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‘Ruined and Lost’: Spanish Destruction of the Pearl Coast in the Early Sixteenth Century

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ABSTRACT

In the early sixteenth century, the area that today comprises eastern Venezuela and its offshore islands enriched Spain with pearls, supplied Spanish colonists with Indian slaves, and generated high hopes of finding interior civilisations rich in gold. However, the prosperity of Spanish colonies in this region (called the Pearl Coast) proved tragically short-lived, lasting less than two decades. Using Garrett Hardin’s concept of the ‘tragedy of the commons’, this article examines Spanish overexploitation of both the oyster beds around the island of Cubagua and the native peoples along the mainland by competing groups of Spaniards. Building upon the works of historians such as Pablo Ojer and Enrique Otte, and utilising archival research and Otte’s seldom-used compilations of primary documents, this article analyses the dramatic but little-known history of the Pearl Coast, where damage to the environment went hand in hand with the enslavement and decimation of native populations.

KEYWORDS

Cubagua, Venezuela, pearls, oysters, Pearl Coast, Indian slavery, Spanish colonialism, Tragedy of the Commons

INTRODUCTION

When different individuals or groups use common, exhaustible resources, they usually act with self-interest, resulting in the overexploitation of the resource to the detriment of sustainable development. In such situations, the predicted outcome is the exhaustion of the unrestricted resource to a point where it is severely debilitated or destroyed altogether. This ‘tragedy of the commons’ – a concept developed by Garrett Hardin in 1968¹ – provides insight into many cases of Spanish conquest and colonisation in the Americas.² Using Hardin’s concept, this article analyses a particular case of Spanish overexploitation of oyster beds for pearls. Another area where the concept of the ‘tragedy of the commons’ is useful is in analysing the overexploitation of native peoples (Indians) by competing groups of Spaniards. The Crown granted contracts to individuals to conquer and colonise certain areas. However, these contracts were so broad, numerous, overlapping and unregulated that in many cases, Spaniards came to view unconquered Indians as a common resource to be exploited by the first among them daring and resourceful enough to do so. Recognising this perspective – even with its many important exceptions³ – facilitates an understanding of Spanish infighting over the exploitation of Indian peoples. Perhaps the most illuminating cases of Spanish ‘tragedy of the commons’ are those in which overexploitation of the natural environment went hand in hand with the enslavement and decimation of native populations.

One such case occurred in what is today north-eastern Venezuela and the coastal islands of Cubagua, Coche and Margarita. In the early sixteenth century, this region enriched Spain with pearls, supplied Spanish colonists with Indian slaves, and generated high hopes of finding interior civilisations rich in gold. This article focuses on the short-lived success and ultimate downfall of the Spanish island colony of Cubagua, as well as successive failures of Spanish enterprises on the adjacent mainland – the Pearl Coast, Paria and their hinterlands (see Figure 1). Between the early 1520s and the late 1530s, Spanish overexploitation of the abundant pearl-bearing oyster beds and the native peoples of this area quickly turned a promising region into a poor and depopulated backwater of the Spanish Empire.⁴

Although the Spaniards’ exploitation of the region’s Indians was much more complicated than their overfishing of oyster beds, linking the two provides a more comprehensive regional history and illuminates a common pattern of Spanish misuse of the region’s resources. Moreover, the devastation of both the region’s oyster beds and its native population greatly frustrated and prolonged Spanish efforts to establish an enduring and prosperous colony in the area, with the arguable exception of Margarita Island.

This study is divided into three sections. Section I recounts Cubagua’s dramatic history, which was inextricably tied to Spanish harvesting of the region’s

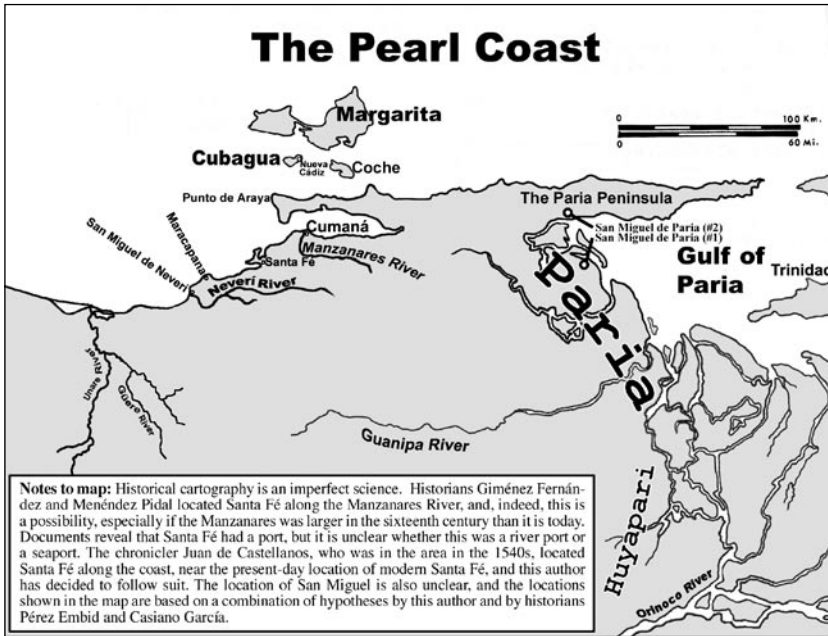


FIGURE 1. The Pearl Coast

oyster beds. It also briefly compares pearling along the Pearl Coast with pearling in the Persian Gulf. Section II analyses the wider regional history by examining three topics: (1) the slaving business that Cubaguans (Spanish residents of Cubagua) and other Spaniards took up after the decline of the pearling economy; (2) the decimation and alienation of the region's indigenous peoples; and (3) the often antagonistic relationship between Cubaguans and the various parties of Spanish conquistadors who launched expeditions in the region in search of wealthy native kingdoms in the interior of northern South America – a vast and unknown land that sixteenth-century Spaniards called Tierra Firma. Cubaguans claimed jurisdiction over much of Tierra Firma, but so too did the conquistadors. Competing for this territory, conquistadors fought among themselves as well as with Cubaguans, especially over the rights to exploit the mainland Indians. Section III concludes the study by examining the aftermath of the Spaniards' destructive enterprises in the region during the early sixteenth century and by evaluating the applicability of Hardin's 'tragedy of the commons' concept to the region's history.

I. THE RISE OF CUBAGUA AND ITS 'TRAGEDY OF THE COMMONS'

Structurally similar to some of today's oil-export economies, the dominance and extractive nature of Cubagua's pearling economy largely discouraged development not tied to pearling, and thus limited the type of economic diversification favourable to sustainable development. Nevertheless, for a few decades Spaniards acquired considerable wealth in the area, and a striking aspect of Cubagua's history is that the colony began as a tremendous success. In the 1520s, many Spaniards, and even some non-Spaniards, wanted a stake in the island's pearling economy. The Spanish Crown wanted its share, and formulated fiscal policies in the region to obtain for itself as much wealth as possible.

The Spaniards' history along the Pearl Coast began with Christopher Columbus' third voyage to the New World in 1498. Sailing west along the south side of the Paria Peninsula, Columbus saw Indians wearing strings of pearls. He sent men ashore to inquire into the source of these gems, and thus learned of the pearl-rich islands on the other side of the peninsula,⁵ where native peoples had fished oysters and other shellfish for thousands of years.⁶ The 'discovery' of these islands (Cubagua, Coche and Margarita) and, more specifically, the existence of pearl-trading Indians, generated excitement in Spain. Soon expeditions led by Alonso de Hojeda, Rodrigo de Bastidas, and the partners Peralonso Niño and Cristobal Guerra visited the area, which became known as the Pearl Coast. Most of these expeditions returned to Spain with profits in pearls. In 1500, the Niño-Guerra expedition brought back so many pearls⁷ that Sanford Mosk described it as possibly 'the first financially successful voyage to America'.⁸

Medieval Europeans had long valued pearls, which were rare and exotic, and mostly imported from Asia and the Middle East. As large quantities of pearls arrived from the Pearl Coast and Panama in the early sixteenth century, monarchs and nobles started wearing pearls by the hundreds, inaugurating what some historians of ornaments have called 'The Great Age of Pearls'.⁹ According to R.A. Donkin, 'Cubaguan pearls, in particular, became famous throughout Europe'.¹⁰ Evidence of the high demand for pearls appears in many portraits commissioned by European royal houses (e.g., the Habsburgs, Tudors, Stuarts, and Medicis); the subjects are shown wearing necklaces, earrings, hats, cloaks, gloves and crowns adorned with pearls (see Figure 2).

The handful of voyages to the Pearl Coast between roughly 1498 and 1505 generated stories of untold riches in pearls, and, by the time these stories reached European publishers, they had become greatly exaggerated. In a letter that Luciano Formisano and other scholars consider to be authentic, the famous cosmographer Amerigo Vespucci wrote that on his 1499–1500 voyage to the Pearl Coast the natives gave him 11 large pearls and an unstated quantity of smaller ones.¹¹ Several forged letters printed by various publishers and attributed to Vespucci had an arguably more important impact because of the sensation they caused. One of these forgeries – printed in Florence circa 1505 and distributed



FIGURE 2. Titian's painting of Empress Isabella with a necklace of pearls. Museo Nacional del Prado.

widely – exemplifies the types of stories circulating among Europeans about the Pearl Coast:

We stayed with these people for forty-seven days, and we acquired 119 marks of pearls for very little merchandise, which I do not think cost us even forty ducats,* because we gave them nothing other than bells, mirrors, glass beads and brass leaves. One of [the Indians] traded all the pearls he had for one bell. We learned

from them how they fished for them and where, and they gave us many oysters, in which pearls were hatched. We acquired an oyster in which 130 pearls were hatching, and others with less: the Queen took the one with 130 pearls from me, so I took care that she did not see any others.¹²

This forged letter has many obvious fallacies (an oyster does not 'hatch' pearls, much less 130 of them). However, Spaniards for a time were indeed able to barter for pearls with the type of trinkets cited in the letter. Although Indians most likely fished for oysters primarily for their food value, about one in ten oysters contains a pearl, and evidence (such as the above-cited report by Columbus) suggests that Indians valued pearls.¹³ Nevertheless, the native Indian peoples of the Pearl Coast (collectively referred to here as the Pearl Coast Indians)¹⁴ were at first willing to trade pearls to the Spaniards for what were to them probably more prized exotica. However, as an increasing number of Spaniards arrived avidly seeking pearls, the trinkets they brought to trade soon became less exotic to the Indians, while, at the same time, the Indians better recognised the potential value of their pearls. Eventually, Indians started to demand more for their pearls, which frustrated the travel-weary Spaniards, who, in their desperation to acquire the pearls they wanted and the food they usually needed, often became abusive toward the Indians.

By 1505, the Crown had virtually suspended authorised voyages by entrepreneurs to the Pearl Coast, because it planned instead to control more directly the area's lucrative pearl trade for its own profit. After such plans proved too difficult and expensive to realise, in December 1512, King Ferdinand decreed that licensed Spaniards from the Greater Antilles could visit the Pearl Coast to barter for pearls, so long as they 'pay one fifth of the pearls they acquire or barter' to the Crown.¹⁵ This royal tax was known as the 'quinto'. Also around this time, news was trickling back to Spain of Father Antonio de Montesinos' sermon criticising Spaniards on Hispaniola for their mistreatment of Indians. Perhaps worried that Spaniards based in Greater Antilles would similarly alienate and decimate the Indians of the Pearl Coast, King Ferdinand in 1513 authorised Indian-advocate Fray Pedro de Córdoba to establish a mission on the Pearl Coast mainland. He also ordered his subjects 'not in any way, shape or form, directly or indirectly, to dare upset, mistreat or have any dealings or communication with the Indians of the region where the said friars plan to be, unless they are able to show that they have permission and consent from the said Fray Pedro de Córdoba or from the clerics who will be with him'.¹⁶

Although there were dramatic incidents of Spanish treachery, murder and enslavement, Ferdinand's decree largely enabled Fray Pedro de Córdoba and his fellow Dominicans to keep the peace for nearly seven years on most of the Pearl Coast. However, the flood of fortune-seeking Spaniards eventually rose too high for anyone to control.¹⁷ By 1520, Spaniards based on both Cubagua and the Greater Antilles had abused, raided and enslaved various Indians along the Pearl Coast, effectively destroying amicable trade for pearls and food. That

summer, an Indian alliance attacked the Spaniards, causing them to flee the region. The following spring, a Spanish punitive expedition from Hispaniola returned in force, killing or enslaving many of the Indians who opposed them. The campaign, led by Gonzalo de Ocampo, decimated native populations near Cumaná and Santa Fé, especially the sedentary Tagare.¹⁸ According to a Tierra Firme royal accountant (*contador*) named Miguel de Castellanos, within two months Spaniards auctioned off in Santo Domingo more than 600 Indians captured in Ocampo's campaign.¹⁹ When the Dominican friar Bartolomé de Las Casas arrived on the Pearl Coast shortly thereafter with a royal contract to establish a peaceful colony among the Indians of the area, the recent violence made his endeavour untenable. Spanish officials on Cubagua were antagonistic to his efforts, and angry Indians soon burned his defenceless colony to the ground.²⁰

In 1521, supplied with a new pearl-diving workforce consisting of Indians enslaved in the recent conflict, some 300 Spanish settlers founded the town of Nueva Cádiz on Cubagua, even though water had to be obtained from the Manzanares River on the mainland. The Spaniards apparently valued the rich oyster beds off Cubagua's coast more highly than a convenient source of fresh water, and soon high yields in pearls attracted others to the arid island. By the mid-1520s, the population swelled to some 1,000 as Spaniards flocked to Cubagua to participate in the pearl-based economy, and by the early 1530s, the population may have reached 1,500.²¹ For a brief period, Spanish fortune-seekers considered Cubagua to be one of the largest bonanzas in the Americas. Summarising the description of Cubagua by the early sixteenth-century chronicler, Juan de Castellanos, Charles Alexander writes: 'Get-rich-quick stories appeared to be the order of the day; men were reputed to have arrived on the island broke and to have departed wealthy. So abundant were the oysters that it was thought that the fishery would never end'.²²

While it lasted, the Cubaguan pearl boom was one of Spain's greatest sources of wealth in the Indies, and the Crown prized its pearling colony. The German scholar Alexander von Humboldt illustrated Cubagua's past pearling prosperity after visiting the area in 1800:

The quinto [royal fifth tax] which the king's officers drew from the produce of pearls, amounted to fifteen thousand ducats; which, according to the value of the precious metals in those times, and the extensiveness of contraband trade, may be regarded as a very considerable sum. It appears that till 1530 the value of the pearls sent to Europe amounted yearly on an average to more than eight hundred thousand piastres [pesos]. In order to judge the importance of this branch of commerce to Seville, Toledo, Antwerp, and Genoa, we should recollect that at the same period the whole of the mines of America did not furnish two millions of piastres.²³

Although Humboldt wrote this passage over 250 years after the fact, and his sources remain largely unknown, his account is for the most part supported

by modern scholarship. Historian Enrique Otte studied many of the primary documents concerning the island's brief history, including records of the quinto, and reached a similar conclusion about the colony's wealth and importance. However, Otte acknowledges that accurate pearl-production figures cannot be calculated from the quinto due to widespread tax evasion.²⁴ The Crown repeatedly ordered that all pearls obtained were to be taxed the quinto,²⁵ but this almost never happened. Royal assessors could not supervise all pearling operations, and, in any case, pearls were easily concealed. Also, unlike gold and silver, officials could not brand, stamp or coin pearls without damaging their value. In fact, the Crown prohibited Cubaguans from piercing pearls. Only jewellers in Spain had the privilege of piercing and crafting the ocean gem.²⁶ In the Indies, pearls functioned as a currency, even though the Crown in this period did not approve of this practice. The quinto on pearls, although designed to be a tax on production, was essentially an export tax.²⁷

Despite the fact that the quinto on pearls does not precisely measure total pearl production, Otte asserts 'the quinto does serve to reflect the evolution of pearl production'. This 'evolution' evidences a dramatic history of boom to bust. Between 1513 and 1520, the quinto on pearls averaged 23 kilograms (100 *marcos*) annually. In 1521, the quinto rose to more than 46 kilograms. Between 1522 and 1526, the quinto's yearly average reached more than 161 kilograms, and in 1527, the quinto peaked at more than 276 kilograms.²⁸ Since 276 kilograms of pearls represented only one-fifth of those legally exported (the quinto), and an even smaller proportion of the total harvested, these tax figures indicate only a fraction of the wealth generated by Cubagua's oyster beds.

Cubagua's prosperity drew hundreds of fortune-seekers and merchants to the island, and increased trade with Spain and Santo Domingo.²⁹ Archaeological excavations revealed that Nueva Cádiz had a customs house, a church, a Franciscan convent, a jail and a granary built of limestone, and private homes made from brick and stone.³⁰ In 1528, the Crown granted Nueva Cádiz the royal title of *ciudad* (city) – a title given only to the most important settlements.³¹ This title, as well as the investment in infrastructure, reflected not only the colony's wealth, but also Cubaguans' belief in its permanence.

Many pearling enterprises were individually owned, but the larger enterprises usually consisted of partnerships involving investors based in Santo Domingo and Seville.³² The principal production expenses of pearling operations included slaves, overseers and boats. In the early 1520s, many of the slave divers were imported Lucayans – natives of the Bahamas who, according to Bartolomé de Las Casas, were such 'famed swimmers' that their price rose to as high as 150 gold pesos each.³³ Within years the Lucayans died out and were replaced with Indians from the mainland. The lives of slave divers were dismal – they worked in the sea or on a boat for most of the day and were then locked up at night.³⁴ The number of slave divers per operation varied greatly, ranging roughly between eight and 18 during the 1520s. A municipal report in 1535 mentioned pearling

enterprises with 30, 40 and even 50 Indian divers.³⁵ However, this increase probably does not so much reflect larger pearling operations as it does Cubagua's transition to principally a slave-market economy.

The health of Cubagua's economy largely depended on the condition of the oyster beds, which, according to Otte, the Spaniards 'subjected from the start to a system of exploitation without limits'.³⁶ No one owned or regulated this common resource, and thus the oyster beds were vulnerable to the type of overexploitation described by Hardin's 'tragedy of the commons'. The pearling of a certain area of an oyster bed was simply determined by who arrived there first.³⁷ Since no individual or enterprise could preserve or protect the oyster beds vis-à-vis the competition, Cubaguan pearlery pursued their immediate individual interests, harvesting pearls as rapidly as possible. By 1528 most of the oyster beds closest to Cubagua were exhausted, but soon pristine oyster beds were discovered off the east shore of the neighbouring island of Coche. Nearly all the pearlery rushed to this new location, and in just one month, January of 1529, they extracted more than 345 kilograms of pearls from the Coche oyster beds.³⁸ Such large yields of pearls reflected enormous harvests of oysters, and because only about ten per cent of oysters contain a pearl, in the few decades that Spaniards inhabited Cubagua, they must have fished billions upon billions of the molluscs.³⁹

The first effort toward a pearling regulation resulted not from some shrewd sense of the common good, but rather as a reaction to competition from an outsider with a dredge. In 1528, in return for a third of the harvest, Charles V granted the Milanese nobleman, Luis de Lampiñán, permission to build 'a machine and device with which [pearlery] could fish pearls...without it being necessary to send Indians, slaves and other persons to the bottom of the sea to extract them'.⁴⁰ The grant included a six-year monopoly to use the dredge near Cubagua, starting at a depth of five fathoms. After Cubaguans protested, the grant was changed to 12 fathoms – a depth out of the range of both Cubaguans and most oysters – whereupon Lampiñán and his associates protested.⁴¹ The case was sent to the Audiencia (Royal Court) of Santo Domingo for settlement. Cubagua's attorney, Francisco Jiménez, argued to the court that Indian divers only harvested mature, pearl-bearing oysters, leaving behind those too young to contain a pearl, while Lampiñán's undiscerning dredge irreparably damaged entire oyster beds. In support of this argument, a fifty-year-old witness named Diego Méndez, who lived 'in these parts' for 15 years, testified that dredges permanently destroy oyster beds. According to Méndez, Ojeda's dredging produced 600 marcos of pearls, but destroyed the oyster beds so thoroughly that no oysters had since been fished there, and the Indians complained that Ojeda had destroyed their fishery.⁴²

Judge Antonio Clavijo ruled that Lampiñán could use his dredge in depths deeper than seven fathoms, but in the face of Cubaguan hostility, Lampiñán abandoned the project. He sold the dredge to Antón de Jaén, a wealthy Cubaguan who

had resided on the island since 1520.⁴³ There is no evidence that Jaén ever used the dredge. Nevertheless, three contemporary chroniclers cited Cubaguans' use of dredges,⁴⁴ and in 1539 the Crown felt the need to officially prohibit pearling dredges,⁴⁵ all of which suggests Cubaguans themselves may have quietly used dredges after eliminating the threat of Lampiñán's granted monopoly.

If this is the case, it partly explains how the Cubaguans devastated the region's oyster beds within a few decades, while the celebrated oyster beds in the Persian Gulf were less prone to exhaustion, supporting a pearling industry that, according to archaeologist Robert Carter, lasted 'over 7,000 years'. The oyster beds of the Persian Gulf were also fished as 'communal property' by 'the native inhabitants of the shores of the Gulf',⁴⁶ but local authorities there forbade dredges and other technologies that would have threatened their control of the industry, especially vis-à-vis European colonial powers. Sometimes colonial powers respected the traditional pearl-diving techniques in the Gulf, which the scholar Richard LeBaron Bowen described as essentially 'skin diving'.⁴⁷ In the sixteenth century, the Portuguese were content simply to collect a tax on pearl fishing, and in the nineteenth century, the British 'took great care to protect the ancient and seemingly sustainable diving techniques in the Gulf, perhaps because of fears of overfishing, and at the insistence of local rulers'.⁴⁸ According to LeBaron Bowen, the British 'prohibited drags, dredges, and compressed air diving suits or helmets', and imposed the heavy fine of 30,000 rupees (9,000 Maria Teresa Dollars) for violation of the law.⁴⁹ Other factors also contributed to the sustainability of Arab and Persian pearling, including 'the vast distribution of oyster beds' in the Gulf, which allowed greater 'scope for regeneration'.⁵⁰ However, the prohibition against dredging was significant. Dredges extract both young and mature oysters and literally scrape away much of the bed that the oysters inhabit, thus severely impairing the oysters' ability to regenerate.⁵¹

As for the Pearl Coast, dredging probably contributed to the rapid exhaustion of the region's oyster beds, although it was not the only factor. Oyster beds along the Pearl Coast were rich where they existed, but they were less extensive than those of the Gulf, and as mentioned earlier, by 1528 overfishing without dredges had already exhausted many of the oyster beds nearest to the island of Cubagua.⁵²

As Cubagua's oyster beds disappeared, so too did the *raison d'être* of Nueva Cádiz. The Crown first responded to falling pearl yields in December 1532 by exempting Cubaguans from paying the custom duty on imports (the *almojarifazgo*) for two-and-a-half years.⁵³ In January 1535, Cubaguans voiced their desperation in a letter to the Crown, in which they asked for a loan of 2,000 pesos to buy food while they waited for the oyster beds to recover. The Crown never approved the loan. On July 12, Cubagua's Royal Treasurer reported, 'We have suffered and we continue to suffer a great necessity due to the very sterile year. We do not even have maize to eat and we are sustaining ourselves with a caravel that came with a cargo of cassava'.⁵⁴ In October, the Crown responded to the

Cubaguans' renewed request for a loan by simply acknowledging their distress and encouraging them to struggle on until the oyster beds regenerated.⁵⁵ That December, the Crown granted Cubaguans an extension of their *almojarifazgo* exemption for another two-and-a-half years, admitting that otherwise Cubaguans 'will all go to live and settle in other regions, and those who remain will suffer much necessity and would not be supplied with foodstuffs and other necessary things'.⁵⁶ Then, in 1537, the Crown ordered the size of the pearl fishing canoes to be decreased,⁵⁷ but nothing could reverse the damage already done to the oyster beds, and Cubaguans continued to plead for aid that never came.⁵⁸

By the late 1530s, overexploitation of the oyster beds had caused pearl yields to dwindle, but both Cubaguans and the Crown at times cited other reasons for the decline. In 1537, a royal order mentioned that 'often the business and fishing of pearls has ceased due to a lack of food and supplies for the Indians who work the operations'. The document blamed this precarious situation on various Spanish conquistadors and their men (mainly those comprising the expeditions of Ordás, Ortal and Sedeño), who were accused of spending long periods of time on Cubagua recovering, carousing and buying supplies, which, in turn, created food shortages for the islanders.⁵⁹

Such official speculation denied the reality that overexploitation had ruined Cubagua's pearling economy. The practically unfettered abuse of the oyster beds demonstrates the validity of Hardin's 'tragedy of the commons'. Competition for profit from the common exhaustible resource of the oyster beds resulted in their destruction.

II. DESTRUCTIVE RIVALRIES: CUBAGUANS, CONQUISTADORS AND COMPETITION FOR THE REGION'S PEOPLE

The Spaniards' exploitation of the Pearl Coast Indians was in many ways similar to their exploitation of the region's oyster beds, although there were many more complexities and exceptions to the former because the Spaniards did not always treat the region's native peoples as mere commodities. However, the Spaniards' ambition and notions of superiority, together with fierce competition between different groups, created a near free-for-all climate in which Spaniards raided and enslaved Pearl Coast native peoples with little regard for the long-term consequences. The result was a significantly depleted Pearl Coast Indian population in which most of the survivors became implacably hostile toward the Spaniards. This, in turn, diminished the Spaniards' desire and ability to establish a viable Pearl Coast colony.

During the heyday of Cubaguan pearling (roughly 1518 to 1530), merchant-adventurers (*armadores*) from the Greater Antilles, Seville and Cubagua vied for licenses to trade with the Pearl Coast Indians. Such trade was necessary to supply Cubagua and its pearling operations. Included in most of the licenses was

permission to barter for slaves. Under the guise of barter (*rescate*), armadores often used coercion to acquire slaves. At the same time, the Crown regularly granted licenses to certain individuals to make war on rebels or 'Carib' Indians, with permission to enslave those they captured.⁶⁰ A general prohibition against Indian slavery issued in 1530 did little to decrease Cubagua's slave-raiding enterprises, and, in a classic case of the Crown contradicting its own policies, in 1532 Cubaguans were granted a general license to capture and enslave rebellious Indians.

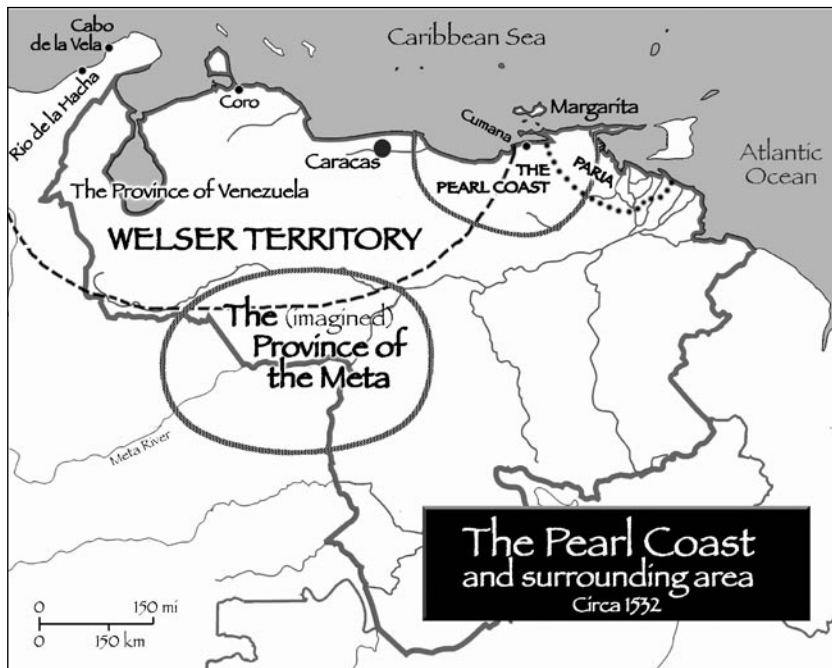


FIGURE 3. The Pearl Coast and Its Surrounding Area.

Starting in 1531, various Spanish conquistadors and their men came to the region in search of the (imagined) golden Province of the Meta (a precursor to the fabled city of El Dorado), or, at least, an Indian kingdom similar to that recently conquered by Hernando Cortés in Mexico.⁶¹ These conquistadors recruited some unemployed Cubaguan pearlery, and also brought hundreds of additional fortune-seekers with them. After launching their expeditions, or *entradas*, many conquistadors made frequent trips back to Cubagua to sell their war captives as slaves and to buy provisions for their soldiers. While enslaving Indians was

not the conquistadors' main goal, as their provisions ran low, pillaging Indian villages and selling Indian slaves became a quick way to resupply their forces and continue their entradas. In the eyes of the conquistadors, the Indian peoples between them and their golden destination were an unregulated, unclaimed (i.e., common) resource. Still, Spaniards might not have so rapidly depleted this common resource if it were not for Cubaguans and competing parties of conquistadors wanting to enslave or exploit the same Indians. As with the oyster beds, competition drove the Spaniards to overexploit the region's Indians to the point that sustainable colonial development became economically unfeasible.

Since settling on the island, Cubaguans had depended on certain Indians to supply them with foodstuffs, and they often were more circumspect than the conquistadors as to which Indians they enslaved. Moreover, some Indian peoples were the Cubaguans' allies – most notably the Guayquerí on the large neighbouring island of Margarita. Some Cubaguans even intermarried with Guayquerí nobility. The most famous Guayquerí-Spanish intermarriage was that of the female chieftain (*cacica*) Isabel to Don Francisco Fajardo, the lieutenant-general of Cubagua and Margarita. Their son, Francisco Fajardo, was the first to conquer the Valley of Caracas and was probably the first mestizo to lead both Spaniards and Guayquerí in expeditions of conquest and colonisation.⁶² However, most Pearl Coast Indians did not experience such fraternisation with Spaniards, and Cubaguans and other Spaniards often classified or re-classified Indians as rebels or 'Caribs' when convenient. Years before the arrival of the conquistadors in the 1530s, Spanish slave-raids had devastated those mainland Indian peoples nearest to Cubagua. By 1527, for example, Spaniards had largely decimated the Indian peoples living along the nearby Gulf of Cariaco, requiring Cubaguans to travel farther afield to search for Indians either to enslave or induce as trading partners.⁶³

Cubaguans found some such Indians inhabiting Paria and the interior of the western Pearl Coast. Problems arose between Cubaguans and the Spanish conquistadors who entered these areas in the 1530s because Cubaguans considered the Indians living there as their own resource. If any Spaniards were to exploit or enslave these unconquered Indians, Cubaguans believed it should be them. However, they could not prevent the conquistadors – who viewed such Indians as a common resource – from doing it first. Thus a complex 'tragedy of the commons' developed because no single group of Spaniards could effectively claim or protect the unconquered Indians.

High demand made enslaving Indians profitable. Struggling merchants and pearlery from Cubagua, determined entrepreneurs from the Greater Antilles, and desperate conquistadors all wanted to claim or enslave the region's remaining Indians for their own purposes. These purposes were frequently at odds, and often one Spanish faction was unconcerned about enslaving the Indian trading partners of another Spanish faction. Furthermore, the market for slaves was not confined to Cubagua; those slaves not consumed in the pearling industry were

often exported. Thousands of slaves registered at Cubagua were sent to the Greater Antilles, and after Peru was discovered in 1531, hundreds more were exported to Panama, where they worked as porters in the murderous trans-isthmus cargo route known as the *trajín*.⁶⁴

The conquistadors' jurisdictional claims to the Pearl Coast mainland also riled Cubaguan authorities. Since its inception in 1522, the municipal government of Nueva Cádiz had claimed jurisdiction over much of this territory. The conquistadors' competing claims led to intense factionalism and power struggles between Cubaguan authorities and conquistadors, and also among rival conquistadors. Indeed, many actions taken by these Spaniards in the early sixteenth century were largely motivated by inter-Spanish rivalries, as different factions sought to claim the area's resources (principally Indians), and as they competed with each other to discover the Province of the Meta.⁶⁵

The first significant conquistador to enter the area in search of the Province of the Meta was Diego de Ordás, a wealthy conquistador famous for his exploits against the Aztecs.⁶⁶ In 1531 Ordás established a settlement in Paria, a province just east of the Pearl Coast. This angered the Cubaguans, who had long-established trade relations with the 'Aruacas' (Arawaks) of Paria. Moreover, the Aruacas had close ties to the Guayquerí of Margarita Island, who, in turn, were the Cubaguans' closest allies and trade partners. At the same time, Cubaguans considered non-Aruaca natives of Paria – many of whom were the traditional enemies of the Aruacas and Guayquerí – an important source of slaves.⁶⁷

After an unsuccessful expedition up the Orinoco River and the destructive plundering of several Indian towns, Ordás decided to move his base camp from Paria to Cumaná on the mainland near Cubagua. The Crown had granted Ordás a contract to explore and potentially possess a huge expanse of unknown territory, from the Amazon to the boundary of the Welsers⁶⁸ in central Venezuela – and Cumaná clearly lay within these boundaries. Nevertheless, the Cubaguans were outraged by Ordás' intrusion into their particular territory, and immediately took action against him. As Ordás sent his forces to Cumaná, the Cubaguans and their Guayquerí allies attacked, seizing most of his ships and capturing hundreds of Ordás' men. Eventually, the Cubaguans arrested Ordás himself, and, after much legal wrangling, sent him to Santo Domingo, where he was released but not permitted to return to his men. Frustrated, Ordás decided to return to Spain to plead his case to the Crown and recruit reinforcements. He died en route, reportedly of syphilis.⁶⁹

Ordás' death created an opportunity for other conquistadors, although his remaining men, encamped in Paria, were deprived of his considerable resources. The two main contenders who sought to assume Ordás' undertaking were the Puerto Rican, Antonio Sedeño, who had been Ordás' rival, and Ordás' former treasurer, Gerónimo de Ortal, who the Crown eventually sanctioned to inherit Ordás' expedition. Of course, the Cubaguans wanted the hinterland of the Pearl Coast reserved for themselves, even craftily naming the unknown territory the

'Llanos [Plains] of Cubagua'.⁷⁰ Despite Ordás' misfortunes, the contenders believed that the Province of the Meta existed in the interior, and each wanted to be the first to find it. Even though Sedeño only had a contract to conquer the island of Trinidad (with vague clauses permitting him to use the adjacent mainland of Paria) and a letter from the Empress Isabella requesting him to look after Ordás' men, the Puerto Rican conquistador declared his determination to be the first to discover the Province of the Meta. Sedeño eventually launched his entrada, against the orders of the Royal Court of Santo Domingo. (Later, in 1537, royal officials labeled Sedeño a traitor, but he died on his expedition and was never brought to justice.)⁷¹ The other main contender, Ortal, was convinced that the Province of the Meta was the New World's true mother lode of gold, and he believed that he would be the first to discover it. In 1534, he wrote to Emperor Charles V, 'I think that in a short time I will accomplish more in his Majesty's service than anyone ever has in these lands'.⁷²

With so much seemingly at stake, Ortal and Sedeño soon came into conflict with each other, and also with the Cubaguans, who still asserted their claim to the Pearl Coast and viewed themselves as the protectors of certain Indian peoples in neighbouring Paria. Thus, when Ortal landed his forces in Paria and started to enslave many of the Indians there, the Cubaguans were outraged. In July 1535, the Treasurer of Cubagua, Francisco de Castellanos, wrote the Emperor about Ortal's activities in Paria:

The Governor Gerónimo Ortal set out from here, and has done a great deal of harm in having depopulated the Province of Paria, enslaving the Indians, and selling them here and in other regions. They were friendly Indians, and they guarded these frontiers against Caribs. Those who he did not seize have escaped to distant lands, leaving the province depopulated. We believe that he did this because certain Indians killed 3 Christians. However, it is not right that a thousand should pay for the actions of six guilty Indians. He has done Margarita a great deal of damage since they had very good relations with [these Indians of Paria].⁷³

Ortal had a different version of these events, blaming his longtime rival, Antonio Sedeño, for inciting the Indians to attack his men. Whatever actually occurred, Ortal was mainly concerned with preparing for his expedition to the Province of the Meta.⁷⁴ Events soon frustrated him. His second in command, Alonso de Herrera, essentially mutinied and took the bulk of Ortal's forces to launch his own expedition to the Province of the Meta. Sailing up the Orinoco, Herrera reportedly reached the lower Meta River, but had to stop and wait out winter rainstorms in Casanare. While there, Achagua Indians attacked the expedition with poison arrows, killing Herrera, many of his men and all but one of the horses. The survivors retreated back to Paria, suffering Indian ambushes, starvation and exhaustion along the way. In their flight, they left behind the expedition's artillery, provisions and trade goods. Of the 160 men who had left with Herrera, less than half returned.⁷⁵

After learning of Herrera's mutiny and the loss of so many of his men and horses, Ortal was devastated but not deterred. With the Crown's permission, he relocated the remainder of his forces to the western half of the Pearl Coast and established a settlement named San Miguel near the mouth of the Neverí River.⁷⁶ From there he hoped to gather his forces and again prepare for an expedition to find the Province of the Meta. Shortly after establishing San Miguel, he had one of his commanders, Agustín Delgado, lead an expedition to obtain slaves, which were needed to buy supplies for the longer expedition to the Province of the Meta.⁷⁷ After a short trek to the southwest, Delgado and his 53 men came across a certain *cacique* (chief) named Guaramental, who gave them presents of food and gold. Still desiring slaves, the Spaniards pressured Guaramental into forming a military alliance. When asked if he had any enemies nearby, Guaramental reportedly told Delgado that he had once warred with a neighbouring *cacique* named Orocopón.⁷⁸ According to the chronicler Pedro de Aguado, within days, Delgado and his men, using horses and four war dogs, and accompanied by Guaramental and some 900 warriors, made a surprise night-time attack on Orocopón's capital along the Unare River, sacking the town, killing Orocopón, and enslaving those they captured. After bullying yet another group of people of the Unare Basin into giving them 'as many gifts as they were able',⁷⁹ Delgado and his men returned to San Miguel, where Ortal awaited them. A chronicler who lived on the Pearl Coast in the 1540s, Juan de Castellanos, wrote, 'they arrived in good health at the said port with a great quantity of prisoners, [whose sale] brought them a great deal of money'.⁸⁰

Ortal's presence and slave-raiding activities in the Unare Basin drew protests from the Cubaguans, and Ortal felt the need to defend himself. In a letter to the Emperor written in November 1535, Ortal explained his actions and blamed the Cubaguans for undermining his leadership, for encouraging slave raiding, and for impeding his and his predecessors' efforts to settle and explore Tierra Firma:

We journeyed along this river [the Neverí] and sea and found 20–25 Spaniards from Cubagua, who went to make war and enslave certain Indians declared as Caribs. [The Cubaguans] sowed discord among my men. [They were able to do this] because they went with them to Cubagua, and all this time [the Cubaguans] gave them a hard time about their poverty, their work and the prodding of their Governor [(Ortal)]. [My men then] challenged me somewhat (*Se me remontaron algo*) and I calmed them down by giving them what I had. But after a few days, the captains and men petitioned and pleaded with me to let them take as slaves Indians designated as Caribs like the Cubaguans do, since they are no less than them. I had to consent, even though before the war I attracted some [Indians] to peace by following the proper steps and requirements, and others had been enslaved, being appraised and branded before the religious and Your Majesty's officers.

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The Cubaguans' discontent with me and my men for coming to this land is unspeakable... [and] it is impossible to satisfy them. This is why they have vexed all of the Governors who have come [here]. It is also why the exploration and settlement of this Tierra Firma will never be carried out successfully unless it and Cubagua are under [the rule of] one Governor.⁸¹

Ortal's claim that his men, provoked by Cubaguans, compelled him to permit slave raids is questionable, especially since such slave raids were clearly in Ortal's interests.⁸² For their part, Cubagua's royal officials criticised in equally harsh terms the 'Governors' (Ortal and Sedeño), especially after the rivalry between the two conquistadors turned into warfare.⁸³ Sedeño and Ortal's forces raided and attacked each other, and, in their effort to exploit the Indian populations before their competitors, unleashed a flurry of raids against the region's native peoples.

Alarmed, Cubaguans reported to the Crown that the Governors were warring with each other, bleeding dry many of the Indian populations and recklessly ravaging the territory that Cubaguans considered to be under their jurisdiction. For an island colony that depended on the mainland for supplies and that was suffering from a collapse of its traditional economy, the Governors' destructive warfare on the Pearl Coast mainland seemed to snatch away Cubagua's last chance to remain viable. In May 1536, the Cubaguan royal officials wrote to the Empress:

The [battles between Sedeño and Ortal] have been very damaging to this island, whose citizens [*vecinos*]...usually maintain themselves by bartering with the mainland Indians. But now, frightened by the Governors, the Indians are in revolt, and they do not want to converse with Spaniards or work their fields, from which we have supplied ourselves through barter. This is the principal reason for the desolation of this island.

Ortal left burning pueblos as he went so that Sedeño could not follow him for lack of provisions. He has branded many Indians, and by doing so he has turned this land into a war zone.⁸⁴

Such reports to the Crown fell on concerned ears. Although Cubagua's pearling economy had suffered severely for a number of years, the Crown continued to believe the oyster beds would recover, and the memory of the island's prosperity less than a decade earlier still influenced royal policy. In January 1537, the Crown issued several decrees addressing the Cubaguans' complaints. Citing the conquistadors' enslavement of the surrounding Indians, their bad behaviour on Cubagua itself, and their 'roving about making war', one decree ordered that no Governor or representative of a Governor could go to Cubagua with more than six persons, and that they were obligated to leave the island whenever Cubaguan officials 'deemed it necessary'.⁸⁵ Another decree ordered Ortal and Sedeño to leave the territory of Cubagua, accusing Ortal, in particular, of branding friendly

Indians as slaves with the royal iron without first having the Indians inspected by the judges and religious of Cubagua.⁸⁶

If news had travelled faster, Sedeño too could have been criticised for enslaving friendly Indians. Sedeño felt that any Indians left alive by Ortal's expedition were his to exploit. Since the plundered Indians had few or no provisions left to offer, Sedeño thought it justifiable to assault native communities, enslave the inhabitants, and then remit them back to Puerto Rico or Cubagua to barter for additional supplies. The chroniclers Pedro de Aguado, Fernández de Oviedo and Juan de Castellanos have painted Sedeño's warfare and slave-raids against the Indians as even bloodier than those of Delgado or Ortal.⁸⁷ Castellanos poetically described Sedeños' depredations:

They took them to neighbouring Cubagua
As slaves in very long chains,
Leaving the roads very bloody.
All of the trails and paths were left full
Of the dead in this foolishness.
Hunger, exhaustion and other sorrows
Were some of the miseries of those captured, and
There were many more dead than alive.⁸⁸

Although Castellanos wrote that Sedeño sent his enslaved Indians to Cubagua, the Council of Cubagua in February 1537 reported otherwise in a letter to the Crown. After repeating much of the criticism against Ortal that Cubaguan royal officials had voiced in earlier letters, the Council of Cubagua wrote the following about the slave-raiding activities of Sedeño:

Sedeño has been destroying the lands [around Maracapana, Neverí and Cumanagoto], arrogantly enslaving the Indians there. Disrespecting Your Majesty and Your royal justice, he has...sent two shipments of four hundred Indians to the island of San Juan [de Puerto Rico] without branding or assaying them. In this way, he has injured and vexed friendly Indians who had had until now peaceful relations with this town.⁸⁹

Cubaguans were upset with Sedeño on many levels. By illegally bypassing the branding and assaying of his Indian captives on Cubagua, he deprived the colony of its role as customhouse and slave market. Cubaguans also viewed Sedeño as an intruder, who, along with the other conquistadors, usurped valuable resources within Cubaguan territory (i.e., the Indians). As a result, there was little to mitigate Cubagua's economic collapse after the exhaustion of its oyster beds, and soon Cubaguans were forced to relocate.

Most Cubaguans emigrated to Cabo de la Vela in western Venezuela, where new oyster beds had been found.⁹⁰ Others made the much shorter move to Margarita, a neighbouring island with potable water and inland valleys where

colonists could ranch and farm while still being reasonably close to the old oyster beds.⁹¹ Still others moved to the mainland, joining expeditions searching for the fabled Province of the Meta and enslaving Indians for profit.⁹² A small number of colonists remained on Cubagua despite more promising prospects elsewhere. When a hurricane devastated Cubagua in December 1541, most of the remaining residents abandoned the island. The last of the diehards finally left in 1543 after French pirates burned Nueva Cádiz.⁹³

Most Spaniards on the Pearl Coast mainland also relocated. Some joined the various expeditions into the interior, including a second expedition by Ortal in 1541. After difficult and fruitless efforts in what is today eastern Venezuela, some of these conquistadors – such as Ortal – settled in the Greater Antilles, while others moved to western Venezuela, where they joined expeditions financed and led by the Welsers. These expeditions also proved disappointing, compelling the Spaniards who remained in Venezuela to lower their expectations. Men such as Diego de Losada, who was a prominent leader in the failed Sedeño expedition, eventually abandoned their dreams of conquering another empire similar to the Aztecs or Incas. Instead, in the late 1540s, Losada and his cohorts concentrated on conquering the Valley of Mérida; in the 1550s, on settling the Venezuelan town of Barquisimeto in west-central Venezuela; and in the 1560s, on definitively conquering the Indian peoples of the Valley of Caracas.⁹⁴

By the mid-sixteenth century, the Spaniards had practically abandoned the Pearl Coast mainland, with the exception of the irregularly manned outpost at Cumaná.⁹⁵ The Pearl Coast was renamed Nueva Andalucía, and sporadic attempts were made to re-subjugate the surviving Indians. However, without pearls or the illusion of a native civilisation rich in gold, the Spaniards' efforts waned, while the Indians' determination to resist hardened.

Hardin's concept of the 'tragedy of the commons' helps to illuminate how the Spaniards failed to exploit the region's Indians in a more sustainable fashion. Although they usually turned a quick profit from enslaving these peoples, Spaniards – and Cubaguans in particular – lost a potentially long-term source of provisions and labour. Long before the entrance of the conquistadors in the 1530s, Cubaguans and other Spaniards from the Greater Antilles had decimated many of the Indian peoples closest to Cubagua. The arrival of competing parties of conquistadors greatly accelerated the enslavement and pillaging of more distant Indian peoples. Spanish competition for these Indians (also viewed as a common resource) resulted in the decimation of the resource. Another outcome played a significant role in inhibiting future colonial development in the area: the surviving Indians became resolutely hostile to virtually all Spaniards who entered their territory.

III. 'RUINING' THE POTENTIAL FOR A VIABLE COLONY ON THE PEARL COAST

The quick succession of plunder and slave raids by competing groups of Spaniards in the 1530s devastated Indian populations in the western half of the Pearl Coast – namely the sub-province of Cumanagoto (also sometimes called Maracapana) between the Neverí and Unare rivers, and the Unare Basin, deeper into the interior (see Figures 3 and 4). Many indigenous peoples of the western Pearl Coast never recovered from the Spanish raids and assaults. Diseases brought by Europeans probably also decimated the native populations.⁹⁶ Some of the smaller tribes, near extinction, joined the larger tribes of the Cumanagotos and the Chacopatas, who, also reeling from Spanish assaults, now became implacably hostile toward Spaniards for generations. The Chocheima, Topocuar, Characuar, Chaima and Core survived as distinct peoples, but they often formed alliances with each other and with larger tribes (e.g., the Cumanagoto-Chacopata coalition). Frequently during times of heightened conflict, the peoples of the region engaged in high-stake diplomatic manoeuvres to ensure survival. For example, the Píritu, located near the coast along the western boundary of the Province of Cumanagoto, at times allied themselves with the Spanish, and at other times allied themselves with the Cumanagoto-Chacopata coalition.⁹⁷

Perhaps the most interesting development occurred among some of the different native peoples living within the Unare Basin, where the assaults and slave raids by Delgado, Ortal, and Sedeño were especially destructive. According to historian Pablo Ojer, survivors native to this area – various peoples who the Spaniards identified by their chiefs (e.g., Canima, Guaramental, Orocopón,

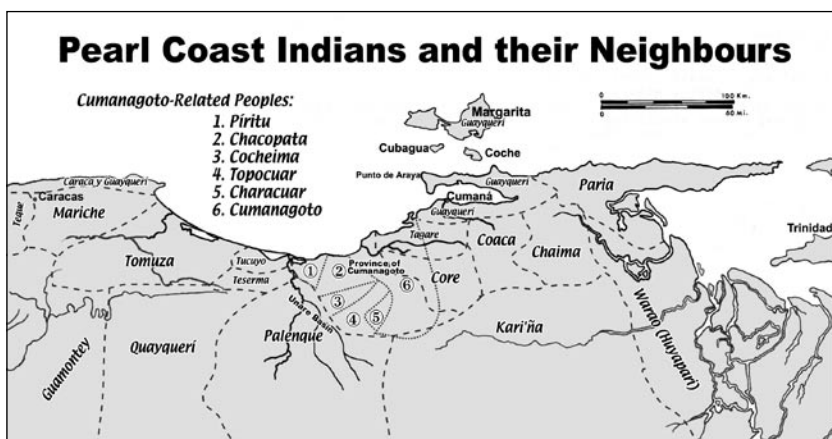


FIGURE 4. Pearl Coast Indians and their Neighbours

Orocomay) – eventually reassembled into new conglomerate societies, whose people generally became known to the Spaniards as the ‘Palenques’ (‘People with Palisades’).⁹⁸ The Palenques successfully reorganised their communities to defend themselves more effectively, repelling numerous Spanish expeditions for over a century. According to the late sixteenth-century chronicler Juan López de Velasco, the Palenques were fierce and determined fighters who enclosed their communities behind ‘great wooden fences that they continuously fortified for war so as to prevail upon their territory’.⁹⁹ By the seventeenth century, the Spaniards referred to the upper Unare Basin as the Kingdom of the Palenques, and at times this kingdom seemed impregnable.¹⁰⁰

Other Pearl Coast Indians shared the Palenques’ determination to resist Spanish subjugation, and by the second half of the sixteenth century, new generations of Pearl Coast Indians became particularly effective in resisting Spanish invasions. A dramatic example occurred in 1570, when a Spanish expedition led by Diego Fernández de Serpa attempted to re-conquer the area. The previous year, Serpa had re-settled Cumaná and established the coastal settlement of Santiago de los Caballeros between the Neverí and Unare rivers. However, he met with disaster upon returning from an expedition into the interior. An Indian alliance led by the Cumanagotos and Chacopatas ambushed Serpa’s expedition, killing Serpa, two of his captains, and 74 of his men. The survivors retreated to Santiago de los Caballeros, where the Indian alliance besieged the settlement and forced the Spaniards to retreat. Two years later, the Cumanagotos further decimated and dispersed the Spanish population in the area by assaulting Cumaná.¹⁰¹

From 1579 to 1580, Garci González de Silva, a fierce Indian-fighter from western Venezuela, entered the region with some 130 Spaniards, determined to conquer the western Pearl Coast. His campaign involved several bloody battles, but eventually the Indians compelled him to leave the territory. In the 1580s, campaigns led by Antonio de Sotomayor and Pedro García Camacho also failed to re-conquer the area. For the next several decades, Spaniards based in Caracas made numerous slave and pillage raids (*cabalgaduras*) against the various Indians of the western Pearl Coast, but largely failed to capture territory.¹⁰²

To the east, along the now sparsely populated central Pearl Coast, Spaniards were able to establish a few small outposts in the 1590s, but they faced new challenges. A small number of Spaniards reinforced Cumaná, and soon thereafter, some poor Spaniards – described by one witness as ‘riff-raff’ – established a coastal outpost called Nueva Ecija de los Cumanagotos approximately 32 kilometers west of Cumaná. The reported 30 vecinos of Nueva Ecija made a living smuggling tobacco to European interlopers, primarily the Dutch, who came to the area to collect salt at the Punta de Araya. Alarmed by the rampant contraband and the presence of Spain’s European enemies in the area, Spanish authorities reacted harshly. In 1605, a large Spanish armada violently expelled the Dutch from Araya, and, in 1607, the Crown ordered the Governor of Cumaná, Pedro Suárez Coronel, to depopulate Cumanagoto.¹⁰³

Between 1637 and 1645, after decades of neglect punctuated by occasional Spanish raids, the Catalan Juan de Orpín campaigned against the Pearl Coast Indians using different tactics. Determined to govern the area, Orpín was able to pacify many of the Cumanagotos, the Píritus, and even some factions of the Palenques through a combination of war, trade and negotiation. A renewed decline in the Indians' population – probably caused by epidemics – may have also aided Orpín.¹⁰⁴ Orpín never fully achieved his conquest, but his partial pacification of many of the region's Indians opened the territory for Capuchin and Franciscan missionaries in the 1650s and 1660s. The Capuchins and Franciscans successfully established missions, but the cultural, spiritual and economic conquest of the Pearl Coast Indians proceeded slowly and unevenly, and was interrupted by periodic Indian rebellions. According to Marc de Civrieux, the 'definitive conquest' of the area was not completed until 1681 after the Spaniards repressed an uprising by a coalition of Indians. However, even this conquest was not conclusive, since many of the Pearl Coast Indians chose to resettle in the llanos to the south or along Orinoco Delta in the east rather than to live under Spanish subjugation.¹⁰⁵

Much of the implacable hostility toward Spanish rule by the Pearl Coast Indians in the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries originated in the depredations of the Cubaguans and the conquistadors in the 1520s and 1530s. The presence of defiant Indian peoples prevented the Spaniards from building a road between Caracas and Cumaná until the eighteenth century, and largely because of this, eastern Venezuela and Margarita became more integrated with Spain and the Caribbean than with the region's largest city, Caracas, located in central Venezuela.¹⁰⁶ Although people of Caracas advocated the desirability of a safe road to Cumaná, few Caraqueños appeared alarmed by the lack of trade and contact with its eastern neighbour, and probably with good reason. After its devastation in the 1530s, the Pearl Coast had little to offer, and it became a backwater of the Spanish Empire for the rest of the colonial period. The only occasional exception to this was Margarita, which at times experienced periods of rejuvenated pearling prosperity, although never again on the scale enjoyed by Cubagua in 1520s. A telling summation of the destruction inflicted on the Pearl Coast was written by Juan Pérez de Tolosa, a sixteenth-century Governor of Venezuela – a province just west of the Pearl Coast. In 1546, Tolosa reported: 'The magistrates of the island of Cubagua and the governors Antonio Sedeño and Jerónimo de Ortal have taken a large number of slaves and have destroyed the land to such an extent that now tigers [jaguars] prey on the frail and exhausted Indians who are left. Thus, one of the largest populations in the Indies has been ruined and lost'.¹⁰⁷

Tolosa's report contains both truth and exaggeration. The population of the Pearl Coast Indians was at least in the tens of thousands at the time of the Spaniards' arrival, and may have been in the hundreds of thousands,¹⁰⁸ but it was not one of the largest populations in the Indies. Moreover, the Spaniards

did not entirely exterminate either the region's Indians or its oyster beds. Yet the severe destruction described both by Spanish contemporaries and chroniclers is undeniable. The Spaniards devastated the region's oyster beds and alienated its native peoples to the extent that an economically sustainable colony on the mainland did not develop for many decades and – with the exception of Margarita and some coastal outposts – arguably for much longer.

Although Spaniards generally viewed many of the Pearl Coast Indians as a common resource that, if not exploited by their group, would soon be by a competing group, Hardin's concept of the 'tragedy of the commons' does not apply as neatly to the devastation of Pearl Coast Indians as it does to the exhaustion of the regions' oyster beds. The Spaniards' relationship with the native peoples was much more complex, and Spaniards did not uniformly treat all Indian peoples inhumanely. The Cubaguans, for example, allied themselves closely with the Guayquerí of Margarita and intermarried with Guayquerí nobility. However, unconquered Indians who were not closely allied with the Spaniards often faced a tragic fate. Similar to the oyster beds of Cubagua – which were subjected to 'a system of exploitation without limits' that was reflective of Hardin's 'tragedy of the commons' – Spaniards frequently treated the Indians of the Pearl Coast as an unregulated resource, belonging to those first to take the initiative in exploiting them. The result, as with the oyster beds, was the overexploitation of a common resource to the long-term detriment of nearly all involved. Like other backwaters of the Spanish Empire, the Pearl Coast became a jewel- and bullion-poor area where the natives were too few and too hostile for Spaniards to sustain colonial development.

NOTES

¹ Garrett Hardin, 'The Tragedy of the Commons', *Science*, 162 (1968): 1243–1248.

² Some significant studies have examined the biological conquest of the Americas, and in reference to grazing lands for livestock, some historians, such as Elinor Melville, have employed Hardin's concept of the 'tragedy of the commons'. Alfred Crosby, *The Columbian Exchange* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Pub. Co., 1972); Elinor Melville, *A Plague of Sheep* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 157.

³ The friars Pedro de Córdoba and Bartolomé de Las Casas are the most obvious exceptions, but so too were those Spaniards, such as Don Francisco Fajardo, who married into a certain Indian nobility and sought to protect certain Indian peoples. Despite the fact that Spanish treatment of native peoples contributed to their decimation, the Spaniards did not want such peoples – an important resource – to die out. Nevertheless, war, over-exploitation, and, above all, diseases brought by Europeans often led to demographic calamities for Indian peoples. Noble David Cook, *Born to Die: Disease and New World Conquest, 1492–1659* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

⁴ This author is indebted to Enrique Otte and Pablo Ojer. Otte's numerous compilations of primary documents concerning the area are of significant historical value, and his

Cedulario de la Monarquía Española Relativo a la Isla de Cubagua is a compilation frequently cited here and abbreviated as ‘CC’. Furthermore, Otte has written an insightful history of Cubagua and its pearling economy in his *Las Perlas: Nueva Cádiz de Cubagua*. Pablo Ojer’s *La Formación del Oriente Venezolano*, which recounts the history of eastern Venezuela during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, provides valuable analysis and references. Many references cited by Ojer are examined here in greater detail, especially those concerning the decade of the 1530s. Other historians have also documented the rise and fall of Cubagua’s pearling economy. In the 1930s, Sanford A. Mosk wrote an account of the Spaniards’ pearl-fishing operations on Cubagua. Two decades later, Charles S. Alexander published a study of Margarita and its Guayquerí Indians. See Charles S. Alexander, *The Geography of Margarita and Adjacent Islands, Venezuela*, University of California Publications in Geography, 12:21 (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California, 1958); Sanford A. Mosk, ‘Spanish Pearl-Fishing Operations on the Pearl Coast in the Sixteenth Century’, *The Hispanic American Historical Review*, 3 (1938): 392–400; Pablo Ojer, *La Formación del Oriente Venezolano* (Caracas: Universidad Católica, 1966); Enrique Otte, *Las Perlas: Nueva Cádiz de Cubagua* (Caracas: Fundación John Boulton, 1977).

⁵ Christopher Columbus, *Select Letters of Christopher Columbus*, translated and edited by Richard H. Major, Hakluyt Society, 1st series, No. 43, 2nd edn (London: The Hakluyt Society, 1870), 121–145.

⁶ In 1950, the archeologists Irving Rouse and José M. Cruxent excavated a ‘great shell heap’ at Punta Gorda on Cubagua Island. The bottom layer of the midden, called the Cubagua complex, ‘yielded a radiocarbon date of 2325 B.C.’. Irving Rouse and José M. Cruxent, *Venezuelan Archaeology* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1963), 45.

⁷ Paraphrasing Peter Martyr (Pietro Martire d’ Anghiera), Carl O. Sauer wrote that the Niño and Guerra expedition returned with ‘96 pounds of pearls, some as large as hazelnuts, very clear and beautiful’. Fernández de Oviedo claims that the Niño and Guerra expedition came back with 50 marks of pearls. A mark was equivalent to about 230 grams, so 50 marks were equal to 11.5 kilograms, or roughly 25.3 pounds. Enrique Otte writes that Niño and Guerra declared 110 marks of pearls and had to liquidate five more. In addition to this, Otte claims that Niño and Guerra smuggled back ‘785 pearls as well as two large sacks (*talegones*)’. Otte, *Las Perlas*, 100; Fernández de Oviedo, *Historia General y Natural de las Indias*, ed. Juan Pérez de Tudela Bueso, Series: Biblioteca de Autores Españoles desde la Formación del Lenguaje hasta Nuestros Días (continuación) No. 117–121, 2nd edn (1535; rpt. Madrid: Ediciones Atlas, 1959) No. 118, Vol. II, 191; Carl Ortwin Sauer, *The Early Spanish Main* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966), 109.

⁸ Mosk, 393–394.

⁹ Neil H. Landman, Paula M. Mikkelsen, Rüdiger Bieler, Bennet Bronson, *Pearls: A Natural History* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 2001), 10.

¹⁰ R.A. Donkin, *Beyond Price: Pearls and Pearl Fishing: Origins to the Age of Discovery* (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1998), 318; G.F. Kunz and C.H. Stevenson, *The Book of Pearls: The History, Art, Science and Industry of the Queen of gems* (Mineola, New York: Dover Publishers, 1993 [reprint]).

¹¹ *Letters From A New World, Amerigo Vespucci’s Discovery of America*, ed. Luciano Formisano, (New York, Marsilio Publishers, 1992), 10.

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* A ducat (*ducado*) was a coin, usually of gold, that equaled 375 *maravedí*, which was Castile's basic monetary unit.

¹² *Letters From A New World*, 84. (Note: For the purpose of readability, this author slightly altered Formisano's translation.)

¹³ Columbus reported that Indians collected pearls and wore them as jewellery. Archaeologist Nicholas Saunders maintains that to the Indians 'pearls were miniature symbols of the generative power of the sea as 'mother of fertility', and were votively offered as such'. Lastly, several historians cite circumstantial evidence suggesting that pre-Columbian Indians in the region used pearls as trade goods. Columbus, 121. William Jerome Wilson, 'The Spanish Discovery of the South American Mainland', *Geographical Review*, 31, 2 (April, 1941), 286–287; Nicholas J. Saunders, 'Biographies of Brilliance: Pearls, Transformation of Matter and Being, c. AD 1492', *World Archaeology*, 31, 2, *The Cultural Biographies of Objects*, (October, 1999): 248; Donkin, 315; Morella A. Jiménez, *La Esclavitud Indígena en Venezuela (Siglo XVI)* (Caracas: Academia Nacional de la Historia, 1986), 65.

¹⁴ The Pearl Coast Indians consisted of various linguistic groups and many more subdivisions of politically autonomous groups. A report by Governor Rodrigo de Figueroa in 1519 proved highly simplified and inaccurate, but it nevertheless reflected the complexity of the region's native ethnicities. For example, in the Gulf of Paria located on the eastern boundary of the Pearl Coast, the report distinguished eight tribes, four 'Arawak' and four 'Caribs', all living in close vicinity to one another. The ethnicities of Indians living in the area around Cumaná and the Araya Peninsula were probably equally complex; however, anthropologist Marc de Civrieux believes that they were a variety of Guayquerí-related peoples. The best-known Guayquerí people are those who inhabited Margarita Island. The Tagare occupied the territory west of Cumaná. To the west of Tagare lived the Cumanagoto, and to the west of them lived a list of politically distinct peoples who were linguistically related to the Cumanagoto (Chacopata, Pritu, Cocheima, Topocurar, Characuar). Further inland from east to west were the Warao, Chaima, Coaca, Core and Kari'ña. In the Unare Basin, especially along the Unare and Güere rivers, lived different peoples who spoke languages not related to Cumanagoto. The Spaniards collectively called these peoples the 'Palenques'. (See Map 3.)

One of the best sources for understanding the aboriginal peoples of eastern Venezuela is Marc de Civrieux's 'Los Cumanagoto y sus vecinos' in *Los Aborígenes de Venezuela*, ed. Walter Coppens (Fundación La Salle de Ciencias Naturales, 1980), 33–239. Two books by Miguel Acosta Saignes also provide useful analysis. Acosta Saignes convincingly argues that, upon the arrival of the Spaniards, the Venezuelan coast was 'densely populated', with a complex array of many different native peoples. See Miguel Acosta Saignes' *Los Caribes de la Costa Venezolana* (México: Acta Anthropologica, 1946) and *Estudios de Etnología Antigua de Venezuela* (Caracas: Universidad Central de Venezuela, 1983). For a more general survey see Fernando Arellano's *Una Introducción a la Venezuela Prehispánica* (Caracas: Universidad Católica Andres Bello, 1986), 161–167, 371–377. Lastly, Morella Jiménez has a chapter that surveys the Indians of Venezuela. Jiménez, 20–68. Two versions of Figueroa's decree that classified the known Indians of the Caribbean and *tierra firme* can be found in *Colección de Documentos Inéditos relativos al Descubrimiento, Conquista y Colización de las posesiones españoles en América y Oceanía*. [hereafter CODOIN] (Madrid, 1864–1884), Vol. I, 379–385; Vol. XI, 321–327.

¹⁵ Enrique Otte, ed. *Cedulario de las Provincias de Venezuela, 1500–1550* [hereafter CPV] (Caracas: Academia de Ciencias Políticas y Sociales, Tomo I, 1982, Tomo II 1984), I, 60.

¹⁶ CPV, I, 65–66.

¹⁷ Testimonies taken in the autumn of 1519 in Rodrigo de Figueroa's investigation (*juicio de residencia*) of the former supreme judicial inspector-general of the Indies, Alonso de Zuazo, illustrates the flood of Spanish fortune-seekers visiting the Pearl Coast. Many of the testimonies recount how Zuazo secretly issued licenses to associates to conduct trade and slave-raiding expeditions (*armadas*) along the Pearl Coast, in violation of royal decrees. Archivo General de Indias [hereafter, AGI], Justicia 43, Número 1. Also see Otte, *Las Perlas*, 144.

¹⁸ The Tagare were one of the older tribes of the region, and in an earlier era their territory had been larger. They inhabited an area to the southwest of Cumaná, near the Dominicans' mission of Santa Fé. There they had developed an agricultural economy based on the cultivation of corn and cassava. Unfortunately, this agricultural productivity attracted many Spanish traders (*rescatadores*) searching for provisions. Sometimes when the *rescatadores* could not effectively barter for food, they seized it out of greed and desperation. Otte, *Las Perlas*, 98–101, 176–177, footnote 885.

¹⁹ CODOIN, Vol. X, 32–33; Enrique Otte, 'La Expedición de Gonzalo de Ocampo a Cumaná en 1521 en Las Cuentas de Tesorería de Santo Domingo', *Revista de Indias* (Madrid: Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas, January–March, 1956), No. 63, 51–82.

²⁰ Bartolomé de Las Casas, *Historia de Las Indias* (Caracas: Biblioteca Ayacucho, 1986), Libro III, caps. 157–158, 573–582; Otte, *Las Perlas*, 195–197.

²¹ Otte, *Las Perlas*, 285; Rouse and Cruixent, 134.

²² Alexander, 125.

²³ Alexander von Humboldt, *Personal Narrative of Travels to the Equinoctial Regions of America During the Years 1799–1804*, translated and edited by Thomasina Ross (New York: Benjamin Blom, Inc., 1971), I, 191–192.

²⁴ Otte, *Las Perlas*. In particular, see 51–54.

²⁵ CPV, I, 60. A revision of this order can be found in *Recopilación de leyes de los reynos de las Indias* [hereafter *Recopilación*] (Madrid: 1791, Edición facsímil, Madrid, 1943), Ley XXIX, Libro IV, Título XXV, Tomo II, 101, Ley II, Libro IV, Título XIX. Tomo II, 68.

²⁶ 'Que el licenciado Prado haga cumplir la prohibición de oradar perlas en Cubagua' (14 December 1532), CC, Vol. I, 188.

²⁷ Otte, *Las Perlas*, 51–54.

²⁸ Otte, *Las Perlas*, 54.

²⁹ Records from the import and export tax called the *almojarifazgo* show nine ships visited Cubagua in 1528, six of which departed from Spain. In 1530, the number of ships climbed to 15, and this, according to Otte, represent only a fraction of the traffic since 'clandestine trips were probably much more numerous than those legally licensed'. Otte, *Las Perlas*, 295–296.

³⁰ Otte, *Las Perlas*, 253; José María Cruixent, 'Nueva Cádiz, Testimonio de Piedra', *El Farol* (Caracas: Creole Petroleum Corporation, 1955), 160 (October, 1955), 3; Rouse and Cruixent, 135–137. The jail, cabildo and pier are mentioned in 'Merced a la ciudad

de Cádiz de los dos tercios de las penas de cámara por seis años para la casa de cabildo' (3 February 1537) CC, Vol. II, 71. Reference to Cubagua's granary is made in 'Préstamo a la ciudad de Nuestra Señora de los Remedios de 1.000 pesos para hacer una alhóndiga' (19 October 1547) in CPV, II, 202.

³¹ 'Nombre de Nueva Cádiz al pueblo de Cubagua' (12 September 1528), CC, Vol. I, 81.

³² Ibid, 51.

³³ Las Casas, *Historia de Las Indias*, Libro II, cap. 45, 164; Bartolomé de Las Casas, *Bartolomé de Las Casas: A Selection of His Writing*, edited and translated by George Sanderlin (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1971), 171–172.

³⁴ Ibid.; Juan de Castellanos, *Elegías de Varones Ilustres de Indias* (Bogotá, D.C., Colombia: Gerado Rivas Moreno, 1997), Elegía XIII, Canto Primero, 277; Otte, *Las Perlas*, 48–50; CPV, 1500–1550, 123–124.

³⁵ Otte, *Las Perlas*, 50.

³⁶ Otte, *Las Perlas*, 34.

³⁷ Otte, *Las Perlas*, 49.

³⁸ Alexander, 125; Kunz and Stevenson, 231. A royal cédula (order) also provides information on the newly discovered oyster beds off Coche. This cédula was concerned with the governmental jurisdiction of the many Spaniards who had left the waters of Cubagua to fish for pearls off the island of Coche. The cédula ordered the alcalde mayor of Cubagua, Hernando de Carmona, to extend his jurisdiction to include the island of Coche. See 'Hernando de Carmona. Licencia para usar su oficio de alguacil en la isla de Coche' (21 June 1529), CC, Vol. I, 105–106.

³⁹ The ecologists Aldemaro Romero, Susanna Chilbert and M.G. Eisenhart wrote, 'it would not be unreasonable to say that over 100 billion oysters were extracted in less than 30 years'. To arrive at their estimate, they calculated that only one pearl was produced for every 1,000 oysters collected. This ratio might have been accurate in the 1530s regarding the gleaning of young oysters attempting to rejuvenate on previously harvested beds, but it seems much too low for the boom years in the 1520s. Nevertheless, this author believes that the total number of oysters harvested during this time still conservatively ranges in the tens of billions. Aldemaro Romero, Susanna Chilbert and M.G. Eisenhart, 'Cubagua's Pearl-Oyster Beds: The First Depletion of a Natural Resource Caused by Europeans in the American Continent', *Journal of Political Ecology*, Vol. 6 (1999): 68.

⁴⁰ 'Capitulación con Luis de Lampiñán sobre el rastro de las perlas' (10 January 1528), CC, Vol. I, 50.

⁴¹ Otte, *Las Perlas*, 34.

⁴² AGI, Justicia 7, No. 4; Enrique Otte, 'El Proceso del Rastro de Perlas de Luis de Lampiñán', *Boletín de la Academia Nacional de la Historia*, [hereafter BANH] 187 (July–September, 1964): 386–406. Note that Alonso de Ojeda's use of a dredge off Punta de Araya occurred in 1505, some nine years before Méndez' arrival.

⁴³ Otte, *Las Perlas*, 34, 66, 197.

⁴⁴ Castellanos, 290; Oviedo, 206; Girolamo Benzoni, *History of the New World*, translated and edited by Rear-Admiral W. H. Smyth, printed for The Hakluyt Society, 1st series, No. 21, (1857; rpt. New York: Burt Franklin, 19–), 51–52.

⁴⁵ *Recopilación*, Ley XXVI, Título XXV, Vol. II, 101.

⁴⁶ Robert Carter, 'The History and Prehistory of Pearling in the Persian Gulf', *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, 48, 2 (2005): 140–141.

⁴⁷ Richard LeBaron Bowen, 'The Pearl Fisheries of the Persian Gulf', *The Middle East Journal*, 5 (1951): 171.

⁴⁸ Robert Carter, e-mail message to author, 14 January 2008; Carter, 'History and Prehistory of Pearling in the Persian Gulf', 148.

⁴⁹ LeBaron Bowen, 171.

⁵⁰ Carter, 'History and Prehistory of Pearling in the Persian Gulf', 153.

⁵¹ The Arabs' and Persians' prohibition against dredging was a form of regulation and protection that restricted production, and this may place pearling in the Gulf somewhat outside Hardin's theoretical construct. Nevertheless, the Gulf's pearling industries were not able to escape entirely a periodic 'tragedy of the commons', despite the adherence to traditional fishing methods and the vast distribution of the oyster beds. As early as 1770, an observer described the eastern part of the Gulf as being overfished, and by the early twentieth century, according to historian Robert Carter, 'yield from pearl-fishing in the Gulf had reached stasis', despite an increased demand for pearls in Europe and the U.S. Mr. James Hornell, an early twentieth-century officer of the Madras Fisheries Bureau and Superintendent of the Pearl and Chank Fisheries, concluded that a decline in the pearl yields of many of the Gulf's oyster beds was due to unrestrained over-fishing. Carter, 'History and Prehistory of Pearling in the Persian Gulf', 157–158.

⁵² Comparing maps that locate the oyster beds of the two regions illustrates this fact. See Alexander, 125, 127 and Carter, 'History and Prehistory of Pearling in the Persian Gulf', 141.

⁵³ 'Exención del almojarifazgo a los vecinos de Cubagua por dos años y medio' (30 December 1532), CC, Vol. I, 191–194.

⁵⁴ 'Carta de Francisco de Castellanos al Emperador desde Cubagua' (12 July 1535), *Documentos relativos a la Historia Colonial de Venezuela*, BANH, 34 (June 1926), 83.

⁵⁵ 'Respuesta a la carta de la ciudad de Cádiz de 8 de enero' (26 October 1535), CC, Vol. II, 32–33.

⁵⁶ 'Prorrogación por dos años a los vecinos de Cubagua de la exención de almojarifazgo' (8 December 1535), CC, Vol. II, 40–41.

⁵⁷ 'Que no se pesquen perlas con canoas grandes sino con las de un palo' (5 September 1537), CC, Vol. II, 94.

⁵⁸ In a letter of response, the Crown acknowledged and summarised several of the Cubaguans' letters as follows: 'You have reported on the difficult state that this city [of Nueva Cádiz] and island [of Cubagua] are now in, and on the hardships and anxieties that you suffer every day due to the lack of pearls. You [have also reported] that for more than a year and a half you have not been able to extract any pearls'. 'Respuesta a la ciudad de Nueva Cádiz a sus cartas de 27 de febrero y 10 de abril' (7 December 1537), CC, Vol. II, 112.

⁵⁹ It was asserted in the royal order that Cubagua was 'very dissipated and abused, and the vecinos and settlers of [the island] were harmed and vexed, because [the passing conquistadors and their men] spend a great deal of time there and take the supplies'. 'Que ningún gobernador entre en Cubagua con más de seis hombres' (19 January 1537), CC, Vol. II, 65–66.

⁶⁰ Las Casas, *Bartolomé de Las Casas: A Selection of His Writing*, 171–172; Otte, *Las Perlas*, 98–101, 156–160, 176–183, 205–227.

⁶¹ In the 1530s, many of the area's conquistadors (Ordás, Herrera, Ortal, Sedeño among others), believed that the Province of the Meta was rich in gold, and was even the original source of the Incas' gold. Ojer, 87–160; Michael Hartman Perri, 'The Spanish conquest of the Pearl Coast and the search for the Province of the Meta' (Ph.D. diss., Emory University, 2004), 150–247.

⁶² Anthropologist Thomas McCorkle argued that the Guayquerí 'had already a good deal of experience in dealing with foreign peoples, both enemy and friendly neighbors', and that the 'unelaborate yet cosmopolitan configuration of their culture may have especially fitted the natives of Margarita for survival in a world that was to be dominated by Europeans'. Thomas McCorkle, *Fajardo's People: Cultural Adjustment in Venezuela; and the Little Community in Latin American and North American Contexts* (Caracas: University of California Center of Latin American Studies, 1965), 18, 25, and passim; Alexander, 129–130.

⁶³ On 25 January 1531, the Royal Court (Audiencia) of Santo Domingo filed charges against Cubaguans for conducting slave raids along the coast of the Province of Venezuela, west of the Pearl Coast. The charges accused Cubaguans of taking a cacique and his people captive and sailing them to Cubagua. Otte, Enrique, ed. *Cedularios de la Monarquía Española Relativos a la Provincia de Venezuela (1529–1535)* (Caracas: Edición de la Fundación John Boulton, Fundación Eugenio Mendoza, 1959) I, 30–32. On 21 June 1551 the municipal government of the port of Borburata complained the natives in all of the area surrounding their town had been 'robbed and destroyed' by armadas from Santo Domingo, Puerto Rico and Cubagua. AGI, Santo Domingo, 207. Also see Otte, *Las Perlas*, 205–236 (213 in particular); Civrieux, 56–57.

⁶⁴ Murdo J. MacLeod, *Spanish Central America: A Socioeconomic History, 1520–1720* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1973), 54; Jiménez, 162–199; Otte, *Las Perlas*, 205–236; Cook, 41.

⁶⁵ Otte, *Las Perlas*, 205–236; Ojer, 87–160; Perri, 150–247.

⁶⁶ Diego de Ordás had been a major participant in Cortés's conquest of the Aztecs in 1519–1521, and as a result had been granted some of the most lucrative encomiendas in Mexico. According to Fernández de Oviedo, these encomiendas generated for Ordás an income of 6,000 to 7,000 gold pesos annually. (Fernández de Oviedo, Vol. II, 389.) With the hope of finding an even richer Indian empire, Ordás dedicated much of this income to financing his expedition into the Tierra Firme interior. Ordás' resources and experience encouraged the Crown to place a great deal of confidence in him and grant him an immense expanse of territory to explore and conquer. Casiano García, *Vida del Comendador Diego de Ordaz, Descubridor del Orinoco* (Mexico: Editorial Jus, 1952), chapter XII passim.

⁶⁷ Alexander, 129–130; McCorkle, 18, 25.

⁶⁸ The Welsers were a family-run banking enterprise based in Augsburg, Germany. Charles V was indebted to them, and, in return for favourable terms regarding his loans, he granted the Welsers rights of discovery and conquest over an unknown and seemingly promising expanse of territory that comprises present-day central and western Venezuela.

⁶⁹ Suffering from syphilis, Ordás had frequently been too ill to travel before his confrontation with the Cubaguans. Nevertheless, because his authority over the Pearl Coast

had become so controversial, and his returning to Spain was so fraught with potential royal disapproval for those who had rebuffed him, his death led many to suspect his enemies had poisoned him. García, chapter XII passim; Fray Antonio Caulin, *Historia de la Nueva Andalucía* (Caracas: Academia Nacional de la Historia, 1966), Vol. I, Libro Segundo, CaV, 234; Guillermo Morón, *A History of Venezuela* (London: George Allen & Unwin LTD, 1964), 35.

⁷⁰ Civrieux, 68.

⁷¹ Ojer, 137–155; AGI, Santo Domingo, 10, N. 15, *Informaciones de oficio y parte: Juan de Frías, juez de comisión. (Información sobre su misión por Antonio Sedeño, en la Isla de las Perlas)*, 1537.

⁷² ‘Carta de Gerónimo de Ortal al Emperador’, *Documentos relativos a la Historia Colonial de Venezuela*, BANH, 33 (June 1926): 64

⁷³ Seven days earlier, five influential vecinos of Nueva Cádiz wrote a similar letter to the Emperor. ‘Carta de los Oficiales Reales al Emperador desde Cubagua’ (5 July 1535) and ‘Carta de Francisco de Castellanos al Emperador desde Cubagua’ (Isla de las Perlas, July 12, 1535), *Documentos relativos a la Historia Colonial de Venezuela*, BANH, 34 (June 1926): 83.

⁷⁴ ‘Carta de Gerónimo de Ortal al Emperador’, *Documentos relativos a la Historia Colonial de Venezuela*, BANH, 33 (June 1926): 63–64.

⁷⁵ Ojer, 133–134 (footnotes 99, 106); Fray Pedro de Aguado, *Historia de Venezuela* (Madrid: Establecimiento Tipográfico de Jaime Ratés, 1918 {1st pub. in 1581 in Madrid}), 621–624; Fernández de Oviedo, Vol. II, 411–414; Castellanos, Elegía XI, Canto Tercero, 207–215.

⁷⁶ Ortal had apparently given some thought to this plan even before learning of Herrera’s tribulations reaching the Meta by way of the Orinoco. On 31 December 1534, Ortal petitioned the Crown to expand his territory to legitimise his possible presence in the territory claimed by Cubagua. Writing on Empress Isabella’s behalf, the Crown’s ministers responded to this request on 31 May by writing Ortal that the Empress had requested from the alcaldes ordinarios of Nueva Cádiz a report listing the pros and cons of conceding the territory to him. But ‘in the meanwhile’, the Crown’s response continued, ‘you [Ortal] may enter the said boundaries and barter with the natives there, guarding the said boundaries that have already been given to the said island of Cubagua and not interfering with the [Cubaguan] vecinos’ barter and trade within those boundaries. You should do your utmost to favor and help them, and you are not allowed to wrong or harm them in any way because doing so would be a disservice to me’. Despite these warnings to Ortal, the Crown in effect granted different authorities considerable jurisdiction over the same territory. The result was conflict. ‘Licencia para alargar los límites de Ortal’ (31 May 1535), Enrique Otte, ed. *Cedulario Relativo a la Parte Oriental de Venezuela* (Caracas: Academia de Ciencias Políticas y Sociales, 1984), 181.

⁷⁷ According to the chronicler Fray Pedro de Aguado, Ortal’s men insisted on embarking on slave-raiding *entradas* and they ‘obstructed and impeded’ Ortal from accompanying them on their slave raids. The soldiers justified this, Aguado tells us, by telling Ortal that ‘his noble status’ made it inappropriate for him to carry out such deeds. The chronicler Fernández de Oviedo tells a different story, writing that Ortal ordered Agustín Delgado, ‘a man skilful in war and of good understanding’ to conduct slave raids. Oviedo did not

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mention any reason why Ortal did not take part in such raids. Aguado, 642; Fernández de Oviedo, Vol. II, 416.

⁷⁸ Aguado, 640–647 (quote is on page 643). Note: Aguado spelled Orocopón as Arcupon. Castellanos spelled the cacique's name Orocupon, and Venezuelan historian Pablo Ojer spelled the name Orocupón. Another Venezuelan historian, Ismael Silva Montañés, provides reference to the names Arcupón and Orocupon, but cites Orocupon as the dominant reference. This author has chosen to use Pablo Ojer's version of the name. Castellanos, *Elegía XI, Canto Quinto*, 232; Ojer, 142; Ismael Silva Montañés, *Hombres y Mujeres del Siglo XVI Venezolano* (Caracas: Biblioteca de la Academia Nacional de la Historia, 1983), Vol. I, 122 and Vol. III, 348.

⁷⁹ Aguado, 649.

⁸⁰ In his poetic verse, Castellanos mentions the use of horses and dogs and recounts the conversation between Guaramental and Delgado in making their alliance. He is also very colourful in describing the extensive killing and plunder committed by the Spaniards, who reportedly yielded substantial booty. Aguado's prosaic account of the affair provides many details not found in Castellanos, especially concerning Cacique Güere. Aguado, 647–650; Castellanos, *Elegía XI, Canto Quinto*, 224–233 (quote is on 233.).

⁸¹ 'Carta al Emperador por Gerónimo de Ortal' (30 November 1535), in A. Arellano Moreno, ed. *Documentos para la historia económica de Venezuela* [hereafter DHEV] (Caracas, Instituto de Antropología e Historia, 1961), 127–128. Also, AGI, Santo Domingo, 180, R. 14, N. 88.

⁸² Historian Pablo Ojer asserts that Ortal permitted his soldiers to carry out entradas to search for slaves after he realised that his supplies were too low to begin the march to the Province of the Meta. Ojer, 141.

⁸³ Ojer, 142–147; Perri, 211–218. Since both Ortal and Sedeño held the title of 'Governor' – a title that Cubaguan royal officials could not claim – the Cubaguans often referred to the competing conquistadors simply as 'the governors'.

⁸⁴ 'Carta de Los Oficiales Francisco de Castellanos y Francisco de Lerma a la Emperatriz' (5 May 1536), DHEV: 175–176.

⁸⁵ 'Que ningún gobernador entre en Cubagua con más de seis hombres' (19 January 1537), CC, Vol. II, 64–65.

⁸⁶ 'Que Jerónimo de Ortal y Antonio Sedeño salgan de la isla' (19 January 1537), CC, Vol. II, 67–68.

⁸⁷ Aguado, 698–699; Fernández de Oviedo, Vol. II, 324–329; Castellanos, *Elegía XII, Canto Primero*, 245–255.

⁸⁸ Castellanos, *Elegía XII, Canto Primero*, 247.

⁸⁹ 'Carta del Consejo a S.M. Trata de las necesidades de Jerónomi de Ortal y Antonio Cedeño y de sus primeros asientos' (February 20, 1537), DHEV: 194.

⁹⁰ 'Licencia a los vecinos de Cubagua y Margarita para ir al Cabo de la Vela a descubrir ostiales' (25 October 1538), CC, Vol. II, 143–144; Benjamín Ezpeleta Ariza, *La Verdadera Historia de Riohacha: El porqué Nicolás de Federmann no la fundó; los auténticos pobladores: los pescadores de perlas de Cubaua (Margarita)* (Colombia: Aarón Impresores, 2000), 38, 43, 111.

⁹¹ Rejuvenated oyster beds discovered in 1567 off Coche Island would revitalise Margarita's pearling economy for some three decades. Ojer, 58–85, 291; Cervigón, *Las Perlas*

en la *Historia de Venezuela*, 37–38, 43–44; Marcos-Aurelio Vila, *Síntesis Geohistórica de la Economía Colonial de Venezuela* (Caracas: Editorial Ex Libris, 1996), 101.

⁹² Ojer documents several Cubaguans who joined the various expeditions in search of the Province of the Meta. For example, Francisco de Reyna, a former vecino of Cubagua, joined Sedeño's expedition. Ojer, 147–148, 150–152. On 28 June 1546, Diego Ruiz de Vallejo wrote that Pedro de Limpías took a large number Cubaguans from Barquisimeto in the Province of Venezuela to Nueva Grenada, calling the journey 'el camino de Cubagua'. Santo Domingo, 207.

⁹³ Pablo Vila, 'La destrucción de Nueva Cádiz, ¿Terremoto o huracán?' *BANH*: 31 (1948), 213–219.

⁹⁴ Silva Montañés, Vol. III, 82–87.

⁹⁵ Most of the royal offices for the Province of Cumaná were sold to residents of Caracas, who apparently continued to reside in Caracas. For example, in 1589, the Audiencia of Santo Domingo sold Alonso García Pineda the governorship of Cumaná for 550 pesos, but García continued in his post as public secretary for Province of Venezuela in Caracas for at least another ten years. *AGI*, Santo Domingo 207; Silva Montañés, Vol. II, 206.

⁹⁶ There is no documentation of epidemics among the Pearl Coast Indians in the sixteenth century, but it is likely that Pearl Coast Indians suffered from the same invasion of European pathogens that plagued others in the Americas. In 1530, the Welser conquistador, Nikolaus Federmann, reported widespread decimation among several Indian peoples near the Venezuelan Andes from a disease resembling smallpox. Cook, 83.

⁹⁷ The three main peoples living along the coast between the Neverí and the Unare rivers were the Cumanagoto, Chacopata and Píritu. Further inland were the Cocheima, Topocurar and Characuar. All these people spoke Cumanagoto-related languages. To the west and southwest of this Province of Cumanagoto lay the Unare Basin, where non-Cumanagoto speaking peoples lived. The Spaniards called these peoples 'Palenques'. Civrieux, 33–53.

⁹⁸ Ojer believes that the Indian peoples of the area united to defend themselves better against Spaniards. He cites a report in 1544 that claimed that the Indian peoples of the caciques Canima, Guaramental, Orocopón, Orocomay had recently come under the protection of the 'Palenques'. Since there had been no previous record of the Palenques, Ojer speculates that Cacica Orocomay organised an alliance of the surviving Indian peoples and that the peoples who formed this union became known collectively as the Palenques. He also argues that it is likely that Cacica Orocomay was the same leader that the Spaniards called Cacica Magdalena, a leader whose forces destroyed the Spanish settlement of San Juan de la Laguna located on the mouth of the Unare River. Ojer, 139–140.

Parenthetically, the name 'Palenque' is interesting because *palenque* in Spanish translates into palisade or fence, and it was a euphemism in most of Spanish America for any fortified maroon community of fugitive slaves. However, in Venezuela such communities became known as *cumbes*. Perhaps this uniquely Venezuelan linguistic development evolved to distinguish fortified maroon communities – most of which had a strong African component – from the Palenque Indians.

⁹⁹ Juan López de Velasco, *Geografía y Descripción Universal de las Indias* (Madrid: Atlas, 1971), 78–79.

¹⁰⁰ Around 1630, Juan de Orpín reported that the Palenques had a population of 500,000 souls, with some 50,000 warriors, and an attack force of 5,000 soldiers. Although these figures are almost certainly exaggerated, the Palenques had learned much about the art of war. Orpin also wrote that the Palenques had many horses, which they bred, and they fought with bows and arrows that were so poisonous that upon piercing the skin the victim died within 24 hours. Eduardo Arcila Farías, *El Régimen de la Encomienda en Venezuela* (Caracas: Universidad Central de Venezuela, 1979), 65.

¹⁰¹ Jiménez, 267; Ojer, 253–264.

¹⁰² Letters from the Governors of Venezuela illustrate the difficulty of re-conquering the Pearl Coast, as well as the eventual decision to resort to *cabalgaduras*. In 1584, Governor Luis de Rojas reported to the Crown that he sent Captain Sebastián Díaz with 60 men to provision Cumaná with corn and meat. The expedition's main objective was to establish a settlement between Caracas and Cumaná that would facilitate trade and communication between the two colonies. Although Sebastián Díaz founded San Juan de la Paz, the settlement was soon abandoned. Two years later, Rojas reported sending out yet another expedition with sufficient men to conquer the Cumanagotos, but this conquest also failed. (AGI, Santo Domingo 193, R. 9, No. 21 & No. 24; Silva Montañés, Vol. II, 50.) In 1590, Governor Diego Osorio wrote the Crown that the 'pacification' of the coast between Cumaná in the east and Cartagena in the west was important for commerce and communication between the colonies. Osorio's solution to pacify the recalcitrant Indians was to charge the conquest to men who 'desire and yearn to be named captain so that they could enjoy the authority of having and distributing the people who occupy the lands to be conquered'. (AGI, Santo Domingo 207.)

¹⁰³ Kenneth R. Andrews, *The Spanish Caribbean: Trade and Plunder, 1530–1630* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1978), 227–228; Engel Sluiter, 'Dutch-Spanish Rivalry in the Caribbean Area, 1594–1609', *The Hispanic American Historical Review*, 28 (1949): 183–183, 188–189.

¹⁰⁴ Although the apparent drop in the Pearl Coast Indians' military strength suggest a concurrent drop in population due to diseases, this author has not found any documentation of epidemics along the Pearl Coast in the late sixteenth or early seventeenth centuries. However, the conquistador Garcí González de Silva reported in 1589 that the nearby Indians of the Valley of Caracas had suffered 'two to three different times from bouts of measles and smallpox, causing many deaths and reducing the population'. Arcila Farías, 53.

¹⁰⁵ Civrieux, 85–93; 118–119.

¹⁰⁶ AGI, Santo Domingo 193, R. 9, No. 21, folio 5; AGI, Santo Domingo 207; Morón, 66, 80; Ojer, 404–412–414, 420, 428, 431, 446; Don José de Oviedo y Baños, *The Conquest and Settlement of Venezuela*, trans. Jeannette Johnson Varner (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1987), 244; 257–258; Marcos-Aurelio Vila, 221.

¹⁰⁷ Antonio Arellano Moreno, *Relaciones Geográficas de Venezuela* (Caracas: Academia Nacional de la Historia, 1964), 3–4. Also AGI, Santo Domingo 207.

¹⁰⁸ Multiplying the conservative estimate of 2,000 inhabitants for each people by the number of distinct peoples – at least 12 and arguably many more – results in figures in the tens of thousands. However, this author's impression is that the total population along the Pearl Coast at the turn of the sixteenth century was much higher and probably in the hundreds of thousands.

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