

## Galapagos inside an archive — for the community

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### Abstract:

*The paper presents the work of the Charles Darwin Foundation's library and archive at the Galapagos Islands (Ecuador), the oldest and only active library in the archipelago. The archive holds an important collection of historical documents, which includes both an account of the scientific activity in the islands and an important part of the social memory of the local community during the last six decades. In order to connect people with that particular set of knowledge, the CDF's library and archive are developing a number of activities that are briefly described in these pages.*

**Keywords:** Galapagos, conservation, biodiversity, archive, memory.

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### 1. Galapagos and the CDF

The Galapagos Islands (Galapagos province, Ecuador) are a volcanic archipelago located 563 miles away from the western coast of mainland South America, in the Pacific Ocean. Isolated by the sea for thousands of years, the islands witnessed the development of a very particular fauna and flora, which eventually turned those small pieces of land into a real laboratory for evolution, their environments being populated by a unique biodiversity.

A biodiversity that includes the only marine iguanas in the world, flightless cormorants, tree-size prickly pears, marvelous finches, and the giant tortoises that gave the islands their name (from *galapagos*, an old Spanish word for "turtles").

A mixture of desolate, rocky lowlands and green, misty highlands, the Galapagos were accidentally "discovered" by Spanish sailors in the 15<sup>th</sup> century — and were nicknamed "Encantadas" (Enchanted, i.e. "under a spell") for the difficulty to place them in the charts. They became a safe haven for pirates during 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries and for whalers and seal hunters afterwards. After the Latin American Spanish colonies gained their independencies at

the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Ecuador claimed the archipelago and occupied it with small colonies with a history of their own. And after the British ship "Beagle" stopped in the Galapagos' shores during its famous expedition around the world and Charles Darwin collected specimens and made his observations, they became one of the favorite destinations for naturalists and biologists in Europe and North America.

At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Galapagos received international scientific expeditions as well as prisoners and colonists from the Ecuadorian cities. One of the former led to the publication of a book, "Galapagos: World's End", which became a bestseller and inspired modern Robinson Crusoes to inhabit their magical (but full of hardships) landscapes. The human presence put intense pressure on the natural life of the archipelago: many of the native species, intensely hunted for food or for museums and zoos, were at the brink of extinction. From the 1940's onwards, a world-wide effort led by renowned scientists convinced the Ecuadorian government to declare the Galapagos a National Park (1959), establishing strict measures for its conservation: only four islands were to be inhabited (Isabela, Floreana, Santa Cruz and San Cristóbal), and only in two sectors each: one small section of land by the sea (the harbor) and another in the highlands, devoted to agricultural uses.

That same year, 1959, the Charles Darwin Foundation for the Galapagos Isles (CDF) was born in Brussels, supported by UNESCO and the IUCN, with the objective of supporting the protection of the islands and their particular biodiversity. The CDF established its base near Puerto Ayora (Santa Cruz Island), then a very small town with scarce supplies and almost no services. The Charles Darwin Research Station (CDRS) was officially inaugurated in 1964 and was aimed at becoming the place where scientists and researchers could develop their work, trying to understand and describe the Galapagoan natural world and, at the same time, identifying the threats to its survival.

From that moment on, the CDRS grew into a full, modern, well equipped institution where an international team of professionals carried out their activities. And, at the same time, it became the space where all the history of that work was preserved: the big and small stories of scientific achievements, but also the social memory of Galapagos' conservation, with all the efforts, struggles, success and failures through the decades.

## **2. One library, one archive**

From the very beginning, the CDRS had a corner in their small buildings devoted to keep a book collection. The library, named "G. T. Corley Smith" in honor of one important character in the CDF's history, was officially inaugurated on October 28, 1979 in a space of its own, although by then it had been active for many years — at least since 1971, the date written in its earliest inventory book. With the pass of the years, one of its sections, the archive, got its own space in order to store administrative documents, as well as the abundant audiovisual material produced by the many workers and visitors interested in Galapagos.

Nowadays, the library and the archive strive to be consistent with the CDF's mission: "to provide knowledge and assistance through scientific research and complementary action to ensure the conservation of the environment and biodiversity in the Galapagos Archipelago" (CDF, 2018).

The CDF library is the oldest, largest and most active in the entire archipelago. Today it can be said that it is the only proper library in all the islands, which is, at the same time, a great honor and a huge responsibility. Floreana never had libraries, the public library in Isabela was closed 12 years ago, something similar happened in San Cristóbal and in Santa Cruz, the public library has been inactive for 6 years now — leaving the library at the CDRS as the main reference regarding scientific literature, and the only one managed by trained librarians.

The library holds the most comprehensive collection of Galapagos information and scientific work developed in/about the islands at a global level. It includes books, encyclopedias and journals, but also original thesis, reports and papers that cannot be found anywhere else. This unique collection is used mainly by the CDRS scientific staff, but also by naturalist guides, National Park rangers, school teachers, visitors and the local community in general.

In the archive, on the other hand, valuable audiovisual and textual documents are kept, conserving the CDF's memory and documenting the history of both the institution and the scientific work in the islands. Besides audio cassettes and VHS videos, there is a huge collection of unique, original photos and slides, as well as many technical reports, administrative papers, historical documentation, notebooks and the raw data that were at the origin of many pioneering books and articles about the islands' natural life.

### **3. Conservation, community and the library**

As stated by the most important, up-to-date literature on the subject, conservation —i.e. CDF's main goal— cannot be achieved without the direct involvement of the local community. No matter how big the effort is at the scientific level: if there is a lack of communication with the community, all that effort is useless and wasted (see e.g. Goldman, 1998 and Brechin et al., 2003).

And libraries are essential pieces in that communication process (see IFLA, 2018)

After understanding that fact, the CDF's library and archive has developed a two-fold line of action in order to support conservation by directly interacting with the local population. For a number of reasons —including past misunderstandings and conflicts— the task is not as easy as it sounds, and includes an intense dialogue with many different actors (the Galapagoan resident society is very diverse) and what intends to be a constant activity of information dissemination.

One side of the library and archive's work is "Outreach", currently focused in the "Travelling libraries" project. It intends to establish strong links with the residents in Galapagos, to support environmental education and citizen science, to encourage reading skills (particularly at schools) and training (for naturalist guides and National Park rangers), and to raise awareness about conservation-related topics among the general public. In order to do that, the CDF is launching a mobile library program —the first of its kind in Ecuador and the Galapagos— to carry books (emphasizing selected environmental education materials) to all the inhabited islands. To complement this activity, actions are being developed to create hand-made books, duplicate valuable documents (identification nature guides, handbooks, textbooks...) and find new ways for knowledge distribution (social media, online platforms, radio broadcasting, etc.).

The other side of the library and archive's work is "History", a humanities-related project centered on the recovery of the massive CDF's archive, which has not been inventoried until the second half of 2018. After an initial screening, the archive proved to contain a wealth of extremely valuable documents from years past, just waiting to be discovered. Preventive measures have been taken to safeguard the information they contain, as well as a thorough cleaning and identification process. Organization, classification and digitization are now being carried out.

Complementing this activity, the "History" project includes an oral history set of activities, the recovery of historical artifacts, and the update of the long-neglected "Bibliography of Galapagos" — a book collecting all the documents produced about Galapagos, its only edition being published in 1995. The outcomes of all these activities are intended to be uploaded in the medium term to an online, open-access database, provisionally called *Galapagueana*, which will be linked to the library database as well as to the rest of CDF's biological databases. This way, a true "Galapagos' Web of Knowledge" with shared metadata (and based both on physical and digital documents) will be born and will be accessible for everyone, opening the possibility for the creation of a digital-humanities community around topics related to Galapagos — and biodiversity conservation in general, from a social and historical perspective.

#### **4. An archive for Galapagos**

Probably the most "graphic" part of all this work is the one being developed at the audiovisual section of the CDF's archive, which houses a collection of videos, films, photos, audio recordings, slides, negatives, maps, diskettes, CDs, and DVDs, alongside some of the old hardware used to "read" those documents.

As the saying goes, "a picture is worth a thousand words", and in this case, it could be stated that some of the images and films stored and preserved in the archive are worth a thousand memories: they condense in themselves moments of the past that are not registered anywhere else. The collection portrays an important part of the archipelago's history: a visual narrative

of the scientific activity developed in the islands, especially for the last 60 years. But it also describes the natural environment and its changes, as well as the local society and how it has been growing and evolving along time.

This is important both for the scientific staff working at the CDRS and for the people living in Galapagos. Past shapes the present and can very much define the future. Acknowledging the mistakes done and the positive steps already taken is strategic for decision-making processes and for the construction of strong local identities.

The audiovisual collection is a valuable cultural tangible heritage, from both a social and a scientific point of view. It is expected that access to all those materials for the international scientific community and the local society by means of digitization and outreach —e.g. through the above mentioned platform *Galapagueana*— will allow, on the one hand, the safeguard of the documents' contents and, on the other, their dissemination and visibility. That way, all that treasured social and academic memory will be safe. And alive.

And they may become the basis for new stories and new memories, and for a deeper understanding of the present situation and the future possibilities for Galapagos.

As already said, the contents of the archive are being slowly digitized. The results of the oral history project will be added to the audiovisual collection as well, the interaction of all the documents providing more interesting elements for research and outreach.

The archive is in constant danger: it is placed fifty yards away from the seashore, and suffers the effects of the humid and hot Galapagoan weather on a daily basis. The basic measures put into place to counteract such conditions try to protect documents that are unique — there are no copies of most of the archive's items anywhere else. To those environmental conditions and the isolation that are almost a Galapagos' trademark, many other challenges may be added, the lack of economic and human resources being the most remarkable.

Opportunities, on the other hand, are countless, and make the hard work worth the pain: the impact that any kind of activity based on those documents may have is huge. As huge as the relevance of sharing social memory with the community.

## **5. Paths beyond the horizon**

The work at the CDF is currently focused on the documents and information stored at the CDRS facilities. But there is a richer and more abundant amount of documents in the hands of the local society: from family pictures to home-made reel films, cassettes recording old radio shows, VHS videocassettes containing documentaries or TV shows on Galapagos, etc. The next planned step in the library and archive's interaction with the community will be supporting the use of those items, getting copies whenever possible, and adding those links to the history

chain being built and publicly displayed through *Galapagueana*. The CDF's audiovisual archive will strongly benefit from those inputs, and the community will have expert support to preserve their valuable memories.

A common saying in the islands states that even if the giant tortoises are slow, they finally get to do whatever they intend to. The iconic turtles have become a symbol of endurance, perseverance and resilience, and they serve as a role model for the work at the CDRS — including its library and archive.

During 2019 the CDF is celebrating its 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary, and the library, its 40<sup>th</sup>. After such a historical trip —from the initial humble infrastructure to what the Charles Darwin Research Station has become today—, the library and archive's staff has learnt to walk slowly but steadily in pursue of their goals: recovering and preserving the local social memory and the valuable knowledge produced during the past decades, and using both to foster a proactive attitude towards the conservation of Galapagos, the so-called "Enchanted Islands".

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