)

I had embarked on the *Queen Mabel* ship with the task of filming and photographing the “penguin and cormorant monitoring trip” co-organized by the Charles Darwin Foundation (CDF) and the Galapagos National Park Directorate (GNPD). Alongside an enthusiastic crew of scientists, conservationists, research assistants and park rangers, my role was to raise awareness about the importance of studying two endemic flightless birds: the Galapagos penguin and the flightless cormorant. Little did I know that the next week would be one of the most thrilling experiences of my life.



| ONE OF MANY BEAUTIFUL SUNSETS IN GALAPAGOS. PHOTO: JULIO RODRÍGUEZ

The trip left me with lasting images: frigate birds circling our ship, pelicans squawking loudly from the mangroves, blue-footed boobies plummeting into the ocean while fishing, sea lions chasing us by jumping over the waves, marine turtles swimming past sharks and spotted eagle rays, humpback whales leaping out of the water, and the ship swaying as it traveled to Isabela and Fernandina islands.



A PELICAN FLYING NEAR OUR SHIP. PHOTO: JULIO RODRÍGUEZ

For the first four days I enjoyed the routine of hopping into zodiacs to film the team conducting animal censuses and monitoring Galapagos penguins and flightless cormorants to gather vital data about their health and population size, as part of a project led by Dr. Gustavo Jiménez-Uzcátegui. During a film interview, he summed up his scientific work quite powerfully: “This project is important because without it we can’t know what’s going on with these two species (penguins and flightless cormorants). We need to know if their populations are diminishing or if they have great threats that may increase the probability of them going extinct.” After the scientific monitoring, the penguins were so cute and photogenic as they waddled about before disappearing into the waves. During the trip, the GNPD staff carried out actions to control the population of rats and cats that are killing and displacing endemic species.



THE CHARISMATIC AND ENDANGERED GALAPAGOS PENGUIN. PHOTO: JULIO RODRÍGUEZ

On the fifth day we visited a meteorological base on Isabela Island called “Caseta Bolivar,” which is famous for being the westernmost house on Ecuadorian territory. As I took photos and videos of the work, Daniel Unda suddenly pointed at a cloud over Fernandina Island and said “Is that a volcanic eruption?” A huge whitish plume could barely be seen behind the other clouds, but was unmistakably rising in the form of a mushroom.



A FLIGHTLESS CORMORANT UNDISTURBED BY THE VOLCANIC ERUPTION. PHOTO:  
JULIO RODRÍGUEZ

Contrary to the two cruise ships in the vicinity which moved away from Fernandina volcano, our tiny little boat sped towards it. Nothing seems to stop a determined scientist from collecting data. After weighing, taking the pulse and gathering other data from over ten flightless cormorants, we all stood and stared at the gleaming orange reflection of magma on the plume at dusk.



FERNANDINA VOLCANO AT DUSK. PHOTO: JULIO RODRÍGUEZ



On the last day of the trip, which happened to be my birthday, we headed home to Puerto Ayora. I sat at the prow of the ship and stared at the waves, reflecting on the beauty of our natural world. At night, the crew made sure to push my face into a chocolate cake, as per the Ecuadorian tradition.



THE ECUADORIAN TRADITION OF 'BITING THE CAKE'. PHOTO: JOHANNES RAMÍREZ

Back on land, I thought the adventure had come to an end. But that night my neighbors suddenly started yelling "tsunami alert" and throughout the wee hours of the morning people hopped into pickup trucks, sped by on motorcycles or even walked all the way into the highlands. The earthquake in Mexico was sending us waves. Fortunately, we were soon cleared to head home, but in Mexico the situation was very different.

The world is interconnected and if we care about our fellow human beings and other living creatures we must act together to preserve our planet. It is for that reason that I am proud to be working for the Charles Darwin Foundation, an organization solely dependent on donations and whose passionate team works tirelessly to conduct science that will improve the management and conservation of the islands.



THE PENGUIN/CORMORANT EXPEDITION TEAM. PHOTO: JOHANNES RAMÍREZ



*Julio Ignacio Rodríguez Stimson is a tri-national citizen of Ecuador, Spain and the USA who holds a B.A. in History and a MSc. in Social and Cultural Anthropology. Over the last few years he has made films for organizations in India and Greece, interned at the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and worked as a video chronicler aboard the National Geographic Islander in Galapagos. He is very passionate about environmental conservation and particularly the role of indigenous peoples in forest conservation, after having lived with the Cofán people of*

*the Ecuadorian Amazon rainforest. Currently, he is working as an Environmental Communicator for the Charles Darwin Foundation.*

For more information about our work visit: [www.darwinfoundation.org](http://www.darwinfoundation.org)

and Like us on Facebook: [www.facebook.com/darwinfoundation](https://www.facebook.com/darwinfoundation)