



Edgardo Civallero

Galapagos' travelling libraries

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## Galapagos' travelling libraries

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(<https://princh.com/galapagos-travelling-libraries/#.XsVLWnshPIU>).*

I have been sleeping the entire journey so far. When I open my eyes, Santa Cruz Island is a grey triangle behind us, far away on the northern horizon, while on the southern I can see the silhouette of Floreana Island, my final destination. I am travelling on a *fibra*, one of the small boats that cross the sea everyday and connect the small harbors of the Galapagos archipelago.

Galapagos: 19 islands, 42 islets and 26 rocks belonging to Ecuador, located in the Pacific Ocean, 563 miles away from the nearest mainland, the western coast of South America. As naturalist William Beebe put it in the title of his famous book (1924), they are a sort of "world's end".

A "world's end" strongly protected by strict regulations, since the islands are a National Park, a UNESCO World Heritage and a Biosphere Reserve. Only 3% of Galapagos' land surface can be populated, so the 25,200 inhabitants of the archipelago live in the four islands where occupation is allowed, and just in two tiny enclaves each: one by the sea (the harbor) and the other in the highlands (the agricultural area).

I arrived to the so-called "Enchanted Islands" in April 2018 as the coordinator of the library and the archive of the Charles Darwin Research Station (CDRS) in Santa Cruz Island. The Station is managed by the Charles Darwin Foundation (CDF), a Belgium-based, Ecuador-supported NGO devoted to the research and conservation of Galapagos' biodiversity. The library is the oldest and biggest in the entire archipelago and holds a unique collection of Galapagos-related documents. Being an NGO, all the institution's areas depend on donations, which sometimes make things difficult in this part of the world. However, the library has been lucky and hard-working enough as to never close its door since 1979, when it was officially inaugurated.

Being a resident here is quite different of being a visitor. One soon starts realizing that Galapagos is far from being a paradise. Isolation and a serious lack of infrastructures (e.g. drinking water supply) are among the first problems to be noticed; local conflicts and social struggles are harder to see, but eventually they become evident. Anyways, the islands have their own magic: beyond the touristic attractions —the giant tortoises, the marine iguanas napping everywhere, the many sharks around the boats at the harbors, the sea lions playing in the beaches—, Galapagos has "something", a sort of spell. A spell that works in both directions, for the good and for the bad.

Among the lack of infrastructures, bookshops and libraries are the most alarming absences for a person with my professional profile. There are four active libraries in Galapagos nowadays, two of them belonging to private educational institutions, the third being Santa Cruz public library (closed until 2019 and reopened with CDF's support), and the last, the CDF's library itself. In a near past there were more of them, but a dangerous cocktail of incompetence, inability and neglect forced them to close their doors for good. As a result, access to information in Galapagos is "complicated" to say the least, and reading and writing are skills hardly put into practice, regardless of the efforts of the few local teachers.

Facing this problem, I designed a mobile library service, called "Travelling libraries". The name goes well with the format: the books move around inside a suitcase, and go from the CDF library in Santa Cruz to the rest of the inhabited islands: Isabela, San Cristóbal and Floreana. In order to prepare this outreach project, I made several rounds of boat-trips and talked with authorities and teachers, Park rangers and tourist guides, as well as with the resident community. All of them were excited to hear that a library service would be available, no matter if mobile. And they hurried to propose topics and titles to be included in the travelling collections.

Donations were needed to create those small collections, but imagination played a role as well. I bought some books, created others, collected digital resources and stored them into "travelling pendrives", duplicated CDF's educational material, and a long "etcetera" of tricks that are well known by every resource-less librarian in the world. The first stage of the project will check the answer of the target population to the

mobile service. During the second stage, I will provide reading- and writing-related activities for teachers, as well as direct support to naturalists, advanced students and Park rangers. Finally, in a third stage, I'll try to increase reading-related activities and to support the creation or re-opening of local libraries — so the "travelling" ones stop moving and settle down.

By the end of 2019, the first wave of libraries was sailing to San Cristóbal and Isabela. There they were received by the local schools, and were made available for everybody in the community, especially the local students.

And just now I am travelling —aboard this fast *fibra*— with the first suitcase-library for Floreana, the most isolated of Galapagos' populated islands. The books will also stay at the local school: 3 teachers and 17 students, out of a population of about 110 people.

I'm quite excited: this one will be the first library in the history of Floreana. Can you imagine the impact?

The waves around the boat are cut by a group of dolphins, moving in our same direction. I feel it to be a good omen, and a lovely welcoming message for this big, grey suitcase I'm carrying with me, by my side. Wish me luck!

*[This text was written just days before the outburst of the coronavirus pandemics in Ecuador. Since then the "travelling libraries" project was frozen, as everything else in*

*Galapagos. Anyways, it will continue working once the activities are restored to normal in the islands. Donations for this and other CDF Library & Archive projects are more than welcome. Please contact [edgardo.civallero@fcdarwin.org.ec](mailto:edgardo.civallero@fcdarwin.org.ec) for more information].*





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