

"The Many Faces of Marine Conservation - from a Remote Colombian island to a Roman Boardroom in Three Days"

by John Joaquín Bohórquez

Friday

It was twilight in the early morning when I emerged from the jungle and stepped onto the black gravel beach. The sun was rising somewhere to the east over the mainland, but the low clouds obscured it and the sky was a deep blue on all sides. I walked to the water's edge where the sound of the waves jostling the pebbles began to mix with the falling of fat rain drops that had already soaked my shirt.

There was a small crowd on the beach. Half a mix of staff and other visitors leaving the island with me, the other half the remaining staff and a couple guards ready to see us off. I was late, but not so much that my arrival attracted anyone's attention.

I patted my left leg...*Double check that pocket is closed, Johnny.* I had six hundred thousand pesos rolled up inside a ziplock bag to deliver to a man I owed in Guapi. I scrolled down the rest of my mental checklist... Laptop in protective case and waterproof bag, *check.* Tape recorder, phone, notebooks, passports, wallet and cash all in waterproof bags, *check.* Dry clothes in a plastic shopping bag to change into at the airport, *priceless.*

Less than three days later, I'd be in a suit and tie checking in with security at a UN facility in Rome to report on a month-long research trip on marine protected areas in Colombia. Right now I was a disheveled grad student with a rucksack full of mildewed clothes concerned more about his laptop's comfort than his own. It was going to be a wet and bumpy ride, the first stage of a long journey to the east.

The park manager approached me on the beach. "Good-bye, John."

"Good-bye Jefe," I said. "And also thank you, to you and your team, for taking me with you last night. It was magical for someone like me. I will never forget it."

"It always is," she said with a smile. We hugged, and then I waded into the sea to board the boat.

It was sunny when I arrived two days prior. I landed in Guapi early Wednesday morning, a small town nestled in Colombia's vast mangrove forests that can only be reached by plane or boat. I found a moto-taxi outside the airport to take me to the town's riverside where I'd look for a man named Juangi, short for Juan Guillermo, who would take me to the island. "Make sure you tell people you're with us," la Jefe told me on the phone the day before, "that they know that I'm

expecting you and that Juangi will be taking you to see me.” I had to search more than I wanted, but I found Juangi, and we departed with his son and a load of cargo for the research station.

The island was faintly visible as we exited the mangroves on the mainland, its mountain rising out of the horizon like the arched back of a diving whale twenty miles out to sea. The skies were clear and the seas became rougher as the water turned from brown to blue. I spoke with Juangi’s son while his father captained, learning as much as I could about the local community and how it was interconnected with the marine park. Local insight was crucial to my work. I was all business for now, the fair weather and beautiful scenery could wait. Not even the flying fish skipping like stones around the boat could distract me.

We arrived to the island two hours later. The forest was emerald green under the sun as we approached, and out of it walked two guards with olive green uniforms to meet us. My name was on a list la Jefe had given them earlier in the morning.

I went to the security hut to register. “Welcome to paradise,” I heard behind me as I was signing my name. I turned and saw a woman, presumably on vacation, strolling by in a sundress and a wide-brimmed hat. And there certainly was something paradise-like about it, the surrealness of watching her drift along in this primordial landscape like it was a Malibu beach club.

“Thank you,” I responded politely. But I also wondered if she was being ironic. I’d only been on the island for a few minutes but was well aware of its nickname...“El Infierno Verde”...The Green Hell.

Isla Gorgona is a densely forested island off of Colombia’s Pacific coast that once operated as a maximum-security prison. It earned its nickname during that time, and it was often said that if you tried to escape and the snakes did not get you (the inspiration for the name “Gorgona”, and demise of a hundred Spanish sailors once shipwrecked on the island), you had to contend with the sharks that patrolled the waters around it. Conservationists would be pleased to know that the snakes and sharks were faring well from what I could tell. But the “epoca de penal” ended over thirty years before and now the island operated as part eco-resort, part research center, and part navy base, all within the territory of the national parks department that was responsible for protecting the biodiversity on Gorgona and the sea around it.

I arranged a series of meetings and interviews with park officials stationed on the island. I would convert their opinions and perspectives into data, and also collect copies of relevant documents from their files that they would be willing to share with me. Prep for meetings, conduct meetings, debrief and organize notes. That was the cycle I would repeatedly follow for the next two days, sweat pouring down my face and drenching my clothes as I stared at my laptop for hours on end hunched over in my bunk. There were few spare moments, and I hoped to find at least an hour to ‘turn off’ from work-mode and truly appreciate my surroundings in this place I had traveled so far to get to. Then, at the end of my final interview on the second day, I was invited to accompany the staff on a sea-turtle tagging mission. Green sea turtles specifically, a kind I had never seen before.

“Meet us at the beach at 7 pm,” Fernando, the lead biologist, told me. “Don’t be late.”

I had a decent amount of experience doing field work like this under my belt. I went out a dozen or so times a year to survey marine environments for an ecological restoration project my lab was conducting back in the states, and occasionally got one-off opportunities for other activities in the field (I can say I tagged a great white shark once, but he was only a baby). Those experiences were what I would fall back on at dinner parties when people asked about working in marine science and conservation, it’s the image we’ve all come to expect from this line of work, myself included once upon a time.

While I wish I could say that most of my time was spent on the ocean or traveling to far flung corners of the world, ninety percent of my work is done beneath a desk lamp in front of my computer in New York City. But I am by no means a rare case. I think many people would be disappointed to learn how much time many ocean scientists and conservationists spend in offices analyzing data and writing papers instead of exploring the seas. Technology is slowly pulling us away from it, which isn’t such a bad thing for many reasons, but I had to maintain a connection somehow, if at the least to keep me inspired to get to work every morning. For me that connection was reinforced by experiences like what I was about to undergo on Gorgona.

Night had fully set in as I walked towards the beach, my flashlight pointed to the ground to watch for snakes on the forest floor. There was a boat beached at the waterline and shadows moving around it in the dim light. Fernando and la Jefe were there, the others I recognized but did not yet know. They all spoke with hushed voices and had a look in their eyes that I was well familiar with ...*time to get down to business.*

“Alright, you ready?” Fernando said. “We only have the boat for forty-five minutes, we need five turtles, so we need to move quickly.”

“Ok,” I said, “I’ll stand to the side and let you do your work.” I had enough experience to know that staying out of the way was sometimes the best way to help. “But if you need me for anything just ask and I’ll jump in.” He nodded back.

There were 7 of us total, we lined up on either side of the boat, pushed it into the water until it floated freely, then pulled ourselves in and the captain started the engine.

We travelled with no lights so as not to awaken or scare any unsuspecting juvenile turtles sleeping on the reef. But the full moon had now risen above the storm clouds east over the mainland illuminating the seas to my left and the island to my right. It was bright enough that I could make out the mountain’s peak, and even follow the swaying of the palm trees along the beach in what was left of the afternoon breeze. But it was still night, and my other senses heightened in response to the limited visibility. The rough ride the previous morning was like a bumper-car circuit, but the seas had since mellowed into soft rolling swells and now it was smooth like a merry-go-round. The ocean’s scent was stronger than during the day, and I felt the breeze of the nighttime air cover

me like a warm blanket, free from the singeing equatorial sun. I hoped we could go on forever like that through the full-moon light.

The engines whirred to a stop...*Go time.*

Everyone assumed their positions, pulling out data sheets, pencils, stopwatches. The wrangling team donned their snorkel gear and flashlights. One by one they rolled backwards into the water, turned on their lights, and started swimming. Myself and two others stayed behind on the boat and kept an eye on them. We followed their lights, zigzagging in coordinated fashion beneath the surface like a glowing pod of dolphins as they scanned the reef.

After a few minutes I started talking with the two other men onboard, Yerry and Davinson. Both were volunteers, born and raised in Guapi, and were invited to Gorgona by the parks department to help with the sea turtle tagging around the nights of the full moon.

We talked about the turtles. What Yerry and Davinson lacked in a formal scientific degree they made up for through many years of experience helping the research efforts on Gorgona. Ecosystems can be extraordinarily nuanced on a local level, and I'd wager most accredited sea turtle experts could learn something from these two should they ever venture to that region. Never underestimate the value of experienced volunteers for conservation field work, Gorgona's success as the longest running sea turtle monitoring program in the country owed a lot of credit to people like Yerry and Davinson. And in about thirty seconds, they were going to prove their skill at handling wildlife.

I heard splashing ahead of us, and a flashlight waving in the air a hundred yards away from the boat.

"Tortuga!" a man cried.

"Tortuga! Vamos," said Yerry.

Davinson turned the engine on and we crept slowly to where we now saw the lights of two other swimmers next to them. The fourth swimmer was between them, white water splashing in his face as he wrestled something.

They swam towards the boat. Yerry sprung forward and reached down to take it from the swimmer's arms. It was not huge, and Yerry was gentle, but he visibly required all of his strength to lift it. I walked forward to offer my hand, but by then it was already in the boat. A few angsty flaps of its fins, and then it was cool as a cucumber, and the swimmers were already off searching for the next one. I could barely see it in the dark, just a large shadow glazed by the moonlight, but sure enough the first green sea turtle I had ever seen was lying just a few feet from me. It was at that moment, like waking from a daydream, that I became fully present and aware of where I was and what I was doing. My desk in New York never seemed so far away, and the substance of what I had spent hours a day studying never felt so close.

But to be fully present somewhere, like I was at that moment, also means developing an awareness of less idealistic truths. All places have them. Gorgona appeared a pristine jewel of nature on the surface, but it was deeply scarred. Nearly all its forests and marine life were destroyed during its days as a prison, and some of the ecosystems on and around the island were still recovering. After the prison closed in the mid 1980's, Colombia faced perhaps the bloodiest two decades in its modern history. Coming from a Colombian family myself, I was already well versed in many of the country's tragedies. But while much of Colombia had fought to leave that history behind, it remained a very present danger across much of the Pacific region. Gorgona, though 20 miles from shore, had not been spared.

Knowing that bit of history of the local region added to my curiosity of and admiration for local volunteers like Yerry and Davinson. Their hometown of Guapi was especially impacted by violence and poverty, and they had likely faced challenges and dangers that few could possibly imagine. How did they come into this volunteer opportunity? What events in their lives steered their interest towards supporting these research efforts? These were questions I deeply wanted to ask, but refrained. It was no doubt a complex place, as I had learned from my research those two days. But now, following the snorkelers as they swam off again into the night, the darkness became an empty canvass where my imagination began to materialize those complexities before me.

The island was calm, a stark contrast from decades past. I imagined the rattling chains of thousands of men, the crashing of cell doors, and the orange glow of the red fires that fed the prison's ovens, consuming the forest around them. I envisioned the torrential rains washing the scoured landscape and carrying sediment to bury the coral reefs that ringed it.

The beach, now empty, was a much more pleasant place than it must have been in those days. I thought of the many different activities that now converged there on a daily basis, humans and animals, all for different purposes. The bathing tourists, the nesting sea turtles, the local fishermen who rested there before heading for deeper waters.

Behind me was the open ocean, quiet on a full moon night, but on darker nights the navy vessels stationed at the island might be chasing smugglers trying to scurry their cargo out from the mainland and into unpatrolled waters. I was glad it was a full moon.

I looked back towards the research station we departed from, where the tourism bungalows and navy barricades also were. What was it like, I wondered, on that night a few years before, to be awakened by the unexpected roar of boats charging towards the island? What was it like when dozens of armed men stormed the beach out of the darkness, shots firing?

Terrifying though it was, that infamous attack did not derail the important conservation work taking place on Gorgona. Some of the people who witnessed it were in the water searching for turtles at this very moment, pushing ahead with the monitoring project now over a decade in practice. Conservation is resilient, it must be to fend off the terrible threats the ocean faces every day.

One of the swimmers was waving a light again...

“Tortuga!”

By the time we met the swimmers for the second turtle, a third one was also captured. After loading these, it would not be long until a fourth and fifth were found, and we began making our way back to shore. I had a few more minutes to savor the magical atmosphere of that full moon night on the water. It passed by too soon.

We gently placed each turtle into individual pens upon our return, next to the weighing and measuring station on the beach. I really had to pee ...but I couldn't leave now, I was finally about to see what the turtles looked like under the light. Would green sea turtles be that vibrant, almost unnatural green like the colored drawings in books I read as a child? I had been thinking about those drawings since the first turtle was brought up into the boat. I held out some hope, but no, green sea turtles are usually more of a dark green to brown. But I was surprised to see that two of these turtles were black. “The black sea turtle,” Fernando told me. He noticed my confusion, “the same species but a different color morph,” he smiled, “it only exists in the eastern pacific.”

Now Fernando took over most of the work. I watched as he gently measured the specimens, spending as little time with each turtle as possible before placing a numbered tag and preparing it for release. If the team was lucky, they would find the same turtle again some years in the future and track its development through life.

I looked around and saw all the other workers and volunteers, la Jefe included, watching with the same joy and admiration as I was. Unlike me they had all participated in this work dozens of times before, yet it seemed to capture their hearts and curiosities with the same effect as seeing it for the first time. Even some of the navy sailors in their uniforms were excited to come by for a look. Through the dangers and months away from families that this conservation field work required, perhaps they relied on these moments as much as I did to inspire them to carry on with the job. It made me wonder if the sense of depravity I'd often get for being physically separated from the ocean in my day to day work was not really depravity at all, but a certain curiosity for the natural world that could never be quenched no matter how much time I spent on the water in places as special as Gorgona. Despite the contrast in our day to day lives, it seemed that all of us there on the island had this in common.

I went to find a bathroom after the fifth turtle was released, and made my way to my bunk afterwards. In a few hours, I'd be standing on the beach in the rain to leave Gorgona and begin the two-and-a-half-day journey to Rome for the UN meeting. I could not think of a more fitting experience to end my month-long research trip with. Physically, I was exhausted, but it gave me the fuel I needed.

It was two hours east from Gorgona to Guapi. I found Juangi there as soon as we arrived to town and paid him the six hundred thousand pesos I owed for the first ride out to Gorgona. Then I found a moto-taxi to take me to the airport. From the moment the puddle-jumper rose out of the Guapi airstrip, the first of four flights, I had visions of kicking my chair back and tipping my hat over my eyes like Indiana Jones, the world passing below me like a moving map as I jumped from point to point. Maybe with a glass of scotch in my hand. But there was no way. Between then and when I landed in Italy I would have to process everything I had learned and observed during my research

trip and then distill it into a thirty minute presentation. A very difficult task tucked in the back of an overcrowded 737.

Monday

The trip to Italy was a blur. I arrived in Rome late Sunday night after two and a half days of travel, my wrists and elbows aching from working on a seat-back tray table. But my presentation for the upcoming meeting was complete.

The experience of being transported from a remote field site to the highest level of global governance so quickly gave me a new understanding of the breadth and diversity of marine conservation. I had not only witnessed the contrasting settings of conservation efforts, but also embodied the different extremes that exist in this field: From analyzing activities on a hyper-local level to taking part in international discussions a continent away. The experience also gave me a deeper appreciation on both the difficulty and the importance of bringing ground level experience and perspectives into high level discussions. Like with marine ecosystems, conservation efforts are very nuanced on a local level, and we have to make sure we listen closely to the experiences of those on the front lines as we steer global conservation efforts.

But for all the juxtapositions in our relative day to day lives, I realized on Gorgona that there were two major commonalities that connect the entire field of marine conservation together. The first is a common love for all things living in the ocean, the turtles that centered our gazes as Fernando worked on them. No matter if you're a volunteer in the field or a policy expert in a major city, we all bond over the fulfillment our lives gain from helping and working with the ocean, and I know that I can count on anyone I meet in this field to share that with me.

And you have to love it, to work in this field, because to really have an impact often means having to make sacrifices. For me, it was leaving a cushy office job, and the dream of spending much more time on the ocean once I'd begin grad school. But that is not how it panned out. In fact, I hardly see the ocean any more than I did previously. And yet, I have never questioned my decision to change career paths, which I owe very much to rare special moments like my experience on Gorgona that remind me of what I'm working towards. I call back to those experiences now more than ever, as we spend months social distancing during the COVID-19 pandemic.

I count myself lucky overall, because many others have made far greater sacrifices. On the opposite extreme, conservationists in places like Gorgona often spend months at a time away from their families in order to be in the field. Some have even risked their own lives, Gorgona being only one of many examples around the world where conservationists have faced violence. Conservation and environmental protection can be dangerous work, and understanding that helps build an appreciation for the degree to which the ocean is constantly under threat, and how quickly it could crumble under the weight of human driven impacts without the efforts of the dedicated people working to protect it.

I thought of these conclusions and my recent experience as we sat down for the meeting in Rome. I looked at the many different faces encircling the boardroom table as I loaded my presentation,

whom had traveled to Italy from almost every continent in the world. It reminded me of seeing the circle of people on Gorgona surrounding Fernando as he worked on the turtles. While many of us in the meeting room were visibly jet lagged or generally tired from a full day of talks, I knew that they would be smiling the same as everyone else on Gorgona if they were there. We were all gathered in this very meeting room for the same reason, we loved the ocean and we were willing to make sacrifices to give it a better future, I was sure of that. I felt a small boost of confidence as I flipped to the first slide and began to speak.

THE END