

Maritime Cultural Heritage of the Salas y Gómez & Nazca Ridges



A unique region of cultural and natural significance on the high seas

Off the coasts of Chile and Peru lies one of the most unique diversity hot spots on Earth. The Salas y Gómez and Nazca ridges consist of more than 110 seamounts that rise from great depths in the South Pacific to create critical habitat for many species that are found nowhere else in the world. Nearly three-quarters of these ridges lie beyond the borders of any nation, on the high seas, where they are unprotected and under threat from overfishing, pollution, climate change, and seabed mining. These stressors are not only threatening unique and fragile ecosystems, but could also tarnish a window into the exceptionally rich and diverse history of human seafaring.



Polynesian voyaging

Over 40,000 years ago, Polynesians started the most expansive migration in human history. The waters of Salas y Gómez and Nazca served as a critical voyaging highway from the West Pacific to Rapa Nui (Easter Island) and beyond. Scholars increasingly believe that this region was a key pathway for early contact between Polynesia and South America, marking the beginning of a long history of cultural diffusion.



Many Polynesian cultures view the ocean as a living being with transformative powers that can sustain us not only physically but also spiritually. While written history has typically focused on the few people in power, oral traditions and customs highlight that many cultures have had a long history of profound connections with the high seas. Polynesians in particular were and continue to be well-acquainted with the high seas, as evidenced by Rapanui hakanononga sites that have marked productive fishing areas above offshore seamounts for centuries.

European exploration and colonization

More recently, explorers from Europe and other parts of the world traveled these remote waters, charted what they could fathom and attached their names to seamounts. Ferdinand Magellan is believed to be the first European explorer to traverse the waters of the Salas y Gómez and Nazca ridges, naming the nearby Desventuradas Islands (islands of misfortune) for their lack of habitable land. The Dutch first landed on Rapa Nui on Easter Sunday in 1722, kicking off many subsequent voyages that included violent acts against people, including fatal gunfire and enslavement.

Following European “discovery” of Rapa Nui and other nearby islands, many ships followed to catalogue its geology and natural history. These voyages fostered a better understanding, opening the next chapter of human interaction with this region: the exploitation of marine resources.



Marine resource exploitation

The rich marine resources of the Salas y Gómez and Nazca ridges were first recognized by Polynesians, and later by seal hunters and whalers seeking to meet increasing global demand for pelts and whale oil. Within a few decades, sealers wiped out fur seal colonies estimated to be in the millions. Similar unsustainable practices emerged within the whaling industry, leading one sailor to write in 1859 that there appear to be more whalers than whales.



Over time, the region became a maritime highway for ships transporting goods such as nitrate, guano, and coal. Trade rapidly expanded in the late 1800s due to industrialization. Many ships that left port did not return and many shipwrecks are suspected to rest in the depths of the Salas y Gómez and Nazca ridges. This region thus contains a vast trove of yet-to-be discovered historical and archaeological sites.

The Way Forward

In this new millennium, human history can once again have an impact on the Salas y Gómez and Nazca ridges — this time positive. Industrial fishing in this region is presently very low, and seabed mining exploration has not begun, providing a narrow window of opportunity to restrict extractive activities before unique cultural and natural resources are degraded.

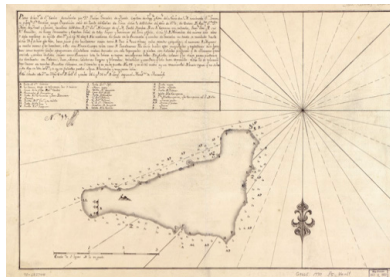
At the United Nations, negotiations are underway for a treaty that would allow countries to establish high seas protected areas to safeguard critical biodiversity and cultural resources. This treaty cannot come a moment too soon — the Salas y Gómez and Nazca ridges provide a rare opportunity to study and protect ecosystems in the absence of modern interference, while also providing a window into the profound relationships between people and the sea.

We can safeguard the Salas y Gómez and Nazca ridges by closing it to commercial fishing and mining, and establishing a marine protected area once the High Seas Treaty is finalized and comes into force. The design and management of this protected area should incorporate an ethos of cooperation with the diverse communities that have historic ties to this region, particularly Pacific Islander communities.



Petroglyphs highlight the profound connection between Rapanui and the ocean, such as this one from the Papa Vaka archeological site depicting a tuna, the fertility symbol komari and the creator god Make-Make.

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A 1770 Spanish chart of the island of Rapa Nui, as “discovered” by Don Felipe Gonzalez de Haedo who named it Isla de San Carlos.

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A mid-nineteenth century watercolor painting of San Ambrosio Island depicting the traditional European method of exploration and taking samples.

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A 1851 whale chart noting the presence of important populations of sperm whales around the Salas y Gómez and Nazca ridges.

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A mid-nineteenth century photograph of wooden ships anchored off the Peruvian Guano Islands, many of which sailed through the waters of the Salas y Gómez and Nazca ridges.

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A 1929 photograph of the trading ship Pinna which wrecked during a voyage to Valparaíso. This dramatic view exemplifies what happened to many other ships that sailed across the waters of the Salas y Gómez and Nazca ridges.

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