

In Search of El Nino on the New Beagle

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I'm not a scientist, but I play one on TV. In 2009-10, Dutch Television and Radio (VPRO) organized a round-the-world voyage of the sailing ship Stad Amsterdam along the route taken by Charles Darwin and the Beagle. The big idea behind this trip was to trace how our relationship with the environment has changed since Darwin's visit in order to gauge the Future of Species in a world dominated by humans.

I sailed on the leg from Valparaiso, Chile, to Callao, Peru, as an expert on the Pacific Coast of South America. But I was in a totally alien environment out there in the midst of the ocean wilderness. We sailed with the wind to waters seldom glimpsed by humans. Thousands of meters of dark blue water lay between me and the earth, and my accustomed habitat on dry land was even further away.

Of course, this is what made the trip so attractive. Binoculars provided my main tool of investigation. Best of all, when we neared the coast of Peru, we sailed straight through hundreds of thousands of birds, sea lions, and dolphins diving for fish. Action surrounded us as far as the eye could see. This was an El Niño year, when this Serengeti of the Sea moves miles offshore to the south. I gained great insight into the environment I study from this firsthand experience.

It was my job to explain the havoc that El Niño and La Niña cause. It is difficult enough to explain the intricacies of this phenomenon in a Powerpoint lecture, article, or book. But they needed it explained in a few sentences, in a handful of takes, filmed on the deck of a ship. I ended up drawing the basics in my notebook with a marker. This appeared in episode 18 "The Last Drop," which traces the impact of El Niño and global warming on the livelihoods of Peruvians. The melting of Peru's highland glaciers is destined to make the country far more vulnerable to rainfall variation during El Niño and La Niña.

The filmmakers found out about me because I had done some investigations in the UK on Darwin and Fitzroy's research in the Atacama Desert and along the Peruvian coast. They asked me some questions when planning this voyage; I provided answers; and to my great surprise, they invited me along. Other sorts of historians participated in other legs of the trip, including cosmologist Paul Davies, big historian Tim Flannery, planetwalker John Francis, and the star of the series, natural historian Redmond O'Hanlon.

I often had to explain that there is a big difference between environmental historians and scientists. One journalist I met at the end of the trip thought I was a big phony. But some of this got through: a bit of my research using old Peruvian almanacs made it into the film. Perhaps there is a larger opportunity for environmental historians in all this. Why can't we be the ones to explain how the earth operates to the public? Who is better qualified to explain how and why these things matter to humans?

Over a million people saw my halting attempts at this when it was first broadcast. You can see them, too, at <http://beagle.vpro.nl/#/widget/afleveringen/18> (Microsoft Silverlight plug-in required.) Click on "Toon alle afleveringen" to see all 30 of these slickly edited episodes. Much of the films' content is in English with subtitles and deals with key themes in environmental history.