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Largest global shark biomass found in the northern Galápagos Islands of Darwin and Wolf

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Overfishing has dramatically depleted sharks and other large predatory fishes worldwide except for a few remote and/or well-protected areas. The islands of Darwin and Wolf in the far north of the Galapagos Marine Reserve (GMR) are known for their large shark abundance, making them a global scuba diving and conservation hotspot. Here we report quantitative estimates of fish abundance at Darwin and Wolf over two consecutive years using stereo-video surveys, which reveal the largest reef fish biomass ever reported (17.5 t ha⁻¹ on average), consisting largely of sharks. Despite this, the abundance of reef fishes around the GMR, such as groupers, has been severely reduced because of unsustainable fishing practices. Although Darwin and Wolf are within the GMR, they were not fully protected from fishing until March 2016. Given the ecological value and the economic importance of Darwin and Wolf for the dive tourism industry, the current protection should ensure the long-term conservation of this hotspot of unique global value.

1 **Largest global shark biomass found in the northern Galapagos Islands of Darwin and Wolf**

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10

11 **Abstract**

12 Overfishing has dramatically depleted sharks and other large predatory fishes worldwide except
13 for a few remote and/or well-protected areas. The islands of Darwin and Wolf in the far north of
14 the Galapagos Marine Reserve (GMR) are known for their large shark abundance, making them
15 a global scuba diving and conservation hotspot. Here we report quantitative estimates of fish
16 abundance at Darwin and Wolf over two consecutive years using stereo-video surveys, which
17 reveal the largest reef fish biomass ever reported (17.5 t ha⁻¹ on average), consisting largely of
18 sharks. Despite this, the abundance of reef fishes around the GMR, such as groupers, has been
19 severely reduced because of unsustainable fishing practices. Although Darwin and Wolf are
20 within the GMR, they were not fully protected from fishing until March 2016. Given the
21 ecological value and the economic importance of Darwin and Wolf for the dive tourism industry,
22 the current protection should ensure the long-term conservation of this hotspot of unique global
23 value.

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33 **Introduction**

34 Overfishing has reduced biomass of most sharks and other large predatory fishes worldwide by
35 over 90% (Baum et al., 2003; Myers & Worm, 2003; Ward-Paige et al., 2010), and even remote
36 locations have been severely impacted (Dulvy et al., 2008; Sibaja-Cordero, 2008; Graham,
37 Spalding & Sheppard, 2010; White et al., 2015). One in four species of cartilaginous fishes is
38 now threatened with extinction due primarily to overexploitation and habitat loss (Dulvy et al.,
39 2014). The systematic removal of sharks from marine ecosystems has negative effects that
40 propagate throughout the entire food web (Bascompte, Melián & Sala, 2005; Myers et al., 2007;
41 Heithaus, Wirsing & Dill, 2012).

42 Sharks and other top reef predators dominate healthy marine ecosystems, so that the traditional
43 fish biomass pyramid is inverted in these increasingly rare areas (Friedlander & DeMartini,
44 2002; Sandin et al., 2008; Sandin et al., 2015). However, only a few localities worldwide still
45 maintain large abundances of top predatory fishes due to either being remote and unfished, or
46 having recovered after full protection from fishing (Sandin et al., 2008; Aburto-Oropeza et al.,
47 2011; Graham & McClanahan, 2013; Friedlander et al., 2014a). The small number of scientific
48 studies on relatively pristine ecosystems limits our ability to establish true baselines of sharks
49 and other large predatory fish abundance and this restricts our capacity to determine realistic
50 recovery targets for degraded ecosystems (McClenachan et al., 2012; Sala 2015), thus
51 perpetuating the shifting baseline syndrome (Pauly, 1995; Jackson, 2010). The establishment of
52 marine protected areas (MPAs), especially no-take areas (NTA) where all forms of fishing are
53 prohibited, have been shown to be one of the most successful management tools to confront
54 global ecosystem degradation (Halpern & Warner, 2002; Lester et al., 2009; Edgar et al., 2014).
55 A growing body of literature supports the positive effects of NTA, which includes substantial
56 recoveries in fish abundance and biomass (Aburto-Oropeza et al., 2011; Eddy, Pande & Gardner,
57 2014); a greater biomass, abundance and size of top predators inside reserves than in nearby
58 fished areas (see review by Lester et al., 2009); increase in abundance and biomass in nearby
59 areas due to the spill-over of adults and/or larvae (Goñi et al., 2008; Halpern, Lester & Kellner,
60 2009; Christie et al., 2010), and shifts in species composition and trophic cascades that result in
61 the restoration of entire ecosystems (Babcock et al., 1999, 2010; Shears & Babcock, 2002, 2003).
62 Furthermore, a recent analysis across 87 sites globally revealed that conservation benefits of
63 MPAs increase exponentially when reserves are no take, well enforced, old, large and isolated
64 (Edgar et al., 2014).

65 The Galapagos Islands are known worldwide for its iconic terrestrial fauna and flora, due in large
66 part to a young Charles Darwin who sailed to these islands in 1835 (Darwin, 1839). While
67 Galapagos giant tortoises, Darwin's finches, and mocking birds have received much of the
68 attention since Darwin's visit, the underwater Galapagos remains under-studied and largely
69 unknown compared to terrestrial ecosystems. Galapagos is the only tropical archipelago in the
70 world at the cross-roads of major current systems that bring both warm and cold waters. From
71 the northeast, the Panama Current brings warm water; from the southeast the Peru current bring
72 cold water; and from the west, the subsurface equatorial undercurrent (SEC) also bring cold
73 water from the deep (Banks, 2002). The SEC collides with the Galapagos platform to the west of
74 the Islands of Fernandina and Española, producing very productive upwelling systems that are

75 the basis of a rich food web that supports cold water species in a tropical setting like the endemic
76 Galapagos penguin (*Spheniscus mendiculus*) (Edgar et al., 2004). The oceanographic setting
77 surrounding Galapagos results in a wide range of marine ecosystems and populations, that
78 includes from tropical species like corals or reef sharks to temperate and sub-Antarctic species
79 like the Galapagos fur seal (*Arctocephalus galapagoensis*) or the waved albatross (*Phoebastria*
80 *irrorata*).

81 The far northern islands of Darwin and Wolf in the 138,000 km² Galapagos Marine Reserve
82 (GMR) represent a unique ‘hotspot’ for sharks and other pelagic species (Hearn et al., 2010,
83 2014; Acuña-Marrero et al., 2014; Ketchum et al., 2014a). Most of the studies around this area
84 have focused on the migration of scalloped hammerhead sharks (*Sphyrna lewini*) and other
85 sharks species between Darwin and Wolf and other localities in the Eastern Tropical Pacific
86 (Hearn et al., 2010; Bessudo et al., 2011; Ketchum et al., 2014a). An ecological monitoring
87 program has visited the islands over the past 15 years with a strong sampling focus to survey reef
88 fishes and invertebrate communities (Edgar et al., 2011). However, no study to date has
89 examined extensively the abundance, size, and biomass of sharks and other large predatory
90 fishes around Darwin and Wolf. We conducted two expeditions to Darwin and Wolf in
91 November 2013 and August 2014 to establish comprehensive abundance estimates for shark and
92 predatory fish assemblages at Darwin and Wolf. Our aim was to use this information to make
93 recommendations for enhanced protection during the re-zoning process of the GMR started by
94 the Galapagos National Park Directorate in 2015.

95 **Materials and Methods**

96 This research was approved by the Galapagos National Park Directorate (GNPD) as part of the
97 2013 and 2014 annual operational plan of the Charles Darwin Foundation.

98 **Site description**

99 Darwin and Wolf are the two northernmost islands in the Galapagos Archipelago, a group of 13
100 major islands and 100 islets and rocks located 1000 km west of mainland Ecuador, in the ETP
101 (Snell, Stone & Snell, 1996) (Fig.1). The Galapagos Archipelago lies at the congruence of three
102 major oceanic currents, which provides a highly dynamic and unique oceanographic settings
103 (Palacios, 2004). Darwin and Wolf represent the far northern biogeographic region of the
104 archipelago and are heavily influenced by the warm Panama current that comes from the
105 Northeast, which supports sub-tropical marine communities to these islands (Edgar et al., 2004;
106 Acuña-Marrero & Salinas-de-León, 2013). Darwin and Wolf are small (approximately 1 and 2
107 km², respectively) and represent the tops of eroded, extinct submerged volcanoes, which rose
108 from the surrounding seafloor > 2000 m below (McBirney & Williams, 1969; Peñaherrera-
109 Palma, Harpp & Banks, 2013). Darwin and Wolf are exposed to a predominant north-western
110 water flow that supports a unique pelagic assemblage on the south-eastern portions of these
111 islands (Hearn et al., 2010). In contrast to much of the Galapagos, which is dominated by the
112 cold equatorial counter-current, the waters of Darwin and Wolf range from 22.5 to 29°C
113 throughout the year, peaking during February-March (Banks, 2002). Two different seasons have
114 been reported around Darwin and Wolf islands: a warm season from January to June, and a cool
115 season from July to December, where mean sea surface temperature remains below 25°C
116 (Acuña-Marrero et al., 2014).

117

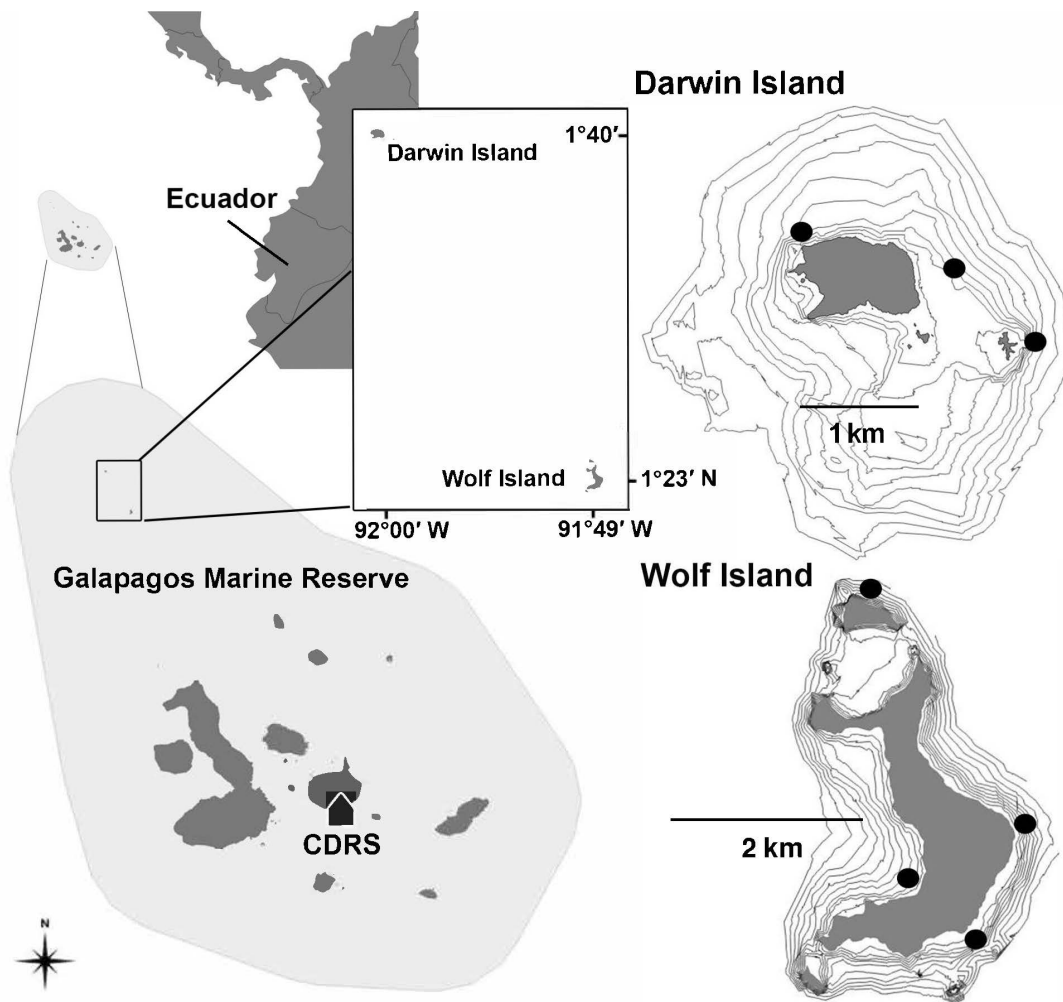
118 In this study, and for comparisons with other reefs worldwide, we treat Darwin and Wolf as a
119 single ecological unit because of the following reasons. First, a number of published studies
120 (Hearn et al. 2010; Ketchum et al. 2014) show that animals in Galápagos (especially
121 hammerhead sharks) frequently move between islands during the cold season (July-December).
122 Second, the two islands are a unique bioregion within the Galapagos Marine Reserve: the ‘far
123 north’ (Edgar et al. 2004). These two islands are characterized by the influence of the tropical
124 Panama current and support unique fish communities within the Galapagos Marine Reserve.
125 Third, the islands are located less than 40 km apart, and isolated from the rest of the archipelago
126 (Fig. 1).

127 **Data collection**

128 **Underwater census using Diver Operated Stereo-video**

129 A diver operated stereo-video system (DOV) was used to sample fish assemblages around
130 Darwin and Wolf over two consecutive years (2013, 2014) during the cold season that spans
131 from July to December. DOVs use two Canon HFG-25 full high-definition cameras mounted 0.7
132 m apart on a base bar inwardly converged at seven degrees and are operated by experienced
133 divers using standard open-circuit SCUBA equipment. DOVs can overcome some of the biases
134 associated with Underwater Visual Census (UVC) by eliminating the inter-observer effect and
135 the over/underestimation of sampling area and fish lengths estimations (Harvey, Fletcher &
136 Shortis, 2001, 2002; Harvey et al., 2003, 2004; Goetze et al., 2015).

137 Fishes were surveyed at seven sites around Wolf (n = 4) and Darwin (n = 3) islands (Fig. 1) in
138 November 2013 and August 2014. All sites were coastal rocky reefs and were selected based on
139 their similar structure to be comparable. At each site, divers towed a surface buoy equipped with
140 a GPS (Garmin GPSmap 78) to create a detailed track of the area surveyed, with GPS position
141 and exact time recorded using a watch synchronized with the GPS at the beginning and end of
142 each survey (Schories & Niedzwiedz, 2012). Divers followed the 20 m depth contour for a
143 period of 25-30 min in order to complete a minimum of ten 50 m long and 5 m wide replicate
144 transects at each site. Dive times were based on preliminary surveys that revealed that swimming
145 at a constant speed, a 2-minute DOVS survey covered approximate 50 m. At some sites, strong
146 currents resulted in longer distances covered by the survey team, resulting in a greater area
147 surveyed. The diver towing the GPS also conducted standard UVCs to record sharks and large
148 pelagics (50x5x5 m) in parallel to the stereo surveys, therefore the 2-minute surveys were also
149 used to synchronize both sampling methodologies (Supplementary Information).



150

151 **Figure 1. Location of Darwin and Wolf Islands within the Galapagos Marine Reserve,**
 152 **which encompasses the waters 40 nautical miles around the islands. Black dots around Darwin**
 153 **(n=3) and Wolf (n=4) islands are survey sites. CDRS: Charles Darwin Research Station.**

154 **Calibration and video analysis**

155 Stereo-video cameras were calibrated prior to field deployments using the program CAL
 156 (SeaGIS Pty Ltd; Harvey & Shortis, 1998). Following the dives, paired videos were viewed on a
 157 large monitor and analysed in the program Event Measure (SeaGIS Pty Ltd). Every fish observed
 158 was identified to species and measured to the nearest mm (Fork Length, FL). Lengths were
 159 converted to biomass (kg) using published length-weight relationships (Froese & Pauly, 2007).
 160 For individual fishes that were not measured (e.g., two individuals overlapping), we calculated
 161 biomass using an average total length for that species from the site where it occurred. Cryptic
 162 reef fishes (<8cm) were excluded from our surveys due to the limited ability of the DOVs to
 163 detect these species and their lack of importance to the fisheries and overall biomass (Ackerman
 164 & Bellwood, 2000). Fishes were classified into four different trophic categories based on
 165 published information: apex predators, lower-level carnivores, planktivores and herbivores
 166 (Friedlander & DeMartini, 2002b).

167 For largely abundant schooling fishes, primarily the abundant planktivorous species locally
168 known as *gringo* (*Paranthias colonus*), which form dense schools that are difficult to quantify,
169 we developed a specific methodology in the software Event Measure. For each of the study sites
170 surveyed, we measured to the nearest mm a subsample of 100 individuals across all replicate
171 transects and obtained a specific set of mean individual lengths. Then, transects were divided
172 into blocks of identical length using the GPS tracks and every individual for each 10x5x5 m wide
173 'cube' was counted. The number of cubes varied according to transect lengths. Total biomass for
174 these sites were obtained by multiplying the total numbers of individuals counted in each cube
175 by the mean individual length for each species at that site.

176 We also conducted a comparative analysis between the traditional survey technique based on
177 underwater visual censuses (UVC) and Diver Operated Video surveys (DOVs) using stereo-
178 cameras to test for differences in estimates of shark diversity, abundance, and size (Text_S1). A
179 diver with > 5 years experience in conducting visual surveys of sharks swam alongside a diver
180 conducting video surveys. Both divers were synchronized to conduct the same transect in
181 parallel. Synchronization was achieved by conducting 2-minute surveys. This time period was
182 based on a previous archipelago-wide survey (n = 81 sites at 20m) that showed that divers
183 swimming at a constant speed covered an area of approximately 50m during a 2-minute time
184 period (Salinas de León, unpublished data). A 15-second interval between transects was used to
185 ensure independence between samples. The visual observer recorded individual shark species,
186 size (FL), and sex of all sharks observed within a 5m wide by 5m high transect in front of the
187 divers. Transect length was obtained by towing a GPS and dividing the GPS tracts into 2 minutes
188 blocks, with a 15s space between transects. We conducted a total of 69 transects across the seven
189 study sites, covering a total area of 21,700m². Strong currents resulted in longer transects than
190 previously estimated and mean transect length across study sites was 65.7m (± 2.2 SE). Transect
191 length was not significantly different between sampling sites (ANOVA, $p > 0.05$).

192

193 **Statistical tests**

194 Patterns of total fish biomass and biomass without sharks between islands, wave exposures, and
195 years were analyzed using generalized linear mixed models (Zuur, 2009) using the glmmADMB
196 package (Skaug & Fournier, 2004) in the R statistical program version 3.0.2 (R Development
197 Core Team). Due to the skewed nature of our biomass estimates, data were fit with a gamma
198 error structure with an inverse link function that works well for continuous-positive data and has
199 a flexible structure (Crawley, 2011). Islands, orientation, and year were all treated as fixed
200 effects, while location (survey site) was used as a random effect in the model. Biomass by
201 trophic group was assessed in a similar manner, except that data were fitted to negative binomial
202 distributions due to the number of zero in these data. Unplanned post hoc multiple comparisons
203 were tested using a Tukey's honestly significant difference (HSD) test. Values in the results are
204 means and one standard deviation of the mean unless otherwise stated. Comparisons between
205 overall relative abundance and biomass recorded by UVC and DOVs were conducted using
206 Wilcoxon rank sum tests.

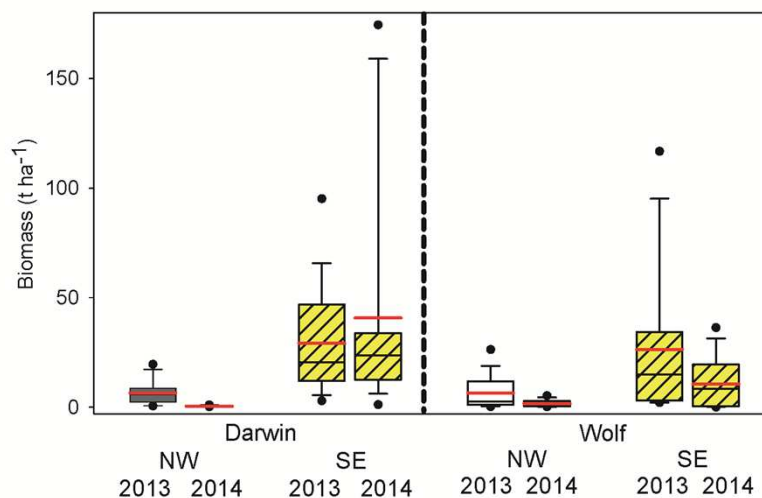
207 Similarity of Percentages (SIMPER) in Primer 6.0 (Clarke & Gorley, 2006) was used to
208 determine the fish species most responsible for the percentage dissimilarities between exposures
209 using Bray-Curtis similarity analysis of hierarchical agglomerative group average clustering

210 (Clarke, 1993). Differences in fish trophic biomass between islands, years, and wave exposures
211 were tested using permutation-based multivariate analysis of variance (PERMANOVA, Primer
212 v6.0, Clarke and Gorley, 2006). All factors and their interactions were treated as fixed effects.
213 Trophic biomass data were 4th-root-transformed. Post hoc pair-wise tests were conducted
214 between island, wave exposure, and year combinations. Interpretation of PERMANOVA results
215 was aided using individual analysis of similarities (ANOSIM).

216 To describe the pattern of variation in fish trophic structure and their relationship to
217 environmental factors we performed direct gradient analysis (redundancy analysis: RDA) using
218 the ordination program CANOCO for Windows version 4.0 (TerBraak, 1994). Response data
219 were compositional and had a gradient < 3 SD units long, so linear methods were appropriate.
220 The RDA introduces a series of explanatory (environmental) variables and resembles the model
221 of multivariate multiple regression, allowing us to determine what linear combinations of these
222 environmental variables determine the gradients. The environmental data matrix included island
223 (Darwin, Wolf), wave exposure (NW, SE), and year (2013, 2014). To rank environmental
224 variables in their importance for being associated with the structure of the assemblages, we used
225 a forward selection where the statistical significance of each variable was judged by a Monte-
226 Carlo permutation test (TerBraak & Verdonschot, 1995). Permutations tests were unrestricted
227 with 499 permutations.

228 Results

229 Grand mean fish biomass between islands, years, orientation, and locations was 17.5 t ha^{-1} (\pm
230 18.6 SE) and was 90% higher at Darwin (24.0 ± 20.8) compared with Wolf (12.6 ± 16.4),
231 although this difference was not significant (Fig. 2, Table 1). Biomass in the SE sections of both
232 islands combined (26.9 ± 35.2) was more than 6 times higher than in the NW (4.4 ± 5.9).
233 Biomass was similar between years (2013 = 19.3 ± 18.9 ; 2014 = 15.6 ± 19.5) but was
234 significantly different due to the large year x orientation owing to higher biomass in the NW in
235 2013 at both islands (Fig. 2, Table 1).



237 **Figure 2. Comparisons of total fish biomass by island, orientation, and year.** Box plots
 238 showing median (black line), mean (red line), upper and lower quartiles, and 5th and 95th
 239 percentiles.

240 **Table 1.** Comparisons of total fish biomass by island, orientation and year. Results of
 241 generalized linear mixed models fit with a gamma error structure and an inverse link function.
 242 Unplanned post hoc multiple comparisons tested using a Tukey’s honestly significant difference
 243 (HSD) test. Only significant multiple comparisons are shown.

| Factor | Estimate | Std. Error | Z | P | Multiple comparisons |
|--------------------|----------|------------|------|-----------|----------------------|
| Island | 0.031 | 0.099 | 0.31 | 0.757 | |
| Orientation | 0.258 | 0.103 | 2.51 | 0.012* | SE > NW |
| Year | 0.435 | 0.117 | 3.72 | <0.001*** | 2013>2014 |
| Orientation x year | 0.449 | 0.116 | 3.88 | <0.001*** | SE13=SE14>NW13>NW14 |

244

245 Nearly 73% of the total biomass ($12.4 \pm 4.01 \text{ t ha}^{-1}$) was accounted for by sharks, primarily
 246 hammerheads (*Sphyrna lewini* – 48.0%), Galapagos (*Carcharhinus galapagensis* – 19.4%), and
 247 blacktips (*Carcharhinus limbatus* – 5.1%). Hammerheads occurred on 92% of transects at SE
 248 Darwin, 59% at SE Wolf, and 9% at both NW Darwin and Wolf. Gringos (*Paranthias colonus*)
 249 were the third most abundant species by weight, accounting for an additional 18.3% of the total
 250 biomass. They were 2.2 times more abundant by weight in 2013 (3.8 ± 4.1) compared with 2014
 251 (1.7 ± 2.4). Gringos were 48% more abundant in the SE (3.5 ± 3.5) compared with the NW (2.4
 252 ± 3.7) exposures. The average dissimilarity between orientations was 84%, with hammerhead
 253 sharks accounting for 41.6% of the dissimilarity, followed by gringos (24.2%), Galapagos sharks
 254 (12.8%), and blacktip sharks (3.4%) (Table 2).

255

256 **Table 2.** Fish species most responsible for the dissimilarity between northwest (NW) and
 257 southeast (SE) orientations based on Similarity of Percentages (SIMPER) analysis.

| Species | SE | NW | Dissim. | % contrib. | Cumulative % contrib. |
|----------------------------------|-------|------|------------|------------|-----------------------|
| <i>Sphyrna lewini</i> | 15.06 | 0.7 | 35.0 (1.2) | 41.6 | 41.6 |
| <i>Paranthias colonus</i> | 3.55 | 2.4 | 20.3 (1.0) | 24.2 | 65.8 |
| <i>Carcharhinus galapagensis</i> | 4.66 | 0 | 10.8 (0.5) | 12.8 | 78.6 |
| <i>Carcharhinus limbatus</i> | 1.77 | 0 | 2.9 (0.2) | 3.4 | 82.0 |
| <i>Caranx melampygus</i> | 0.58 | 0.08 | 2.1 (0.3) | 2.5 | 84.5 |
| <i>Lutjanus argentiventris</i> | 0.31 | 0.07 | 1.3 (0.4) | 1.5 | 86.0 |
| <i>Lutjanus novemfasciatus</i> | 0.18 | 0.02 | 1.0 (0.3) | 1.2 | 87.2 |
| <i>Holacanthus passer</i> | 0.06 | 0.12 | 1.0 (0.3) | 1.2 | 88.4 |
| <i>Prionurus laticlavus</i> | 0.05 | 0.07 | 0.9 (0.4) | 1.1 | 89.5 |
| <i>Sufflamen verres</i> | 0.02 | 0.06 | 0.8 (0.3) | 1.0 | 90.4 |

258

259 Our comparison between underwater visual censuses (UVC) and diver operated video surveys
 260 (DOVS) showed that both methods recorded the same number of species (n=4). Abundance of
 261 sharks recorded by DOVs was 1.18 ± 0.35 100m⁻² (mean \pm SE), and 0.97 ± 0.29 ind. 100m⁻² by
 262 UVC, and they were not significantly different (W=2279; p-value=0.619). Overall shark biomass
 263 recorded was not significantly different between methods (W=2341; p-value= 0.421), despite a
 264 57% higher biomass recorded with DOVs (12.40 ± 4.01 t ha⁻¹) compared to UVC (7.89 ± 2.05 t
 265 ha⁻¹). DOVS yielded estimates of shark size significantly larger than visual surveys, which
 266 suggests that even experienced observers tend to underestimate shark lengths, particularly for the
 267 larger size classes (Fig. S1).

268
 269 Fish biomass excluding sharks was 4.3 t ha⁻¹ (± 5.1), and was 68% higher at Darwin (5.8 ± 5.3)
 270 compared with Wolf (3.4 ± 4.8) but not significantly different between islands (Table 2).
 271 Exposure showed no significant difference in fish biomass without sharks, but was 58% higher at
 272 the SE (5.4 ± 5.3) compared to the NW (3.4 ± 4.7) exposures. Biomass without sharks was 67%
 273 higher in 2013 (5.2 ± 5.3) compared to 2014 (3.1 ± 4.5) but there was a significant interaction of
 274 year with wave exposure (Table 3).
 275

276 **Table 3.** Comparisons of fish biomass without sharks by island, orientation and year. Results of
 277 generalized linear mixed models fit with a gamma error structure and an inverse link function.
 278 Unplanned post hoc multiple comparisons tested using a Tukey’s honestly significant difference
 279 (HSD) test. Only significant multiple comparisons are shown. Exposure x year factors with the
 280 same letter are not significantly different ($\alpha = 0.05$).

| Factor | Estimate | Std. Error | Z | P | Multiple comparisons |
|-----------------------|----------|------------|------|---------|---------------------------------|
| Island | 0.092 | 0.191 | 0.48 | 0.631 | |
| Orientation | 0.177 | 0.200 | 0.89 | 0.376 | |
| Year | 0.366 | 0.109 | 3.35 | <0.001 | 13>14 |
| Orientation x year | 0.281 | 0.109 | 2.58 | 0.009** | 13SE 14NW 14SE 14NW A AB B C |

281
 282 Apex predators (sharks, jacks, and groupers) accounted for 75% of the total biomass, followed
 283 by planktivores (primarily gringos) at 20%, lower level carnivores (4%), and herbivores (1%).
 284 Apex predator biomass was similar among years with a 27% difference (Table 4A). Darwin
 285 harbored apex predator biomass 2.7 times higher than Wolf, although these differences were not
 286 significant. Apex predator biomass was 24 times higher in the SE vs. NW orientations, and
 287 although results are suggestive, they were not significantly different owing to the high variance
 288 within orientations (NW COV = 271.6, SE COV = 155.5).

289 Biomass of planktivores was 2.5 times greater, and significantly so, in 2013 (4.5 ± 4.3) compared
 290 with 2014 (1.8 ± 2.4) (Table 4B). It was 79% higher at Darwin compared with Wolf and 29%
 291 higher in the SE vs. NW, although neither comparison was significant. Lower-level carnivores
 292 were 81% more abundant by weight in 2013 compared with 2014. Their biomass was 69%

293 higher in the SE vs. NW, and 46% higher at Wolf compared with Darwin, although none of these
 294 comparisons were significant. Herbivore biomass was 97% higher in the NW vs. SE, 39% higher
 295 in 2014 vs. 2013, and 74% higher at Wolf compared with Darwin, but none of these factors was
 296 significant.

297 **Table 4.** Comparisons of biomass among trophic groups by island and orientation. Results of
 298 generalized linear mixed models fit with negative binomial error structure. Unplanned post hoc
 299 multiple comparisons tested using a Tukey’s honestly significant difference (HSD) test. Only
 300 significant multiple comparisons are shown.

| A. Apex predators | Estimate | Std. Error | Z | P |
|-------------------|----------|------------|------|-------|
| Island | 0.673 | 0.692 | 0.97 | 0.33 |
| Orientation | 3.071 | 1.731 | 1.77 | 0.07 |
| Year | 0.001 | 0.650 | 0.01 | 0.99 |
| B. Planktivores | Estimate | Std. Error | Z | P |
| Island | 0.339 | 0.291 | 1.17 | 0.24 |
| Orientation | 0.284 | 0.297 | 0.96 | 0.33 |
| Year | 0.609 | 0.302 | 2.02 | 0.04* |
| C. Carnivores | Estimate | Std. Error | Z | P |
| Island | 0.496 | 0.714 | 0.69 | 0.49 |
| Orientation | 0.705 | 0.714 | 0.99 | 0.32 |
| Year | 0.681 | 0.711 | 0.96 | 0.34 |
| D. Herbivores | Estimate | Std. Error | Z | P |
| Island | 0.435 | 1.022 | 0.43 | 0.67 |
| Orientation | 0.662 | 0.992 | 0.67 | 0.50 |
| Year | 0.427 | 0.941 | 0.45 | 0.65 |

301

302

303 The structure of the fish assemblage at Darwin and Wolf based on the biomass of each trophic
 304 group was influenced by year, island, and orientation, as well as their interactions except for year
 305 x island (Table 5). Orientation (ANOSIM R = 0.39, p = 0.001), followed by year (R = 0.09, p =
 306 0.001) appeared to have the strongest influence on trophic assemblage structure. Crossed
 307 ANOSIM between orientation and year yielded R = 0.41, p = 0.001 for orientation and R = 0.14,
 308 p = 0.001 for year. Crossed ANOSIM between orientation and island yielded R = 0.39, p = 0.001
 309 for orientation and R = 0.04, p = 0.038 for island.

310 **Table 5.** PERMANOVA of drivers of the structure of fish assemblage at Darwin and Wolf based
 311 on the biomass of each trophic group (apex predators, planktivores, lower-level carnivores, and
 312 herbivores). Only significant interactions are shown.

| Source | df | SS | MS | Pseudo-F | P |
|----------------------|----|-------|---------|----------|-------|
| Year | 1 | 17232 | 17232.0 | 17.024 | 0.001 |
| Island | 1 | 3058 | 3058.4 | 3.022 | 0.027 |
| Orientation | 1 | 54298 | 54298.0 | 53.642 | 0.001 |
| Year x orientation | 1 | 7384 | 7383.9 | 7.295 | 0.001 |
| Island x orientation | 1 | 4006 | 4005.5 | 3.957 | 0.010 |

| | | | | | |
|-----------------------------|-----|--------|--------|-------|-------|
| Year x island x orientation | 1 | 4345 | 4345.1 | 4.293 | 0.005 |
| Residual | 129 | 130580 | 1012.2 | | |
| Total | 136 | 217710 | | | |

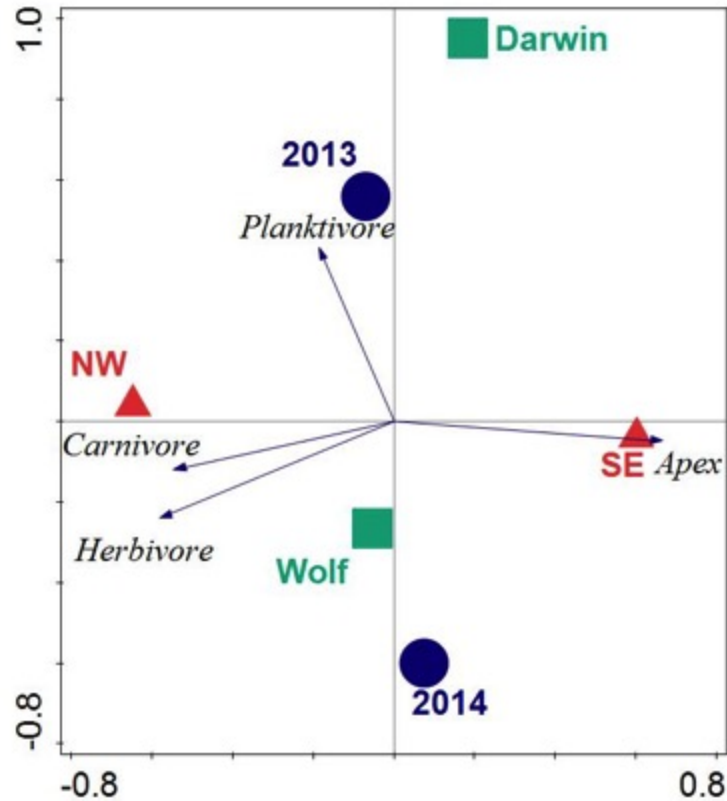
313

314 The first two axes of the RDA bi-plot explained 39% of the functional group variance and 99%
315 of the functional group-environment relationship (Table 6, Fig. 3). Orientation explained 87.5%
316 of the total variance, followed by year (10.6%), and island (9.3%). Orientations were well
317 separated in ordination space with the SE orientation strongly correlated with apex predator
318 biomass, while NW orientations were influenced by carnivore and herbivore biomass.
319 Planktivore biomass was orthogonal to the other three trophic groups and drove the separation
320 between years.

321 **Table 6.** A. Results of redundancy analysis (RDA) on square root transformed fish trophic
322 biomass with environmental variables (e.g., island, orientation). B. Conditional effects of Monte-
323 Carlo permutation results on the redundancy analysis (RDA).

| A. Statistic | Axis 1 | Axis 2 | Axis 3 |
|---|----------|--------|-------------|
| Eigenvalues | 0.34 | 0.04 | 0.01 |
| Pseudo-canonical correlation | 0.67 | 0.46 | 0.20 |
| Explained variation (cumulative) | 34.42 | 38.68 | 38.87 |
| Explained fitted variation (cumulative) | 88.54 | 99.51 | 100.00 |
| B. Variable | Pseudo-F | p | % explained |
| Exposure | 69.6 | 0.002 | 87.5 |
| Year | 5.8 | 0.006 | 10.6 |
| Island | 5.1 | 0.090 | 9.3 |

324



325

326 **Figure 3. Bi-plot of results of redundancy analysis of fish trophic biomass with location,**
 327 **wave exposure, and year.** Blue circles represent the 2013 and 2014 data. Red triangles are
 328 orientations. Squares are centroids of Darwin and Wolf. Vectors are magnitude and directional
 329 effects of each trophic group on orientation of locations in ordination space.

330

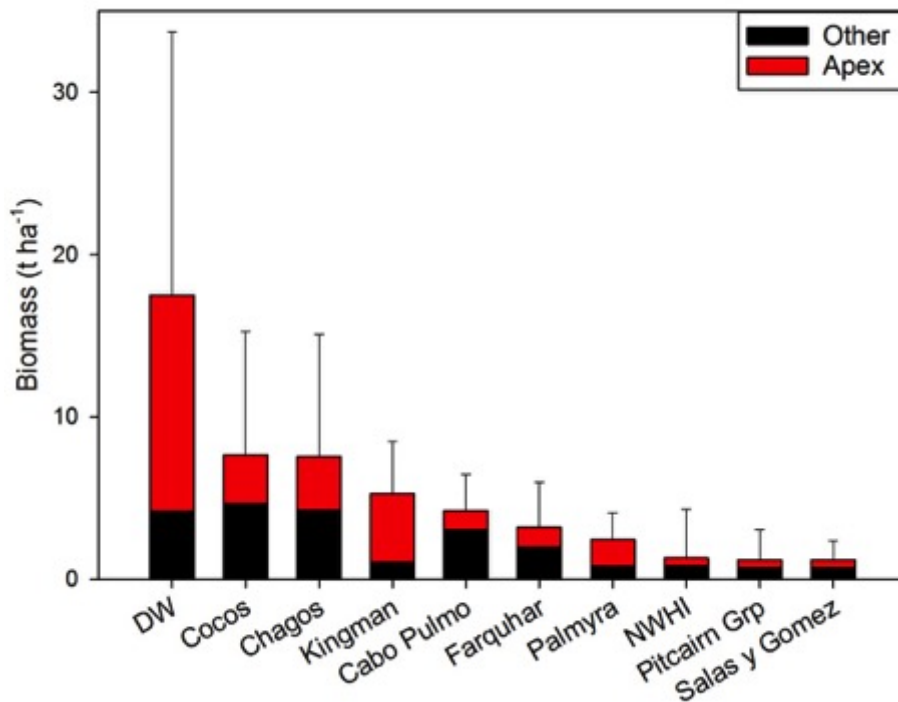
331 Discussion

332 The first quantitative fish surveys using the stereo-video approach around Darwin and Wolf
 333 islands revealed the largest fish biomass reported to date on a reef worldwide (Fig. 4). This
 334 extraordinary biomass, which consists mostly of sharks, is considerably larger than that reported
 335 at Cocos Island National Park (Friedlander et al., 2012) and the Chagos Marine Reserve (Graham
 336 et al., 2013), the next largest fish biomasses globally.

337 One potential issue is the comparison of shark biomass results from different methods. We
 338 obtained biomass estimates using two methods: underwater visual censuses and video censuses,
 339 and found no significant differences between the two methods, despite a 57% difference in mean
 340 biomass between them. This difference is probably due to the large variance in shark biomass
 341 values, the small sample size, and the underestimation of shark sizes by visual censuses (Fig.
 342 S1). There is no practical way to deal with the issue of small sample size since Darwin and Wolf
 343 are small islands, and the availability of comparable sampling habitat is limited. The issue of
 344 large variance is also endemic to areas that show large concentrations of top predators in specific

345 spots, typically exposed and with strong currents (Friedlander et al. 2012; García-Charton et al.
 346 2004; Hearn et al. 2010), making the distribution of top predators highly heterogeneous. In any
 347 case, even if the 57% difference between methods were significant, the shark biomass at Darwin
 348 and Wolf (12.4 t ha⁻¹) would still be greater than any other location globally (Cocos Island would
 349 be the closest with a re-estimated upper value 7.1 t ha⁻¹ for apex predators).
 350

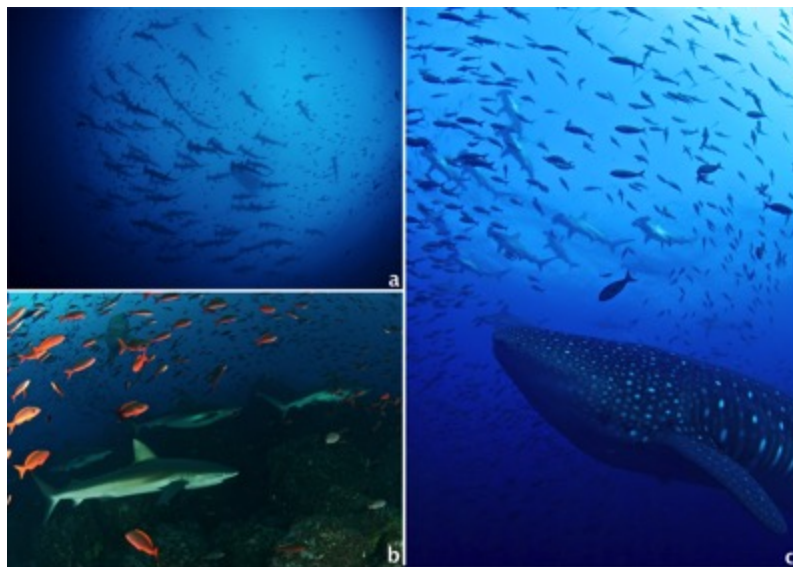
351 Our results contribute to the growing body of literature that demonstrates that the least impacted
 352 areas are dominated by top predatory fishes, mainly sharks (Friedlander & DeMartini, 2002b;
 353 Sandin et al., 2008; Graham et al., 2013; Friedlander et al., 2013, 2014a). At Darwin and Wolf,
 354 top predators account for an astonishing 85% of the fish biomass, a percentage found previously
 355 only at the unfished Kingman Reef on the Line Islands (Sandin et al., 2008). Inverted fish
 356 biomass pyramids had been unreported until recent surveys of unfished coral reefs (Sala, 2015).
 357 Such inverted biomass pyramids of subsets of ecological communities can be maintained when
 358 the top levels of the food web have a much lower turnover rate (slower growth rate per biomass
 359 unit) than their prey (Sandin & Zgliczynski, 2015), and/or when they are subsidized by external
 360 energy inputs (Trebilco et al. 2013). In the case of Darwin and Wolf, the large predatory fish
 361 biomass might be supported not only by the large abundance of lower trophic levels fish on the
 362 reefs but also by the very productive surrounding pelagic waters, where hammerhead and other
 363 sharks take daily foraging excursions (Ketchum et al., 2014a,b).



364
 365 **Figure 4. Biomass at Darwin and Wolf compared to other remote locations and no-take**
 366 **marine reserves around the world.** Data from (DeMartini et al., 2008; Sandin et al., 2008;
 367 Aburto-Oropeza et al., 2011; Friedlander et al., 2012, 2013, 2014a,b; Graham et al., 2013).

368

369 Sharks, mainly hammerhead and Galapagos sharks, dominated the fish assemblage, but other
370 predators like the bluefin trevally, black jack (*Caranx lugubris*) and bigeye jack (*C. sexfasciatus*)
371 were also common at several of the sites surveyed (Fig.5a-c). Our results revealed a marked
372 concentration of sharks and planktivorous fish biomass at the southeast corners of Darwin and
373 Wolf, something previously documented by acoustic telemetry studies (Hearn et al., 2010;
374 Ketchum et al., 2014b). The higher fish abundance at these SE locations may be related to local
375 oceanographic features, dominated by a unidirectional current from the southeast to the
376 northwest that collides with the southeast corner of both islands (Hearn et al., 2010). This current
377 may enhance productivity that supports rich benthic communities and large numbers of
378 planktivorous fishes, mainly gringos, which may serve as a food source to carnivorous fishes and
379 sharks (Hamner et al., 1988; Hearn et al., 2010). Other proposed hypothesis, include that this
380 area constitutes a vantage location for nightly foraging excursion to adjacent pelagic areas;
381 and/or this area is an important cleaning station (Hearn et al., 2010; Acuña-Marrero et al., 2014;
382 Ketchum et al., 2014b). It is important to consider that these results likely represent maximum
383 annual shark biomass because the surveys were carried out during the cold season (July-
384 December), when hammerhead and other sharks are most abundant (Palacios, 2004; Hearn et al.,
385 2014; Acuña-Marrero et al., 2014; Ketchum et al., 2014b). Seasonal changes in fish assemblages
386 and biomass are likely since hammerheads are known to migrate from these islands between
387 February and June (Ketchum et al., 2014b). Future studies should focus on seasonal trends and
388 depth gradients (Lindfield, McIlwain & Harvey, 2014) in shark abundance and distribution.



389

390 **Figure 5 Common encounters around Darwin and Wolf Islands.** a) A large school of
391 hammerhead sharks (*Sphyrna lewini*); b) A group of Galapagos sharks (*Carcharhinus*
392 *galapagensis*), including a couple of pregnant females; c) A large female whale shark
393 (*Rhincodon typus*) swims among a school of hammerhead sharks. All photos by Pelayo Salinas-
394 de-León.

395

396 A total ban on the capture, transport, and trade of sharks within the GMR was established in
397 2000 (AIM, 2000). However, illegal fishing within GMR boundaries (Jacquet et al., 2008; Carr

398 et al., 2013) and recent efforts by local artisanal fishermen to expand longline fishing, a practice
399 banned since 2005 due to large by-catch (Murillo et al., 2004), threaten shark populations. While
400 veteran divers report larger abundance of sharks at Darwin and Wolf 30 years ago (Peñaherrera-
401 Palma et al., 2015), the absence of long-term quantitative studies to monitor shark and large
402 pelagic fish on a systematic basis and with enough replication does not allow an accurate
403 assessment of the magnitude of decline of shark populations at Darwin and Wolf. By
404 comparison, the recent analysis of a 21-year monitoring program for sharks and large pelagic
405 fishes at Cocos Island National Park in Costa Rica revealed a sharp decline in 8 of the 12
406 elasmobranch species monitored, including the endangered hammerhead shark and the giant
407 manta ray (*Manta birostris*) (White et al., 2015).

408 Despite the large shark biomass at Darwin and Wolf, our surveys also revealed a low overall
409 biomass of predatory reef fishes such as the leatherbass (*Dermatolepis dermatolepis*) and the
410 sailfin grouper (*Mycteroperca olfax*), both endemic to the Eastern Tropical Pacific (ETP) (Grove
411 & Lavenberg, 1997). These species are highly prized by Galapagos artisanal fishermen, but their
412 life histories (e.g., long lives, slow growing) make them extremely vulnerable to overfishing
413 (Aburto-Oropeza & Hull, 2008; Usseglio et al., 2015). Leatherbass biomass reported for Darwin
414 and Wolf ($0.008 \text{ t ha}^{-1} \pm 0.05 \text{ SD}$) is 14 times lower than at the unfished Cocos Island (0.1 t ha^{-1})
415 (Friedlander et al., 2012). Artisanal fishermen are known to directly target the only reported
416 spawning aggregation for *M. olfax* in the GMR (Salinas-de-León, Rastoin & Acuña-Marrero,
417 2015), an unsustainable fishing practice known to deplete reefs fish stocks at an alarming rate
418 (Sala, Ballesteros & Starr, 2001; Sadovy & Domeier, 2005; Erisman et al., 2011; Hamilton et al.,
419 2012). The low biomass estimates for groupers reported here are likely caused by the
420 unregulated artisanal fishery for demersal fishes in the GMR that directly targets over 50 coastal
421 fish species and has been shown to have a negative impact on coastal resources of the GMR
422 (Ruttenberg, 2001; Molina et al., 2004; Burbano et al., 2014; Schiller et al., 2014).

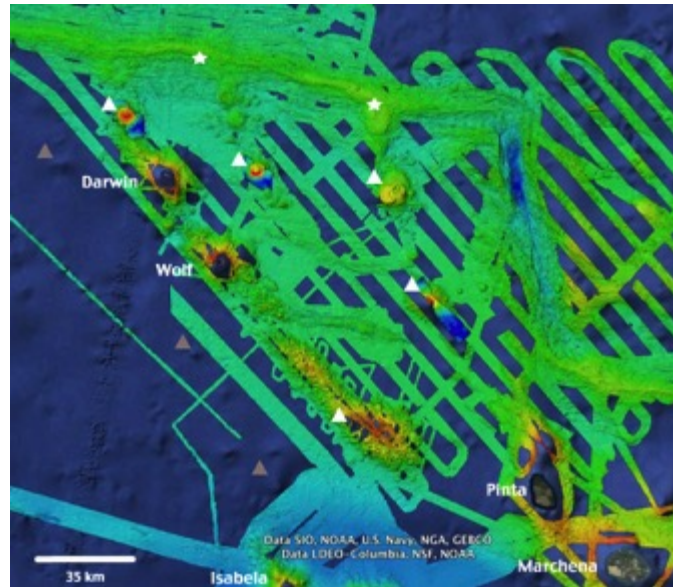
423 Our results also add to the growing body of literature that supports the use of the stereo video
424 methodology as a complement to traditional visual census, as this technique improves the
425 accuracy and precision of fish length estimates (Harvey, Fletcher & Shortis, 2001, 2002),
426 produces more accurate estimates of area surveyed (Harvey et al., 2004), and eliminates the
427 inter-observer bias associated with species identification (Mallet & Pelletier, 2014). Although
428 both stereo-DOVS and UVC recorded a similar number of shark species and overall relative
429 abundance, in our study (one of the few to evaluate the use of DOVs with large and highly
430 mobile species such as sharks), confirmed that even experienced divers tend to underestimate the
431 individual length of large fishes.

432 **Conservation implications**

433

434 This study adds to the growing body of literature that highlights the ecological uniqueness and
435 the global irreplaceable value of Darwin and Wolf (Salinas-De-León et al., 2015). These islands
436 not only harbour the largest shark biomass reported to date, but also represent a unique tropical
437 bioregion within the GMR (Edgar et al., 2004). In addition, they are home to the last true coral
438 reefs in the GMR (Banks, Vera & Chiriboga, 2009; Glynn et al., 2009). These islands also
439 represent essential stepping stones for endangered and highly migratory species, such as
440 hammerhead sharks (Hearn et al., 2010; Bessudo et al., 2011; Ketchum et al., 2014a). They are

441 key waypoints for a recently documented migration probably related to reproductive purposes for
442 the largest fish species on the planet, the whale shark *Rhincodon typus* (Acuña-Marrero et al.,
443 2014) (Fig. 5d), and are home to the only known reproductive aggregation for the regionally
444 endemic sailfin grouper (Salinas-de-León, Rastoin & Acuña-Marrero, 2015). These islands are
445 visited by deep-water species such as the smalltooth sandtiger shark *Odontaspis ferox* (Acuña-
446 Marrero et al., 2013), and are surrounded by numerous seamounts and active hydrothermal vents
447 that harbour unique biological communities (Salinas-de-León, *unpublished data*) (Fig. 6).



448

449

450 **Figure 6. High-resolution bathymetry around Darwin and Wolf Islands.** Recent multi-beam
451 echo sounder surveys around D&W have revealed the presence of a number of seamounts (white
452 triangles) and active hydrothermal vents and black smokers (white stars) that support unique
453 biological communities. Additional inferred seamounts (grey triangles) are likely to be
454 discovered to the West of the Islands. Source: (Dennis et al., 2012), Ocean Exploration Trust
455 NA-064 2015.

456 The economic benefits of ecotourism from sharks are far greater than shark fishing (Clua et al.,
457 2011; Gallagher & Hammerschlag, 2011; Cisneros-Montemayor et al., 2013). For instance, the
458 net present value of the average hammerhead shark at Cocos Island National Park was estimated
459 at \$1.6 million, compared to the ~\$200 that a fisherman obtains by selling a dead shark
460 (Friedlander et al., 2012). In Galapagos, the net present value of a shark to the tourism industry is
461 an astonishing \$5.4 million (Lynham et al., 2015). The value of an individual shark to the
462 tourism industry is ~\$360,000 per year, compared to \$158 obtained from a dead shark (Lynham
463 et al., 2015). That makes sharks alive in Galapagos the most valuable on Earth. Despite their
464 high economic value and iconic importance, only about 50 km² of the waters around Darwin and
465 Wolf (representing an insignificant 0.04% of the total GMR area) were fully protected from
466 fishing after the creation of the GMR in 1998.

467 Given the large-scale migrations reported for several shark species around Wolf and Darwin
468 (Bessudo et al., 2011; Ketchum et al., 2014a), and the night foraging excursions by scalloped

469 hammerhead sharks of up to ~30 km from shore (Ketchum et al., 2014a), the levels of protection
470 after the creation of the Galapagos Marine Reserve in 1998 were clearly insufficient. The
471 government of Ecuador created a 40,000 km² no-take reserve (the ‘Darwin and Wolf Marine
472 Sanctuary’) in March 2016, expanding levels of protection around Darwin and Wolf, including
473 some of the numerous seamounts located around these islands (Fig. 6). This conservation move
474 is critical to ensure the recovery and long-term preservation of one of the most extraordinary
475 marine ecosystems on the planet – and an economic engine for Ecuador.

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