location & history: The Galápagos Islands are an archipelago of some 13 volcanic islands and associated islets and rocks located in the Pacific Ocean about 1,000 kilometers west of the coast of South America. The Galápagos archipelago is politically part of Ecuador. The oldest of the islands are about 4 million years old and the youngest are still in the process of being formed. In fact, the Galápagos islands are considered to be one of the most active volcanic areas in the world. They are famed for their vast number of native species and the studies conducted by Charles Darwin that led to his theory of natural selection. The islands are distributed to the north and south of the equator. The equator crosses the northern part of the largest island, Isabela.
**Melville’s name for islands:** The archipelago has been known by many different names, including the "Enchanted Islands" because of the way in which the strong and swift currents made navigation difficult.

**Darwin:** Charles Darwin visited the Galapagos six years earlier than Melville; his observations of the flora and fauna caught in an evolutionary time warp there led to the publication of *Narrative of the Surveying Voyages of His Majesty’s Ships Adventure and Beagle* (published 1840).

**the turtles:**

Galapagos Giant Tortoise, *geochelone elephantopus*, known as Galapago in Spanish, is the animal that gave the name to the islands.

In 1793, James Collnet made a description of the flora and fauna of Galápagos and suggested that the islands could be used as base for the whalers operating in the Pacific Ocean. He also drew the first accurate navigation charts of the islands. Whalers killed and captured thousands of the Galápagos tortoises to extract their fat. The tortoises could also be kept on board ship as a means of providing of fresh protein as these animals could survive for several months on board without any food or water. The hunting of the tortoises was responsible for greatly diminishing and in some cases eliminating certain races. Along with whalers came the fur-seal hunters who brought the population of this animal close to extinction.