Jarvis on Stahl and Astudillo and Jamieson and Quiroga and Delgado, 'Historical Ecology and Archaeology in the Galápagos Islands: A Legacy of Human Occupation'

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The field of environmental history is evolving, and with this evolution scholarship and research focusing on lesser-studied regions and cultures is growing. This change is necessary because we live in a global society and American or Eurocentric works must not be the only scholarship available. Peter W. Stahl, Fernando J. Astudillo, Ross W. Jamieson, Diego Quiroga, and Florencio Delgado’s new book, Historical Ecology and Archaeology in the Galápagos Islands: A Legacy of Human Occupation, adds to the field in just this way. The average reader is probably not familiar with the history of the Galápagos beyond knowledge of Charles Darwin’s adventures and the islands as an eco-tourism destination. This book provides a lengthy history of the islands’ colonization and habitation, an overview of several seasons of archaeological fieldwork, and a discussion of ecological changes. In their own words, the authors seek to “bring light to the human story of the Galápagos” and illustrate the islands as a “globalized place” (p. xii).

The past five hundred years of history in the archipelago fit into four phases. First, the period of exploitation, 1535-1832, was marked by early visitors, settlers, and sailors passing through. What we know of this period is from written sources, mostly describing the plentiful natural resources and exotic animals. From Thomás Berlanga’s accidental discovery of the islands in 1535, through subsequent visits by the Spanish, and other encounters by sailors of the many seafaring European nations, the Galápagos Islands functioned as a safe haven and provisioning site for mariners. This is when stories appear of tortoises captured and taken with ships as provisions for their voyages. Later, it was a favorite stopping point for whaling and sealing vessels, but no significant permanent population existed.

Next, between 1832 and 1959, the islands were colonized extensively, and land use was focused on subsistence farming. Settlers wanted to “tame nature” and “convert the land” (p. 129). The main undertaking during this period was that of the San Cristóbal colony and the Hacienda El Progresso, run by Manuel Cobos. This is a period of dramatic transformation of the landscape and the introduction of many new plants and livestock as well as a brutal regime with Cobos’s harsh rule over his workers. Much of the archaeological work has been done on this settlement.
The third period (1959-98) was when wilderness conservation was prioritized. The eco-tourism industry grew during this time and the islands got their reputation as a “pristine ecosystem” and “natural laboratory.” This era brought in new, complicated relationships between the tourism sector and the local agriculture, with the latter suffering.

The final, and current, phase is attempting to balance tourism interests with conservation. The Special Law of Galápagos was passed in 1998, part of Ecuador’s new constitution. Its goal is to promote the maintenance of the ecological systems in place, while acknowledging the role humans have played in shaping the land. The Galápagos Islands were made into the second-largest marine reserve in the world.

The following chapters of the book give an overview of the results of several years of fieldwork conducted by the authors. This section is rich with material culture and interesting analysis of the finds and insight into the lives of the ordinary workers in El Progresso as well as Cobos, the wealthy owner. The archaeological material helps place El Progresso into a wider, global context, as is the case with all of the Galápagos. Even though the islands are remote, the spread of artifacts from all over Europe and the Americas shows an interest in global connections and reflects larger trends in consumer habits.

Finally, the book also examines the ecological history and status of the Galápagos. The public perception of the Galápagos as a pristine ecosystem and “natural laboratory” has fueled the tourism industry in recent years. The most interesting argument in this book is that in constructing that narrative of untouched native lands, all human influence and exploitation of the islands is conveniently left out. What makes this work exciting and important to the field is the authors’ refusal to do just that. This publication, and the research that went into it, shows exactly how humans have manipulated the landscape, for better or for worse.

This is an impressive body of research and clearly significant time and energy went into the research and excavations discussed. There are many interesting, well-articulated points presented, but a lot of the discussion is lost in too much detail and too many disciplines. There is no cohesive balance or flow between the historical, archaeological, and ecological themes. The many different authors are clearly experts, but the chapters feel repetitive and a bit disjointed. Overall, though, the book is good for references and should be consulted on a chapter-by-chapter basis. It also has an extremely useful bibliography for an underrepresented geographical location.


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