



## IN THEIR DEBT

by Shelley Bueche

# Aggie and Buck

## *Environmental Sniffers in the Galapagos Islands*

The Galapagos Islands are a place of unsurpassed beauty and home to an abundance of wildlife. In addition to spectacular vistas, there are over 3,000 species of marine plants and wildlife. Visitors to the area may encounter sea lions at play, slow-moving tortoises, iguanas, and sea turtles and other native creatures – all living without fear of predators. But the ecosystems are extremely fragile, and the boost in tourism has become a threat to the unique flora and fauna of the Galapagos.

Island life is unique to each area within the Galapagos. Santa Cruz is a busy hub and the center of tourism for the area. Locals say that nearby San Cristobal is much more laid back, with brilliant sunsets, providing just the right balance for ideal island life. Nearby Isabela, with only 2,000 inhabitants, is a relaxing frontier teeming with coconut trees and sandy beaches. Of course, in addition to the scenery, musicians add to the island culture, making the region a desirable place to visit and live.

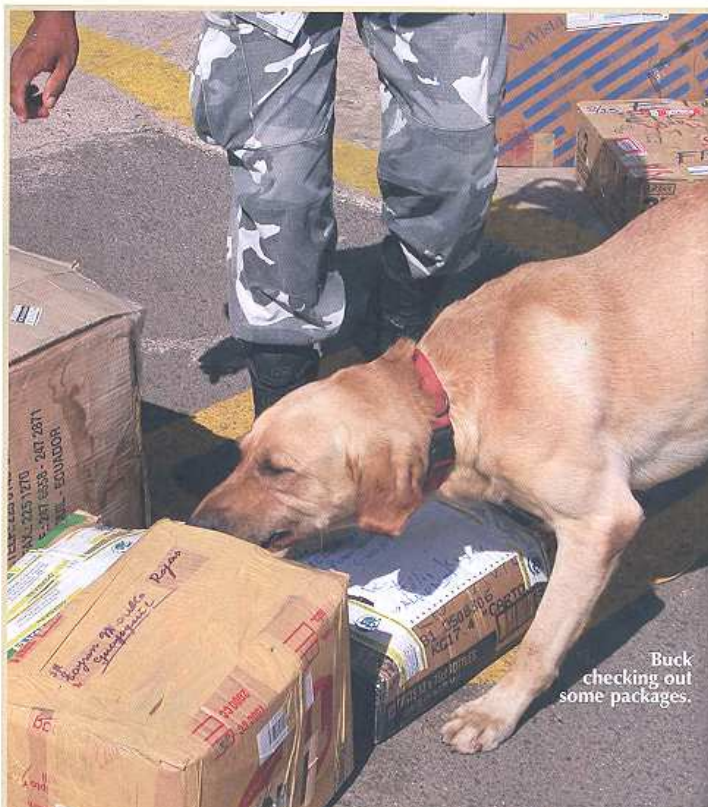
The Galapagos National Park, the Charles Darwin Research Center, and

the environmental police help preserve and maintain the abundance of wildlife for the region. In particular, two Labrador retrievers, Aggie (a six-year-old, 80-pound black Lab) and Buck (a six-year-old, 85-pound yellow Lab), work as environmental “sniffers,” protecting the islands and helping the area retain its unique attraction. The canine team is trained to detect drugs coming into the

islands, and sea cucumbers and shark fins leaving the area.

Because the region was once a land of unspoiled beauty, tourists are now arriving in record numbers, and poachers are on the prowl. Wild Aid, an international conservation agency, and Wildlifeline, a conservation agency based in London, donated Aggie and Buck to work in the Galapagos.

The dogs were trained in Napa



Buck checking out some packages.



Aggie on the job.

Valley, California, by Makor K-9's dog-training facility, which has placed working dogs for service all around the world. Owner Mark Rispoli says that although Aggie and

Buck were born and bred in different kennels prior to meeting at Makor, they got along very well, "as Labs do," when they began their training together in Napa.

Domestic pet overpopulation has long been a problem for the Galapagos, starting with pirate invasions in the late 16th century. There are numerous feral cats and dogs on the islands, and Wild Aid works to educate residents while offering spay and neutering services. Wild Aid is also involved in local education on the islands. The Safe Pet Project, sponsored by Wild Aid, has had a relatively large impact in a short period of time: Islanders are now taking their pets in for veterinary services, and it is becoming common to see dogs on leashes.

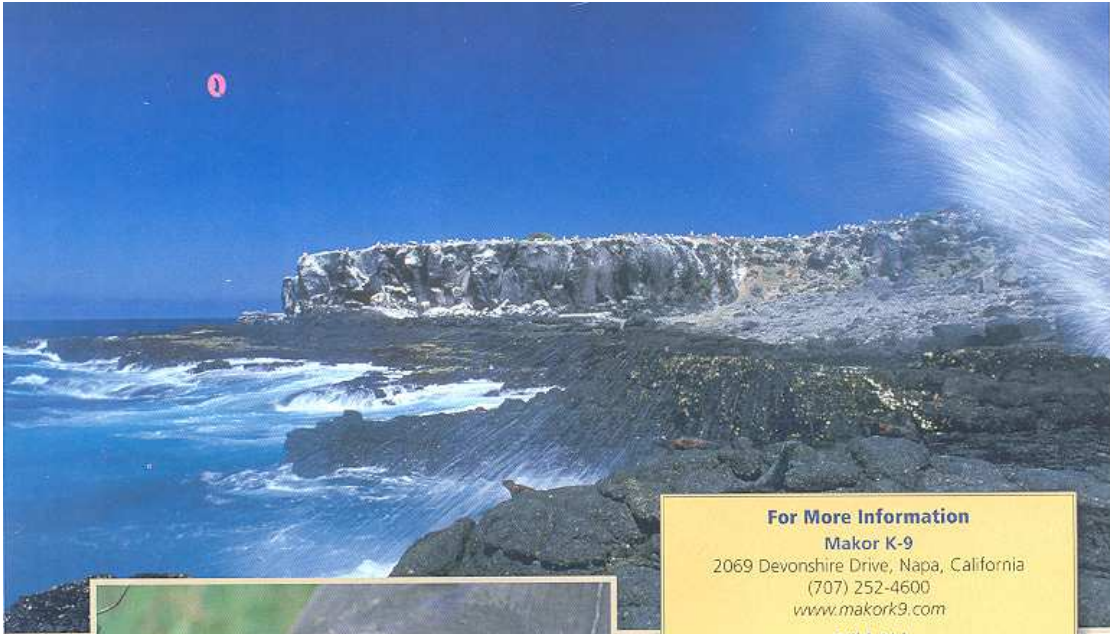
Within a small parcel of land, according to Marcel Bigue, program manager for Wild Aid, "One can encounter thriving mangroves next to cactus jutting out of large slabs of volcanic rock. Penguins, marine iguanas, blue-footed boobies, and sally lightfoot crabs all eke out a living on the rocky shores of the archipelago."

Marcel Bigue says that Aggie and Buck "are extremely effective" in their environmental-protection work. Bigue adds that Wild Aid is seeking to add more canines to the team, as the wildlife protection program has been a tremendous success.

The Galapagos archipelago is made up of 13 volcanic islands, just below the equator in South America. Charles Darwin visited the islands in the *HMS Beagle* as part of his historic journey in 1835. Darwin was mesmerized by the sheer beauty of the area and made it his life's work to study the region. Darwin's recognition of the relativity of species between the islands led to his publishing the well-known *On the Origin of Species* in 1859.



NASA/DEMIRSKY PHOTO ASSOC.



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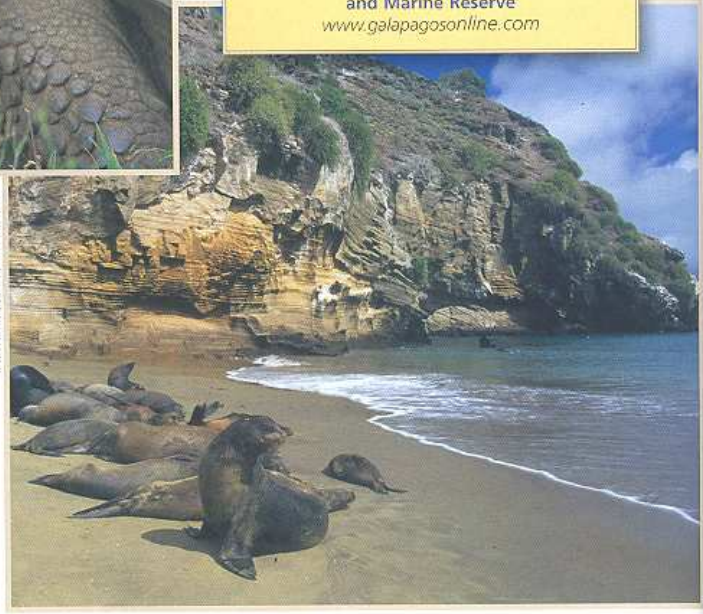
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**Galapagos Islands Tourism, National Park,  
 and Marine Reserve**  
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One such example of their success was August 30, 2006. Aggie and Environmental Policeman Escobar Valle Fernando detected over 1,400 sea cucumbers that were illegally hidden in boxes ready to be shipped out of the Galapagos. This was a colossal find for both Wild Aid and the Environmental Police, and the seizure would not have been possible without Aggie's sensitive nose.

The canine duo work from 8:30 in the morning until 2:30 in the afternoon, Mondays through Sundays. The majority of their work shifts are conducted at the Baltra

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Airport, in the Galapagos Islands. In addition, the canine team occasionally heads out to inspect cargo boats entering and leaving the islands.

Last summer, Aggie and Buck, along with their handlers, traveled to nearby San Cristobal to inspect the cargo of boats that were assumed to have a large shipment of illegal drugs. They traveled 35 nautical miles from Santa Cruz to San



BIRDING: DERBACH/EMERY PHOTO ASSOC.

Cristobal on very rough seas, prompting seasickness for both man and dog. Their handlers reported that "when it came time to return to Santa Cruz" neither the handlers nor the dogs much wanted to board the boat for their return home.

The dogs are each fed a diet of specially balanced dog food, providing the extra nutrients they need as working canines. When they are not on the job, Aggie and Buck enjoy swimming, jogging, and playing ball on the island. Of the duo, Buck is the playful one and loves to spend time with children. Aggie is more reserved and does not like to attract attention,

preferring to spend time with Buck and his handlers.

"Essentially, a great deal of time is spent on the identification of odors," as Bigue explains the techniques used to train the sniffers. "Different materials are placed in four different boxes, three are random and one box contains a sea cucumber or sharks' fins. Later they participate in simulations and submit to other distractions, as light and sound." The canine team inspects buildings, shipping containers, luggage, and vehicles as part of their ongoing training. They also work with their handlers in understanding proper canine handling, canine physiology, and procedures for inspections under a variety of scenarios that might be found as part of their daily work.

Buck and Aggie live with the Environmental Police in communal housing at the Galapagos National Park, Esobar Valle Fernando, one of their handlers says, "Aggie is a great worker, with a great personality, almost human." Fernando goes on to describe the dogs as being "part of the family."

Aggie and Buck are vital to maintaining and preserving the ecosystems in these enchanting islands, and their work is of utmost importance to all of us. Upon retirement, Aggie and Buck will live with their handlers and enjoy the land of paradise they helped protect.



Shelley Bueche is a freelance writer and member of Dog Writer's Association of America. She and her family reside in Central Texas, and they share their home

with a senior Lab, Belle, and two other canine companions, Brownie and Boomer. She writes extensively about working dogs and marvels at the contributions they have made in our daily lives.

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