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### **Chinese Shark-Fishing Fleet Off Ecuador's Coast Fuels Superpower Tension**

(Bloomberg) -- It's a World Heritage Site whose unique wildlife helped Charles Darwin to devise his theory of evolution.

Now the waters surrounding the Galapagos Islands, an archipelago some 900 kilometers (560 miles) off the Pacific coast of Ecuador, have become the latest point of friction between the world's two superpowers.

The appearance of hundreds of Chinese fishing vessels near the borders of the protected nature reserve prompted a rebuke from U.S. Secretary of State Michael Pompeo. China's government said it's being smeared by U.S. politicians trying to "sow discord".

The volcanic islands, which belong to Ecuador, are known for their abundance of indigenous species, including the huge Galapagos tortoise and the group of bird species known as Darwin's finches. The waters too are plentiful in marine life.

The widespread belief in Ecuador is that the Chinese fleet of some 260 vessels was attracted to what is a rich habitat for sharks, used to make shark fin soup, considered a delicacy in China. In 2017, Ecuador's navy captured a vessel from a similar fleet which had strayed inside the Galapagos's protected waters, and found more than 6,000 frozen sharks aboard.

The mostly Chinese fishing fleet - some are under Liberian and Panamanian flags - was detected by Ecuador's navy last month in international waters between the Galapagos and the mainland. The area is legally open to international fishing, but the appearance of Chinese ships in the area over the past three years has still caused protests in Ecuador.

Pompeo weighed into the dispute on Ecuador's side at the weekend.

"It is time for China to stop its unsustainable fishing practices, rule-breaking, and willful environmental degradation of the oceans," he said via Twitter. "We stand with Ecuador and call on Beijing to stop engaging in illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing."

#### **China Hits Back**

China's Foreign Ministry said Thursday that it has agreed to a moratorium on fishing on the high seas west of the Galapagos protection zone from September through November to help protect fishery resources.

The U.S. "is in no position to criticize other countries on maritime affairs," Foreign Ministry spokesman Wang Wenbin said in Beijing, since it has not ratified the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, which establishes guidelines for managing marine resources.

U.S.-China relations are becoming increasingly strained amid trade disputes, the rise of Chinese technology companies and the recent national security law in Hong Kong. The countries are also at odds over China's territorial claims in the South China Sea, as well as Taiwan.

Darwin's observations of how perfectly Galapagos species were adapted to their environments formed the foundation for his theory of evolution by natural selection, which he laid out in *The Origin of the Species*, published in 1859.

## GPS Tracking

A young female whale shark named Esperanza, or Hope, tagged last year with a GPS transmitter, disappeared near the Chinese fleet, becoming a symbol of the threat to rare marine wildlife. To protest the impact of the fleet, Galapagos islanders have been stringing up plastic bottles with Chinese labeling which wash up on the shore.

Since 2018, President Lenin Moreno has strengthened Ecuador's ties with the U.S., and turned his back on former allies Cuba and Venezuela. He has allowed U.S. counter-narcotics surveillance planes to refuel on the Galapagos, and last year Ecuador took part in U.S.-led naval exercises.

Despite its warmer relations with the U.S., Ecuador can't afford to alienate China, to which it owes \$5.3 billion, and which is one of its biggest export markets.

China is the largest buyer of Ecuador's shrimp, the country's second-biggest export, and Quito is trying to get restrictions lifted after traces of Covid-19 were found on some packaging. Ecuador is also close to obtaining \$2.4 billion in new loans from China, according to the Finance Ministry.

(Updates with Chinese government response from third paragraph)

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By Stephan Kueffner

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