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Chronicles of a librarian in Galapagos and nearby

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A Medium's blog

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Chapter I

The Encantadas

> *I have no reason to go, except that I have never been, and knowledge is better than ignorance.*
>
> Freya Stark. From *A Winter in Arabia: A Journey through Yemen*. London: John Murray, 1940.

The opening quote was heard from the mouth of an Arab man, Abdulla the watchmaker, by British writer and explorer Freya Stark. She included it in her travel diary on January 30th, 1938, and she added, right after Abdulla's comment, the following thought: "What better reason could be for travelling?"

When I decided to move to the Galapagos Islands, back in 2018, it was probably because "I had never been there, and knowledge is better than ignorance". Actually, that was the reason behind all of my journeys, long and short, since the very moment I started travelling.

I stayed in Galapagos as the only professional librarian in the islands. Something got me there. And although I have been, am and will be travelling all the time in the

neighborhood —Peru, Colombia, Ecuador...—, right now I can say I'm based in the archipelago. In the *Encantadas*, the "Enchanted Islands".

These are the chronicles of my experiences in Galapagos and nearby. Needless to say: from a librarian point of view.

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Let me start by providing some rather general information, just to put you on the correct spot in the map — and in the timeline.

The Galapagos Islands or Archipelago of Colón are a group of 19 islands, 42 islets and 26 rocks belonging to Ecuador, located in the Pacific Ocean, about 900 km from the nearest mainland. As stated by American naturalist William Beebe in his famous book (*Galapagos: World's End*. New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1924), they are a kind of "end of the world".

A world's end located in the planet's central belt: the equator crosses the archipelago on Isabela Island, almost cutting Wolf Volcano, the highest peak in Galapagos (1,707 m).

The islands are part of an Ecuadorian National Park, have a limited resident population (only 3.5% of the Galapagos area can be populated) and are subject to strict levels of protection, since they are, among other things, a UNESCO World Heritage Site (one of

the first one to be declared, actually) and one of its Biosphere Reserves. Despite this, they are the scenario of massive international tourism and strong migratory movements, as well as a number of environmental conflicts.

They have been called "the *Encantadas*" (Spanish for "Enchanted islands"), a nickname given to them by the first Spanish sailors, for they thought them to be bewitched: since they were not able to locate the elusive islands in their navigation charts, they believed that they appeared and disappeared because of an evil enchantment. Herman Melville, *Moby Dick*'s author and himself a crewman on a whaler who sailed Galapagos' waters, immortalized the name in one of his best works, *The Encantadas* (written in 1854 for *Putnam's Monthly* and included in *The Piazza Tales*, New York: Dix & Edwards, 1856). There he says about the archipelago:

> Take five-and-twenty heaps of cinders dumped here and there in an outside city lot, imagine some of them magnified into mountains, and the vacant lot the sea, and you will have a fit idea of the general aspect of the Encantadas, or Enchanted Isles.

Darwin himself, who would make the islands famous —and the object of desire of the international scientific and conservation community— was not much kinder in his description. In chapter XVIII of *Voyages of the Adventure and Beagle - Volume III – Journal and remarks, 1832-1836* (later known as *The Voyage of the Beagle*, London: Henry Colburn, 1839), he notes:

> Nothing could be less inviting than the first appearance. A broken field of black basaltic lava, thrown into the most rugged waves, and crossed by great fissures, is everywhere covered by stunted, sun-burnt brushwood, which shows little signs of life. The dry and parched surface, being heated by the noon-day sun, gave to the air a close and sultry feeling, like that from a stove: we fancied even that the bushes smelt unpleasantly.

The Spanish "discoverer" of the islands —a Dominican friar by the name of Tomás de Berlanga, deviated from his route between Panama and Peru in 1535 and thrown on the archipelago's shores half-dead with thirst— did not receive a good impression either:

> ...on the whole island I do not think that there is a place where one might sow a bushel of corn, because most of it is full of very big stones, so much so that it seems as though at some time God had rained stones upon the land; and the earth that there is, is like slag, worthless, because it does not have the virtue to create a little grass, but only some thistles

No, it is not a tropical paradise, with white beaches and palm trees: rather, it is a rough volcanic land. Galapagos have, in fact, 21 volcanoes, of which 13 are considered active. Since 1797 there have been around 60 eruptions. The last ones in spitting lava and toxic gases were the beautiful Cerro Azul, on Isabela Island, in 2008; Fernandina Volcano, on the island of the same name, in 2009; and Wolf Volcano, again in Isabela,

on May 25, 2015. That day, the only pink iguanas on the planet —the amazing *Conolophus marthae*— surely felt that their end had come.

Despite being described as a wasteland, Galapagos has magnificent landscapes —like the greenery of mangroves colonizing black basaltic flows that sink into a deep-blue sea riddled by sharks... It is also a place with an amazing human history: stories of Inca navigators and persecutions between Spanish conquerors, English buccaneers and Dutch privateers, whalers and seal hunters, prisoners and foremen. And Darwin, of course.

The relative isolation of the archipelago and its particular configuration has allowed them to become a sort of biological laboratory within which a very special flora and fauna have survived: from the famous giant tortoises that gave the archipelago its name and fed pirates, whalers and settlers for centuries, to marine iguanas, wingless cormorants, huge albatrosses and pelicans, prickly pears and daisies the size of trees, equatorial seals and penguins... and much, much more.

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This natural laboratory, these "heaps of cinder" seemingly lost in the Southern Seas, became "home" for me. A complicated home — for one thing is visiting a "natural paradise" as a tourist, and a different one is living long periods of time in that place: in isolation, in a highly protected land, far from a good number of those things that

compose what we call "modern life", surrounded by a lot of problems and latent conflicts...

But, as old Abdulla said, knowledge is better than ignorance. And here (and around here) there is still a lot to learn, to discover, to enjoy... Countless things to be astonished by, horizons to reach, stories to hear and tell...

What better reason could be for travelling?

Chapter II

Books, turtles and a lot of cacti

> *What a desolate and sad landscape is discovered on the coast! Two conical hills, quite high in black color, separated by a gray plain, in which some gigantic cereus and prickly pears stand out, and at the bottom of the picture, a reddish mountain range, form a group with such a strange and sui-generis appearance that I did not expect to see but in dreams.*
>
> Nicolás G. Martínez. From *Impresiones de un viaje al archipiélago de Galápagos* [Impressions of a trip to the Galapagos archipelago], 1915.

8 in the morning. 30 degrees and rising. No wonder the iguanas have learnt to swim on these islands.

Southwards, so close that I can hear it, the Pacific Ocean. On the coast, marine iguanas and some *zayapas* (red rock crabs, *Grapsus grapsus*), plus the usual sea birds. On the other three directions, full of cacti the size of trees and thorny plants, the Charles Darwin Research Station. That includes the pens where several giant tortoises live. And the library where I work.

A library surrounded by a truly rugged landscape.

Visually, the Galapagos are defined by their volcanism. They are nothing more than a group of young Hawaiian-type volcanoes that poke their (sometimes smoky) mouths above the waves of the eastern Pacific, near where three tectonic plates —Nazca, Cocos and Pacific— come into contact. The archipelago is located above a true hotspot on the earth's crust: the geological equivalent of one of the mythical Gates of Hell.

An old legend —quoted in 1905 in *Las Islas Encantadas* by José A. Bognoly, who recovered it from the Spanish chronicler Sarmiento de Gamboa— tells the story of Tupaq Yupanki Inka, the tenth sovereign of the so-called "Inka Empire", and how he would have been the discoverer of the Galapagos or, at least, of two of the islands: *Jawachumbi* and *Ninachumbi*. The name of the latter may be translated from Quechua as "[Island] of fire", probably because it would have received the ruler of the ancient *Tawantinsuyu* with a show of burning fumes and lava that, supposedly, would have motivated the hasty return of the expedition to mainland.

Hence, the archipelago is nothing more than a bunch of rough basaltic flows surrounded by a sea that is cold sometimes, lukewarm others —throughout the year the chilly Humboldt Current alternates with the warm Panama Current in the temperature control—, mostly covered with xerophytes and huge cacti (the so-called "arid vegetation floor"), and mainly populated by seabirds, finches, mockingbirds, iguanas and turtles. And some sea lions.

The landscape displeased the official discoverer of the archipelago, the Spanish Dominican friar Tomás de Berlanga (1535), who wrote down some comment about

God raining stones upon the land— but apparently did not make much of a dent in the following visitors. That was the case for Diego de Rivadeneira, captain of Diego Centeno's troops, who arrived to the islands fleeing the restless persecution of his rival Francisco de Carvajal in 1546, during the Civil Wars between the Spanish Conquerors of Peru. Or for Edward Davis, an English filibuster who, after attacking three Spanish ships off the coast of Tumbes (nowadays Peru) in 1684, noted in his logbook:

> Knowing that wee had more than a hundred prisoners on board and not knowing where to get water, nor where to find a safe place of making a Magazeene for flour but that wee should be hunted out and have our flour destroyed, wee sailed to the Westward to see if wee could find those Islands called the Galipoloes, which made the Spaniards laugh at us telling us they were Inchanted Islands, and that they were but shadowes and noe reall Islands (quoted by G.T. Corley Smith in 1984 in *Noticias de Galapagos*).

The "ghostly" reputation the islands had among the Spaniards led pirates and privateers, after landing on them and making sure that they were very real, to take them as their base of operations.

A shelter for pirates and whalers

The English buccaneer William A. Cowley drew up the first map of the archipelago (the best until Fitzroy's, a century and a half later) during his voyage around the world, and published it in 1684. His colleague Edward Davis visited Galapagos in 1684 and 1687,

when the islands' fame of "pirate haven" was getting stronger. Corsairs didn't care too much about desolation, aridity, or stones. Neither about the cacti, nor the iguanas. And they considered the tortoises a blessing. In fact, by the end of the 17th century the British captain William Dampier —nicknamed "the naturalist pirate", and who was described in the title of a book about his life as "a pirate of exquisite mind"— spent three months in the Galapagos, feeding precisely on turtles. And he pointed out:

> The land-turtles are here so numerous, that five or six hundred men might subsist on them for several months without any other sort of provisions. They are so extraordinarily large and fat, and so sweet that no pullet eats more pleasantly (from Dampier's *A New Voyage Round the World*, 1699).

A hundred years later, at the end of the 18th century, the privateers left the islands and their place was occupied by whalers and seal hunters (and some shipwrecked people with amazing biographies, as described by R. Rose in a chapter of famous Beebe's *Galápagos: World's End*). They did not care too much about the rock-strewn land or the spiky bushes, not even about the lack of water: they only saw good hunting and fishing. The abuse to which the islands' biodiversity had been subjected since the arrival of humans to its shores intensified alarmingly. Thirty years later, with the sperm whales exhausted, the fur seals almost extinct and the tortoises, penguins and iguanas seriously threatened, the ships (especially British and American) left to plunder different lands and waters. Galapagos have since then become —especially after Darwin's visit in 1835— an object of study for naturalists and a place of visit for

innumerable scientific missions. And, since 1832 (when general José de Villamil took possession of Floreana Island), in part of the Ecuadorian territory.

After Darwin and the *Beagle*, the first scientific expedition to arrive to Galapagos was American, and reached the archipelago's coasts aboard a warship, the *USS Hassler*, in 1872. After it, and until World War II, about thirty expeditions (two thirds of them American and the rest, mostly British) turn them into the most studied islands on the planet. Meanwhile, Ecuadorian settlers began to arrive, working practically as slaves for ruthless masters.

By the end of the 19th century, the degradation of the Galapagoan environment was brutal. The destruction caused by domestic animals introduced by man was added to the predation of the colonists, similar or worst than that of whalers and hunters. There were also scientific missions, which looted everything they could to feed the hungry collections of western natural history museums and zoos.

In 1935 an Anglo-American naturalist expedition led by V. von Hagen landed on San Cristobal Island and erected a monument to Darwin's memory on the site where he had stopped over a century earlier. Upon his return, Von Hagen founded the London Galápagos Committee, intended to raise funds for the establishment of a scientific station in the archipelago. It would be one of the numerous initiatives to protect the islands. World War II, unfortunately, frustrated many plans.

In 1954, Irenäus Eibl-Eibesfeldt, a German ethologist from the Max Planck Institute, made a scientific cruise to the Galapagos. Back in Europe, the naturalist alerted the recently created International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) of the terrible situation of the archipelago and, with its support, obtained the sponsorship of UNESCO to carry out an assessment of the islands (1957) and look for a place where a scientific station could be established. The presentation of his report to the XVth International Congress of Zoology in 1958, describing a worrying situation (and choosing Santa Cruz Island as the right location for the station), was decisive for the birth of the Galapagos National Park.

The Park was created by the Ecuadorian government on July 20, 1959, and currently covers 97% of the land area of the islands, excluding just eight colonized enclaves.

A Research Station and a library

On July 23, 1959 (the year in which the centenary of the publication of Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* was celebrated) the Charles Darwin Foundation (CDF) was created in Brussels. Its mission is:

> [...] to provide knowledge and assistance through scientific research and complementary action to ensure the conservation of the environment and biodiversity in the Galapagos Archipelago.

Victor van Straelen, the man behind the creation of the Albert National Park in Congo (1925) and one of the main promoters of the Galapagos National Park, was the first president of the CDF. In 1960, and under harsh conditions, the first construction work began on the Charles Darwin Research Station, in the outskirts of Puerto Ayora, Santa Cruz Island's harbor and main city. On January 20, 1964, the Station was officially inaugurated, after countless problems and missteps, in a ceremony held under the scarce shadow of giant cacti.

Since then the Charles Darwin Research Station has served as an international base for scientists who want to carry out their research on the islands, and as a space where information is collected in order to contribute to the protection of the archipelago and its inhabitants. It also seeks to inform and educate the resident population, the vast majority of them being migrants from mainland Ecuador (the first "Education for Conservation" program was launched in 1966). It also houses the spaces for raising endangered animals: in 1965 the tortoise breeding program began and in 1976, the land iguana program. And in 2014 the first mangrove finch (seriously endangered by the introduced *Phylornis* fly) was born in captivity at the Station.

Such a space needed a library to serve as a repository for the newly created knowledge, and to support the research activities. Named "Corley Smith", the library opened its doors in 1979.

That is the library I coordinate. A small redoubt of books next to the sea, surrounded by cacti, volcanic stones and dry-land plants. And marine iguanas, and seabirds, and a lot of Darwin finches. And a bunch of (protected) giant tortoises.

Chapter III

Isolation, libraries and finches

> *Every biologist, once in a lifetime, should make a pilgrimage to the Galapagos, where one of the greatest successes of science was born.*
>
> Jean Dorst. From *Future scientific studies in the Galapagos Islands*, 1963.

Dorst, a French ornithologist and one of the key figures in the creation of the Galapagos National Park and the Charles Darwin Foundation, had a very particular perception about the Galapagos Islands. As a matter of fact, many scientists did, and still do. They seem oblivious to the fact that they are miles and miles away from almost everything and everyone.

But when you are not a scientist (or, at least, when you do not share their passion) and you work inside a research station located in one of the few, tiny inhabitable enclaves of a strongly protected National Park / Biosphere Reserve / World Heritage Site, which in turn is inside an island surrounded by at least 900 km of ocean, you start feeling the isolation. Or suffering it.

That is my case when working in the library of the Charles Darwin Foundation, a small building timidly looking at the sea from the southern coast of Santa Cruz Island. Although in the end one realizes that isolation is not as bad as it seems.

A multi-staged trip to the world's end

To get to my library's door, you have to board one of the few Avianca, LATAM or TAME airplanes departing on a daily basis from Guayaquil or Quito — after leaving behind all the bureaucracy, the tax / fee payments, and the baggage checks. After a flight of about two hours, you will arrive to the airport located in Baltra or South Seymour (most of Galapagos have two names, a Spanish and an English one), a small, flat, dry, barren, brownish island out of the northern coast of Santa Cruz.

[The history of that airport is quite curious. In 1942, the Ecuadorian government allowed the United States to install a military base in Baltra. "The Rock", as the soldiers called the island, served as a sort of "acclimatization site" for the troops before going to fight in the Pacific, one of the harshest WWII scenarios. Baltra's base housed 12,000 men: ten times the total population of the archipelago at that time. A change in the political regime caused Ecuador to reject, in 1944, the US offer to rent the island for 99 years. So, in 1946 the military base was dismantled: everything the Americans could not carry with them, they threw into the ocean. Except for a tarmac airstrip —the current airport— and a deepwater dock, which is now a small harbor for international cruises].

From there, it is necessary to cross Itabaca, the 400-meter wide channel separating Baltra from Santa Cruz. For five dollars, you take a bus to cross half a mile of the brownish, stony lands of South Seymour —just populated by thorny plants and a bunch of endemic land iguanas— and you arrive to the local jetty. And for another dollar (this is Ecuador, dollar is the national currency) you board a boat and sail over the deep-blue, mangrove-bordered waters of Itabaca, with pelicans, frigates, lava gulls and blue-footed boobies flying over your head.

Once on the coast of Santa Cruz, you board a bus (another five dollars) that takes you from the northern tip of the island to the southern end: there lies Puerto Ayora. Except for two small corners where settlements are authorized (Puerto Ayora itself and an agricultural area in the highlands), all Santa Cruz' territory is part of the Galapagos National Park and, therefore, is protected. That means that you cannot enter those lands, unless you have a permission for scientific research, or you are in the company of an official naturalist guide.

In the past, the Baltra-Puerto Ayora route was made by boat, but then a 40 km road was opened through the Park lands. The road climbs up the northern slopes of the island to the forever-clouded summit (864 m), populated by small forests of *Scalesia* trees. It goes between two magnificent volcanic calderas locally known as *Los Gemelos* (Spanish for "The Twins") and then descends, crossing the farmlands of El Carmen and Bellavista —crops of banana and cassava and small herds of cows coexisting with giant tortoises and endemic finches— until Puerto Ayora, the insular capital and harbor.

Puerto Ayora is mainly a tourist resort by the sea. But it also includes a set of neighborhoods (more or less stable, more or less humble) where the locals and the Ecuadorian temporary migrants live. The buildings practically fill the entire territory allocated for colonization, pressing the population against the fences that separate Ayora from the Park lands.

To arrive to the Charles Darwin Research Station —and to the library I coordinate— you have to walk almost two kilometers east of Puerto Ayora's downtown, entering the National Park. There, by the Pacific waters, surrounded by nothing by mangroves, saltbushes and cacti, away from everything, you can knock the library's door.

Insularity and evolution

In Galapagos, you can breathe isolation. You can chew it. To the (somehow expectable) conditions related to insularity, you can add a strong dependence on daily supplies arriving from mainland by boat (ships that sometimes cannot make it, leaving the archipelago with serious shortages of basic goods), the limits in air transport, the scarcity of entertainment, the irregular communications (including the Internet), and the weak health service (any serious medical emergency must be evacuated by plane to Guayaquil), among many others. A lot of the people living in the islands take every chance they have to enjoy "breaks" from their forced isolation — by flying to Quito, for example.

It was precisely this isolation that turned the archipelago into a so-called "natural laboratory" in which evolution put its principles into play. Principles that Charles Darwin identified when he studied, among other species, the finches of the different islands, and found that all of them, each one different from the other, derived from a common ancestor. They had evolved divergently, secluded in their own universes, adapted to their own circumstances. The same happened with the giant tortoises. And with the different species of the genus *Scalesia*, plants of the Asteraceae family —like the daisies— which are endemic to the Galapagos and can reach the size of huge jungle trees.

Galapagos' finches allowed Darwin to understand that, thanks to natural selection, those whose genetic variations had allowed them to better adapt to their particular environment had survived. The magic of being away from everything, isolated from everything, is that you have to learn how to live with what you have, and adapt to your environment and your circumstances as well as possible. Or give up and walk the path leading to disappearance and oblivion.

That biological principle is somehow valid for a library: an entity that, after all, usually behaves like a living organism in an "information and knowledge ecosystem". Isolation turns it into a true laboratory of Library & Information Sciences where, in a constant action-research process, solutions are sought, found and reformulated — allowing the library to fulfill its role in its "ecological niche", to adapt to adverse conditions and changes, and to survive (or perish).

The processes of research, search, improvisation, resistance and constant adaptation are not new to libraries. They have been put into practice by almost all of them, to a greater or lesser extent, since the beginning of their history. However, forced by circumstances, some have turned those processes into a sort of "second skin": this is the case, for example, of many rural, popular and community libraries in Latin America, especially those with little resources or working in conflictive areas. That is, those facing strong isolation.

[For libraries, isolation does not necessarily need to be geographic. There are many other types: social, economic, political, ethnical...].

In the case of the Charles Darwin Research Station library, the challenge is twofold: to provide quality services to the Galapagos' society in general and, at the same time, to a community of biologists, conservationists and naturalists located at the forefront of research in their particular areas of study. All that, done with limited resources and facing the isolation a "frontier library" like that has to endure. And achieved by modifying —drastically, whenever necessary— functions and structures like Darwin's finches did with their beaks, until they find the right combination.

Isolation is often seen as a barrier and a serious impediment. But, all things considered, it forces us to search new ways to act, to sharpen our wits, to unfold our imagination, to seek collaborations and help, to renounce the superfluous. And it also provides a "glass bell" that allows some withdrawal: an amount of silence and solitude that sometimes are necessary, and more than welcome.

Like all libraries that face some kind of isolation, the one at the Charles Darwin Research Station has a long way to go. Fortunately, it is surrounded by the living evidence that one can successfully adapt to circumstances, no matter how adverse they may seem. There they are, to prove it, the finches, the giant tortoises, the mockingbirds, the iguanas...

Chapter IV

The sea that lulls the mangroves

> *Neither will anyone be surprised at meeting these last [fragments of charred wood and mouldering ribs of wrecks], after observing the conflicting currents which eddy throughout nearly all the wide channels of the entire group [of islands].*
>
> Herman Melville. From "The Encantadas". In *The Piazza Tales*, 1856.

Much has been written about Galapagos. Not only are they among the islands that have motivated a huge amount of scientific literature: they have also inspired a good number of works of fiction (like Melville's *The Encantadas*), travel books, photo albums, documentaries...

...and even a couple of films.

[Most of those documents can be found in my library, at the Charles Darwin Research Station, near Puerto Ayora, on the southern coast of Santa Cruz Island].

Probably due to the fact that they are islands, and because the ocean has played and still plays an essential role in the development of its ecosystems and in its population

process —both by human and non-human living beings—, many of those texts refer to the sea. A sea that terrifies some people with its treacherous currents and its many sharks, and that for others is a source of work (including the old, illegal sea cucumbers fishermen). Or just that blue, salty space that one has to cross by boat to go from one island to the other.

There are texts addressing the many nautical events that mark human history in the archipelago: tales of explorers, pirates, whalers, castaways, settlers... The list of those documents starts with the Spanish bishop Tomás de Berlanga's letter announcing Galapagos' discovery after a maritime adventure, and include, among many others, Darwin's diary of his trip on the *Beagle*, Theodor Wolf's memoirs, the logbooks of the many ships visiting the archipelago, or Beebe's famous *Galápagos: World's End* — a book that, at the beginning of the last century, aroused interest in the islands among many Robinsons from Europe and the USA.

On the other hand, there are works (mainly academic, but also informational) dealing with the sea in a different way: they explore and describe the rich marine and coastal life. A true mosaic of biological diversity that even the most distracted observer will come face to face with when looking out over the shoreline.

A shore line I can spot, hear and feel just from the door of my library: a sector of the coast where the Pacific hits a mantle of black lava on which young marine iguanas bask in the sun.

A coastal community

According to biologists and ecologists, the space between the mark left by the highest tides and an imaginary line placed at five meters above sea level is called "coastal floor". That ecological level is arid, being covered by plants known as *halophiles* — resistant to salt, with sparse foliage and quite a desolate look.

The shore, in general terms, is rocky and muddy: despite what marketing brochures sell to tourists, Galapagos' sandy coasts are scarce. The few white sand beaches in the archipelago can be found to the east or south of the islands: a classic example, appearing *ad nauseam* in the aforementioned brochures, is Tortuga Bay, in Santa Cruz. Made up of shell and coral remains, they are truly resplendent, but also dangerous because of the strong currents and swell hitting them. The few sandy beaches located on the northern and western sides are made of the remains of the surrounding rocks and, therefore, share their color: they are red on Rábida Island, black on Puerto Velasco Ibarra, and even have green reflections (because of ground olivine) in certain spots in Floreana Island.

[This "green reflections" feature recalls a reference made by Tomás de Berlanga in his letter to Spanish King Charles I: he wrote about shiny, diamond-like stone fragments, and even of yellowish pebbles similar to amber, in the sand of a beach in the second island he visited. At a time when European conquerors and "discoverers" were restlessly searching for riches in every corner they stepped on, the glitters caught the bishop's eye. However, it was soon found out that there was no treasure there].

Although rare, there are some coastal bars in Galapagos, which created lagoons of salty water. They can be found in Puerto Villamil (Isabela Island), Rábida Island or Punta Cormorán (Floreana Island).But probably the best-known coastal lagoon of the archipelago is the one in the so-called "Barrio de los Alemanes": an old enclave established by European pioneers, located on the outskirts of Puerto Ayora, on Santa Cruz Island, which can only be reached by boat.

Despite enduring an already strong and always increasing tourist pressure, the lagoon is still a fantastic place. On the bottom, sea cucumbers and sea stars can be seen. The water is crossed by schools of golden rays (*Rhinopteras teindachneri*), some solitary Galapagos sharks (*Carcharhinus galapagensis*) and green sea turtles (*Chelonia mydas*). Along the coast, there are many red mangroves (*Rhizophora racemosa*) and white mangroves (*Laguncularia racemosa*), two of the four species that grow on the islands. Those trees hold the sand with their roots, which look like long, flexible legs. The red mangroves produce huge seeds, which float like corks and allow the species to expand its territory.

A reddish endemic plant (*Sesuvium edmonstonei*) spreads over some sandbanks next to the lagoon, covering the ground (in fact, it is called "Galápagos carpet weed" in English). Among them, the oystercatchers (*Haematopus palliatus*) take refuge. On the shoreline hunt the Galapagos herons (*Butorides sundevalli*, called *huaques* in Spanish because of the way they scream) and the great blue herons (*Ardea herodias*). Those birds live together with marine iguanas (*Amblyrhynchus cristatus*) and at least seven species of lava lizards (genus *Tropidurus*), reptiles all endemic to the archipelago.

Hairs and feathers

The Galápagos sea lions (*Zalophus wollebaeki*), the smallest variety of sea lion in the world, live on the islands' coasts as well. Once the object of a systematic hunt, they are one of the most abundant species on the archipelago nowadays, the most sociable and playful of them and, therefore, one of the most photographed. The barking of the male in heat —a time of the year when the animal is much more dangerous than a shark— is a typical sound in Galapagos.

But the coastal area is, above all, the kingdom of seabirds: it is estimated that almost a million of them live on the islands, temporarily or permanently.

Around 30% of the world population of blue-footed boobies (*Sula nebouxii*) is located in Galapagos, especially in Punta Suárez, on Española Island. There are also the magnificent frigatebirds (*Fregata magnificens*) and the great frigatebirds (*Fregata minor*), reaping the winds with their characteristic black silhouettes. And the brown pelicans (*Pelecanus occidentalis*), that can be seen waiting for some food —together with a family of sea lions— in the "Fish Market" of Puerto Ayora, where they have become a tourist attraction. Above them fly the tropicbirds (*Phaethon aetherus*, one of the first American birds to be named by Europeans), the swallow-tailed gulls (*Creagrus furcatus*), the masked boobies (*Sula dactylatra*), the lava gulls (*Larus fuliginosus*) and many, many more...

On islands like Galapagos, the sea is a fundamental element in daily life. The life of human beings, and of a fauna and a flora which are impossible to ignore when talking about the archipelago. It is not surprising, then, the preponderant role that Galapagos literature gives to the ocean.

An ocean that, with its rhythmic swaying, lulls the mangroves.

Chapter V

About drizzles and droughts

> *In Galapagos, weather ... is a topic of conversation. It is enough that a heavy downpour falls earlier than usual, towards November, for everyone to fear a year with El Niño phenomenon, or that in January the ocean is still cold, according to local criteria, and they have not been seen true rains at the end of the month, so that the farmers worry about their water reserves.*
>
> Christophe Grenier. From *Conservación contra natura. Las islas Galápagos*, 2007.

Being in Galapagos and not talking about wildlife is impossible. Or, as Grenier states in the quote above, about weather. So, no matter how "library-related" this text is meant to be, I have no choice but to adapt to the circumstances surrounding me. You know: "When in Rome...". And, if in the previous post I spoke about seashores, mangroves and seagulls, now it is time to speak of clouds and waters. Or about their absence.

As in other parts of South America, in Galapagos there are just two seasons: "wet" and "dry". During the first one, weather is hot and humid, although it rains just occasionally. During the second, temperatures are moderate —but never cold— and

starts what locals call "tiempo de garúa": a period of gray days and ever-lasting drizzles. This climatic scheme may be twisted by the phenomenon known as "El Niño", which affects the South American Pacific coast. But, generally speaking, it is quite regular.

Because of the porosity of the volcanic terrain, the water that falls and is not absorbed by the vegetation filters very quickly. Thus, there are no permanent freshwater streams on the islands. Neither are lagoons: the only relatively significant one in the archipelago is located on San Cristóbal Island. "El Junco", as it is called, is located in the crater of an old extinct volcano, and does not provide drinking water to the local population (although it was used as a reservoir during World War II by US troops based on Baltra Island).

Located in what some geographers call "dry Polynesia", the Galapagos are, by nature, arid islands.

Wells and bottles

The aridity of the archipelago is problematic: it goes without saying that the local population (both human and non-human) needs fresh water to survive. But the sources are really scarce, the aquifers are usually contaminated by seawater and human residues, and the wild reservoirs —ponds and puddles formed with the rains of the wet season, especially in the highlands— are only useful to give the local fauna a

drink. Specially the giant tortoises, which in the old times used to trace a complex series of paths between their shelters on the coast and their wells up in the hills.

Puerto Velasco Ibarra (the harbor and main population of Floreana Island) is supplied with water from one of the few inventoried fountains on the islands, on the hill known as *Asilo de la Paz* — although there are also several springs around Cerro Pajas. The existence of these springs was already known in the time of the English privateers and buccaneers, who made good use of them.

Puerto Ayora (Santa Cruz Island) and Puerto Villamil (Isabela Island) provide water to their population by extracting it from natural crack in the rock and sending it to the local homes, without any sort of filtering or treatment. Since the cracks have usually been invaded by seawater, the liquid is brackish and, therefore, not quite suitable for drinking. Fecal contamination is usual, and causes a lot of sanitary problems, including parasites and amoebiasis.

Since no steps are currently being taken to ensure a stable supply of drinking water, the inhabitants of the main urban centers of Galapagos —and the thousands and thousands of tourists and visitors— have to consume bottled water, brought from the mainland by boat. Thousands of large and small bottles are consumed monthly, generating tons of plastic, and feeding one of the most profitable businesses on the islands, after tourism and fuel.

Talking about the weather in a territory like Galapagos implies, above all, talking about the arrival of the expected rains of the "wet" season — the ones watering the few existing crops and refreshing the atmosphere...

Few people talk about the *garúa*.

The *garúa* (a Spanish word for "light rain") is a layer of low clouds and mist that get caught in the heights of the highest islands during the "dry" season and causes a perennial drizzle. That drizzle does not provide water neither to the summits nor to the coasts, where the main populations are. Yes, it allows the vegetation in the intermediate areas to supply itself with a liquid that it could not obtain in any other way — but for the average island dwellers that seems to be quite irrelevant.

In addition to not leaving a substantial amount of water, the *garúa* paints the islands in a sort of gloomy look: there are few hours of sunshine, and all landscapes have a uniform, grayish tone. The sea, also gray, is usually agitated by the trade winds, which at that time blow with all their force, and the waves burst against the rocks of the coast in a devastating spectacle. The temperature drops to 20º, and Galapagos' locals usually wear a sweater — which increases the feeling of "cold".

It is a period dominated by a sensation of general sadness, abandonment, grief, even a sort of "hostility" on the part of Nature — a Nature that, regardless of being equatorial, does not show its best looks. Sightseeing tours prefer to avoid that time of

the year, so as not to cause too many disappointments among those visitors who pay real fortunes to enjoy sunshine on a cruise ship.

Returns

But not everything is negative. During the time of *garúa*, some migratory seabirds return to the islands.

Among them is the magnificent waved or Galapagos albatross (*Phoebastria irrorata*), a huge and intrepid ocean traveler who comes back to the rocky shores of the archipelago from the Peruvian and Ecuadorian coasts. It is the only one of its family (*Diomedeidae*) that inhabits the tropics; in serious danger of extinction, it breeds only on Española Island, between lava flows. Therefore, its arrival is always good news.

Despite being able to go anywhere —the breadth of their wings would allow those birds to go wherever they want without any difficulty— the albatrosses return to Galapagos every year, to find refuge among opaque waves, currents of black stone and thick *garúa*... Biologists speak of nutrient-rich marine currents during that time of the year; poets talk of a living being which loves the dullest and most melancholic solitudes of the Southern Seas.

As I pointed out at the beginning, it is impossible to live in Galapagos and not to talk about the weather. Or about wildlife. Or both: for example, locals say that if in

Academy Bay, here in Puerto Ayora, the boobies and sea lions are still numerous at the beginning of the year, it is an indication that it will be a dry one...

Doing "as Romans do", I am getting used to add all those elements to my daily routine. And, as you have seen, to my writing.

Chapter VI

Conservation science, local community, and a library in Galapagos

This text was presented at the IFLA WLIC 2019 Meeting | Conference "Moving beyond traditional collections & services: Supporting science in innovative ways" organized by the Science & Technology Libraries Section joint with the Reference & Information Services Section and the Audio Visual & Multimedia Section. Athens, Greece, August 29th, 2019.

1. An archipelago in the Southern Seas

The Galapagos Islands or *Archipiélago de Colón* are a group of 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 the 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" nowadays protected by strict laws and rules. For the islands are a National Park, a UNESCO World Heritage and a Biosphere Reserve. Curiously, they are also a place affected by intense tourism and migratory movements, as well as being the focus of academic discussion regarding conservation policies and environmental struggles. It seems that Galapagos is one of those hotspots where natural and human histories collide with each other — with unexpected consequences.

The relationship of humans with the archipelago was never simple. They were named "Enchanted Islands" by early Spanish sailors that, unable to place them in their charts during the 16th century, believed them to be bewitched — being under an evil spell that made them appear and disappear. Herman Melville, the author of *Moby Dick* (and himself a sailor in one of the many whaler ships that hunted in Galapagos' waters), immortalized the nickname in one of his best literary works, *The Encantadas* (1854). His description of the islands was anything but flattering: he referred to them as "five-and-twenty heaps of cinders" in the middle of the sea. Charles Darwin, which turned Galapagos into the object of desire of the international community of conservationists and evolutionary biologists, was not kinder. In *The Voyage of the Beagle*, he spoke of scorched soils and bad-smelling bushes. Even the Spanish "discoverer" of Galapagos, a Dominic friar named Tomás de Berlanga, who accidentally reached the archipelago in 1535, spoke of the place as somewhere where God had made stones rain.

Galapagos is far from being the stereotypical tropical paradise: it is more of a volcanic outpost, with arid, rocky lowlands and a few misty highlands. Regardless of the harsh landscapes, they still are dream-like pieces of land: there, mangrove forests mix with huge prickly pears bushes, and black-as-coal basaltic flows sink into a sea populated by sharks and coral-reef's colorful fishes... The relative isolation of the islands and their particular location allowed them to become a sort of biological laboratory, inside which a very special flora and fauna survived: from the famous giant tortoises that gave Galapagos their name (from an old Spanish word meaning "turtles") and fed sailors and colonists for centuries, to marine iguanas, flightless cormorants, huge albatrosses and pelicans, forests of "daisy trees", equatorial sea lions and penguins,

and much more. So much that they became the main subject of hundreds of field studies and research papers.

It is also a place with a very particular —sometimes even dark and tragic— human history: Incan legendary sailors share the pages of Galapagoan chronicles with Spanish *conquistadores*, pirates and privateers, whalers and seal hunters, prisoners and foremen, Robinsons and castaways... And, almost inevitably, Darwin, the "Beagle", and dozens of other scientific expeditions.

The interaction between that unique natural world and that particular human presence produced a conflictive history that is still unfolding, and lead to the creation of the preserved place the archipelago is today — and to conservation practices that are still being debated and tested.

2. A protected land

The "bewitched" reputation the islands had among the Spaniards during the colonial period in Latin America allowed buccaneers and pirates to make them their safe haven during the 17th and 18th centuries; as a matter of fact, the author of the first map of the archipelago was an English privateer, William A. Cowley (1684). Pirates did not mind the aridness and desolation of the Galapagos. They appreciated the tortoises, though: as an example, Captain William Dampier —the so-called "Pirate Naturalist"— spent three months there at the end of the 17th century sustaining himself and his crew on the meat of those giant reptiles.

A hundred years later, after the end of the corsairs' era, their place was filled in by whalers and hunters. They used and abused the local natural resources to the level of nearly extinguishing some species. Thirty years after their arrival, when the sperm whales, the sea lions and the tortoises had almost disappeared, and penguins and iguanas were endangered, the hunting ships went away to overexploit other waters. The Galapagos became then a part of the Ecuadorian territory (1832) and, after Darwin's visit in 1835, a place for study and research.

During the last part of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th, scientific expeditions visited the islands and predated on their fauna and flora to feed the seemingly insatiable hunger for specimens of Western zoos, museums and private natural history collections. At the same time, a good number of Ecuadorian colonists arrived from the mainland to work, under a slave-like regime, for ruthless landowners. This way, by 1930 the degradation of the Galapagoan landscapes was brutal. Besides the damage made by introduced domestic animals (goats, horses, cows), the colonists' overuse of the resources had carried most of the endemic species to the brink of extinction.

In 1958, the strong concern raised among the international scientific community about Galapagos' environments and their exploitation led to the creation of the Galapagos National Park by the Ecuadorian Government. The Park was officially inaugurated on July 20th, 1959, covering the 97% of the archipelago's land surface. Three days later, the Charles Darwin Foundation for the Galapagos Isles (CDF) was created in Brussels, backed by UNESCO and the IUCN, to support the international conservation efforts. In

1960, and under harsh conditions, the CDF started building a Research Station near Puerto Ayora, in Santa Cruz Island. Inaugurated on January 20th, 1964, the Charles Darwin Research Station (CDRS) became an international basis for scientists willing to carry out their studies on the islands, and a place for information to be collected on how to better protect the archipelago and all its inhabitants

Such a space needed a library. And, although it had existed unofficially since at least 1971, the "G. T. Corley Smith" library opened its doors in 1979.

3. A library in Galapagos

The "G. T. Corley Smith" library is the CDF's official information repository. It houses both bibliographical collections (books, journals, reference texts, articles, theses, etc.) and the archive; this way, while illustrating the path walked by the CDF in its six decades of existence, it also encourages the discovery and exploration of new trails.

Located at the heart of the CDRS, the library —the first permanent one in the archipelago, for a long time the only one, and currently the most important in terms of collections and activity— keeps and manages the most complete corpus of knowledge in the world about Galapagos and the scientific work developed in the islands up to the present.

The bibliographic collection is composed of a general collection, consisting mainly on textbooks on exact and natural sciences —with a particular emphasis on ecology,

environmental conservation and biology—, a small journal collection, a reference section, the "Darwin" collection (texts by and about the famous British scientist), and two special collections: "Galapagos" and "Charles Darwin Foundation". Those two hold an important amount of the scientific knowledge produced about the islands, alongside many of the CDF's internal reports and guidelines.

The archive contains hundreds of valuable documents that make up the CDF's social memory and allow building the history of the institution and, at the same time, to produce an account of the scientific activity on the archipelago (a history, the one of science in Galapagos, still to be written). The archive collection is divided into two sections: textual and audiovisual. The former includes an old journal collection (1930-2000), architecture plans, historical and educational documents, administrative files, and manuscript notes produced by some of the many researchers who have worked at the Station. The latter holds, as implied by its name, photographs and slides, films, sound recordings, illustrations, posters, brochures, maps, diskettes, CDs and DVDs documenting the academic and research activities in Galapagos in general and at the Station in particular.

Due to the prevailing environmental conditions in the archipelago and the proximity of the sea, all collections are currently protected in controlled temperature and humidity environments.

The library provides specialized search, loan and reference services to resident and visiting scientists, volunteers, grantees and researchers. Likewise, it opens its doors to

naturalist guides, National Park rangers, visitors, teachers, students of all levels, members of the local community and, in short, anyone who wishes to explore a unique set of knowledge.

Although the library operated at least since 1971 —the date of the earliest conserved inventory book—, it was officially inaugurated on October 28, 1979, in one of the first structures built at the Station. It was named after the British diplomat Gerard Thomas Corley Smith (1909-1997), who, upon retiring from his political activities, joined the CDF Board of Directors in 1969. Corley Smith left, as part of his legacy, the seed of the library that today bears his name.

The collections and their managers have changed over time, following the many socio-economic and historical ups and downs that affected both the CDF and the Galapagos Islands. But the library's mission has always been aligned with the institutional one: "to provide knowledge and assistance through scientific research and complementary action to ensure the conservation of the environment and biodiversity in the Galapagos Archipelago".

The library has played and intends to keep playing an essential role in the development of environmental conservation activities in the archipelago, in the management and dissemination of scientific information, in the divulgation of strategic knowledge, and in the support to education and outreach programs.

4. Present work

Nowadays, the library functions as the CDF's main space for knowledge management and dissemination. As expressed in the *Strategic Plan for the Library 2018-2019*:

> The mission of the CDF Library is to manage knowledge to support Galapagos conservation and the well-being of the archipelago's inhabitants. Its vision focuses on becoming an information unit that builds open, sustainable and plural spaces where knowledge nurtures reflection, commitment and action. Its central value is to serve as a connection channel with knowledge.

Taking into account its vision, the "G. T. Corley Smith" library aims at becoming a meeting place between the scientific knowledge produced by the CDF's professionals, and the Galapagos society. At the same time, it intends to support reading skills among the youngest Galapagoan generations, to encourage knowledge and multimedia production, and to include innovative approaches to the work done by scientists (e.g. citizen science, digital humanities, etc.).

To this end, the library has embarked on a series of projects to be developed in the short and medium term, building a two-fold line of work: "History" and "Outreach".

The "History" part of the library work focuses specifically on the content of the CDF's archive. The documents that make up that collection are being inventoried, cataloged, classified, indexed, processed, repaired whenever necessary, and slowly digitized. The

result of the digitization project will be a virtual collection that, when completed, will include hundreds of elements such as field notes, reports, posters, photographs, slides, etc., narrating the history of CDF and the science in Galapagos— as well as picturing the social memory of the local community. This digital collection will be connected with other CDF's databases in a unique online platform, called *Galapagueana*, which will also include the complete "Bibliography of Galápagos" and the outcomes of the Oral History and Documentary Film projects, both aimed at gathering information and knowledge never registered before on physical media.

The projects that make up the "Outreach" part address the very important and long neglected social side of biodiversity conservation and environmental protection. The strongest component of any conservation project lies in the transfer of knowledge and information to the local community, as well as in environmental education; libraries and the knowledge they manage are essential pieces in both processes. Accordingly, the "G. T. Corley Smith" library intends to establish solid links with the local society in all the populated islands of the archipelago, to support education and citizen science, to promote training (e.g. for naturalist guides and National Park rangers), and to raise awareness about conservation among the general public, including tourists.

To achieve this goal, a number of projects are being carried out. Probably the most important one at the moment is the "Traveling libraries" initiative, first of its kind in Ecuador and Galapagos: collection of carefully selected documents are being sent to different places in the islands inside suitcases, to be used and even become the seeds for future libraries (there is a practically absolute absence of libraries in the

archipelago). Each collection includes up-to-date scientific papers, guides, textbooks and digital documents, but also Latin American literature, multimedia and school books. As basic as it sounds, it is an innovative way to address a huge problem in Galapagos —lack of libraries and distribution channels for updated information—, and it is being very well received by the final users. Thanks to this action, the role of CDF as a center for knowledge production and dissemination is being strengthened, as well as the relationship between the institution and the society at large: trust bonds are being built, and new projects are being designed in a collaborative way.

Other projects include the reproduction of discontinued CDF's documents for their free distribution; collaboration with primary schools in the islands to support access to information, reading / writing / research skills, and environmental education; support to emerging citizen science activities; production of handmade cardboard books (*libros cartoneros*); and a long and exciting "etcetera" that foster interactions between the "G. T. Corley Smith" library and the Galapagoan society, and help the library staff to identify information-related problems and expectations.

5. Paths to the future

Even if the activities presented here are nothing new on an international context, they actually are when considering the local context of isolation and oblivion, lack of resources and social issues. Working in a place as protected as Galapagos (a National Park, a UNESCO World Heritage and a Biosphere Reserve) is challenging as well, with so many actors participating in the political arena, and so many conflicting interests.

What for other libraries may represent a small, easy step, in the archipelago becomes a huge, time-consuming one, and many barriers need to be overcome in order to facilitate dialogue, including the one separating scientists, conservationists and environmental activists from the local population — two human groups with different (sometimes even opposed) interests, thoughts and perspectives. As stated above, the human history in Galapagos has always been a difficult one, a real rollercoaster of events, struggles and diverging opinions and actions.

What may be seen as a handful of problems can also be understood as a window of opportunity and as a field laboratory for Library and Information Sciences to be applied, explored and tested. Hot topics like the interaction between sustainability, information and society, or the role of knowledge in conservation programs, or even categories like social justice, degrowth, human rights and equity, can be researched here. The construction of social memory and local identities, and the political role of libraries as institutional repositories, are also subjects that can be investigated.

The "G. T. Corley Smith" library will continue to explore ways to disseminate knowledge — as innovative as possible. The traditional collection of documents (books, journals, etc.) is being progressively linked to the CDF's collections of biological specimens, in order to add an extra value to both of them and to help people make sense of the meaning of scientific activity and understand the environmental reality they live in. At the same time, as already mentioned, the library collection is being linked to the audiovisual and historical archive, which allows the scientific work to be put in context, and to be approached in a more graphic way. An Oral History project is

planned to add more context and information to the entire ensemble by collecting the experiences of the local society about conservation in the Galapagos. And the results of the interaction of all these pieces is planned to be delivered to the resident community through a number of well-designed services, including blog posts and use of social media, reading promotion, radio shows, and other outreach activities.

Looking for innovative ways to provide services to its users —but without losing its scientific identity— the "G. T. Corley Smith" library will strive to add links to its official four-decade history, and steps to those already given by all those who, in a way or another, put their grain of sand to build and organize the current collection and services. All in pursuit of the conservation of a unique natural space, with a history full of transformations, lights and shades, and a future yet to be defined.

Chapter VII

Little stories from a southern horizon (I)

Being a librarian in Galapagos and nearby (and for me that "nearby" includes all Abya Yala / Latin America) is much more than dealing with budgets, collections and patrons. In my opinion, a library is that particular place where the meeting between knowledge and people happens. And, in "Galapagos and nearby", that can happens in a lot of spots – from a peasant backyard in a rural community to a boat in the Orinoco, on a bike in the forgotten neighborhood of a big city, or by the side of a box carried by a donkey up in the Andes.

Being a librarian "in Galapagos and nearby" means that I have to know my community first. And when getting acquainted with that community (and its environment), I've got into contact with countless amazing, astonishing, funny stories. Most of them are collected in my diaries. And here I'll share some. Because, as I said, that's also part of a librarian's job. The most human part of it, actually.

A plane's horn

Wednesday, September 26

Cristina told it to me in Bogotá, while sitting at the best table of a well-known brewery called *La Ventana*—a table that allowed me to look out through "the window" that gives the place its name, and let me observe downtown's busy life at the intersection of 19th street and 3rd avenue.

Cristina told it to me, I was saying, and she did that after drinking only two beers — a fact that made it hard for me to question her credibility.

(At least in Latin America, bar's conversations are not measured in minutes or hours, but by the amount of alcohol ingested, which is what usually defines the reliability of what is said).

"The plane honked", she said.

She was talking about a cargo plane she had to board while travelling to one of her destinations as a librarian in the Colombian Amazon. I twisted my lips. My first thought was that she was just joking with me. Not a kind thing to do.

"Honked...?" I repeated, almost mechanically. "You mean honking a horn, like cars do...?" I asked, trying to make sure that we were indeed talking about the same sound phenomenon.

"Uh-huh," she nodded, and sipped her blonde wheat beer as she peered at me over the rim of the glass. I twisted my lips even more and kept thinking that the girl was

simply trying to pull my leg— again, not a kind thing to do. And I was about to ask her if the plane's honking was due to the traffic light turning green and the airplane in front of it not moving. But I preferred not to. The story could be true.

And it was. "In Colombia, magic realism has no need of the 'magic' qualifier" said Sandra, next to me. "It is just realism".

I laughed out loud. It was impossible not to. I told them that in my homeland, Argentina, when we wanted to say that something is really useless, we used to compare it to a deaf man's ear, a motorcycle's ashtray, or an airplane's horn. "As useless as a plane's horn", we said. Well, not anymore. I had to find a proper substitute. Tarzan's tailor, maybe?

It was at that table, after two beers (to which some more would be added later), when I remembered one of the reasons why I like to keep a diary in my continent: to collect all those fragments of Latin American "magical realism" which don't need the "magic" part.

Fragments like the honking of those planes crossing the skies of the Colombian lowlands. Horns that sound to scare away flocks of toucans, or to alert those silly Parisian storks— those carrying babies to the many towns hidden among the green of the Amazon rain forests.

Fin

Sunday, June 17

I had just kayaked a large part of the bay that makes up Playa Mansa, there in Tortuga Bay, near Puerto Ayora. In southern Santa Cruz Island. In Galapagos.

It was a long trip. I stopped by the mangroves on the left shore to take a look at the birds resting on the branches, and to delight myself with the interweaving of the trees' roots. Those roots always strike me as the design of a master goldsmith, or of an old Irish illuminator of medieval manuscripts. I also stopped in the middle of the bay when I began spotting the huge heads of several green turtles that came out to breathe and, incidentally, to take a look at me, there, all alone, riding that ridiculous piece of yellow plastic.

It was at one of those stops when I heard the screeching noise, as if a huge sandpaper was being rubbed against the side of my boat. When I looked out, I saw a two-foot fin emerge from the water and, soon after, a tail.

Both belonged to a good-sized Galapagos shark, which had apparently chosen my kayak to scratch his back. And to freeze all the blood in my body.

That was how I found out that sharks scare the s*** out of me.

Mip

Sunday, May 27

I see the "Lost" sign glued on a wooden light pole, while going up to the community market to buy some fruit. It is a sign with the picture of a kitten in it.

I know it, that small furry ball. I've seen those black spots on a fluffy white background before.

Its name's Mip, and yes, of course I've seen it. It's the cat of the lady working at the laundry, just there on the corner. I have spoken to it, I have even made the fruitless attempt to play with it. But it is too young, too little, and it is always running, hiding and fooling around.

Now its owner is looking for it. It seems it got lost last Friday. And since the female cats surrounding my house are noticeably in heat, I assume Mip will have gone after one of them. It is young... but maybe not that much.

Besides being always saddened by those "lost pets" signs —those calls for help from people looking for their beloved companions—, I am struck by the name of the little one. Mip. Where does it come from? I assume an exotic origin, from an indigenous language of the Ecuadorian lowlands. Shuar, maybe?

The lady is sweeping the sidewalk in front of the laundry when I walk by. I ask about the kitten, but it still didn't appear. And I take the opportunity to solve my doubt: what does "Mip" mean?

Almost ceremoniously, the woman answers:

"Manejo integrado de plagas". Spanish for "Integrated pest management".

Chapter VIII

Galapagos' travelling libraries

This text was published on Princh Library Blog on May 20th, 2020.

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!

Chapter IX

Library work in the Galapagos Islands

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The Galapagos Islands, 1000 km off the Ecuadorian coast, in the eastern Pacific, have been called the Enchanted Islands. The Spaniards who discovered them by chance in the sixteenth century believed that they were haunted, so difficult it was to find them and to put them on the navigation chart; the naturalists who visited them two centuries later found that the charms of that handful of volcanic islands and islets were of a very different nature.

A shelter for privateers and whalers, a place of adventures and misfortunes for castaways, colonists and Robinsons, the Galapagos are home for a unique biome: the one which allowed Charles Darwin to build his evolution theory, and many other researchers to understand how life develops in isolated enclaves. They were seriously threatened by invasive species and human pressure, until 1959, when the Ecuadorian government created a National Park to protect the archipelago and its surrounding waters.

That same year the Charles Darwin Foundation was created, an NGO that established its base of operations on Santa Cruz Island, near Puerto Ayora. Since 1964, the Charles Darwin Research Station stands there. And since 1979, in that Station operates the G. T. Corley Smith Library, the most important active information unit on the islands, of which I am the current coordinator.

The library is located in the facilities of the Research Station, half a hundred yards from the sea, surrounded by saltbushes among which the famous Darwin's finches squeak and the native mockingbirds whistle, and under which crawl the equally famous marine iguanas.

Before taking this position, someone warned me that wildlife lives closely with researchers and workers at the Station — and the warning turned up to be absolutely true: you can be having a coffee while a finch is jumping on your table, within reach, or you can go to the beach nearby during a break and carefully dodge huge iguanas a meter and a half long all along the way.

And, of course, you can also go to the giant turtles' Recovery Center and be enraptured with the big reptiles that gave the name to these islands: huge and beautiful animals, and their little ones, bred in captivity to repopulate the different is-lands.

The work of the library is, on the one hand, to protect an archive and a legacy collection that make up the institutional memory of the Research Station, which in turn is part of the historical memory of these islands. On the other, it consists of

organizing all the available scientific production on Galapagos, together with the one produced at the Station itself: this being a relatively small ecosystem, organizing everything that has been written about it is relatively feasible. Finally, it seeks to support the research work of resident and visiting scientists, which ranges from management of fisheries resources and conservation of threatened species to control of invasive species, population monitoring and genetic research.

The profile of the library is complex: it combines that of a specialized institution (a research, academic library) with the one of a very small unit located in an outpost, and provided with wildly variable resources. The challenge for the future is to ensure that the library has a presence in the virtual world—the Internet service on the islands is terribly slow and unstable—that it can connect and combine its contents with many others produced by the Charles Darwin Foundation —the digitized biological collections, for example, or the thousands of research data— and, above all, that it goes beyond the limits of the Research Station and connects more proactively and integrally with the local population: a growing population that faces numerous challenges and problems in the near future and needs, therefore, information on conservation, resources and sustainability.

The Corley Smith Library was the first to provide information services on the islands, and has supported much of the intellectual production output of the Charles Darwin Research Station ever since. It must, from now on, respond to new realities (digital world, virtual reference, databases), to new challenges (connect knowledge and people to stop the ecological deterioration) and to new scenarios (climate change, loss

of biodiversity...). And it will do that as it has always done it: step by step, slowly but with determination.

Like the huge, tough tortoises.

Chapter X

Libraries in the South

[This chapter is an introduction to a micro-series devoted to the libraries in Latin America]

In general terms, it can be said that libraries use to be spaces that seem quite invisible to the big public.

With the exception of some institutions displaying striking architectures or offering some sort of "innovative" services —and monopolizing recognitions and awards, at least for a short period of time—, the dense library network that covers Latin America from Tierra del Fuego to Rio Grande does not usually provide big headlines or receive much attention. Or advertising. With a few stereotypes on their backs —some of them reflecting undeniable realities—, a usually not-too-striking profile, and a "complicated" historical relationship with the continent's inhabitants / patrons, Latin American libraries, librarians and library services are not in the focus of any media.

And yet, the work carried out by a good part of the libraries that make up this network is worth mentioning, supporting and promoting. It is not always a work with visible and short-term outcomes: on the contrary, it uses to be a constant and sustained action, aimed at obtaining a (meager) handful of achievements in the medium and long term.

It is a work that focuses on a limited number of urgent problems and that aims to produce lasting changes. Or, at least, to sow the seeds for those changes to happen somewhere in the future.

In short, these are libraries that, unlike the award-winning ones —those with unbeatable statistics and an outstanding media projection—, would probably not pass a "test of excellence": those quantitative evaluations "where everything implying critical thinking, vital joy, democratic commitment and emancipatory moral substance is slowly sinking", in the words of the professor of philosophy, essayist and Spanish poet Jorge Riechmann.

For centuries, libraries in Latin America were a resource transplanted from the Old World to which only a few had access. That history, that pattern, was repeated on an international level. When they finally opened their doors to the public —i.e. for those who at that time knew how to read—, they were used as tools of "culture" in contexts where there were only two options: "civilization" or "barbarism" ("civilization" being the European model of the late 19th century, and "barbarism" being the American indigenous and rural societies). It took several decades before the literate population that could benefit from library-related services was a majority. During all that time — the Colony, the Republican periods—, the channels for transmission of native and local knowledge remained alive: oral channels that were vilified, ignored, attacked or ignored by the dominant system, within which libraries themselves were included.

In many ways, a sort of "mistrust" due to such an unequal relationship is still in place in Latin America. Depending on the observer, the library is still seen, to this day, as an elitist, closed, exclusive space, reserved for a minority. And there is no doubt that sometimes it is. Fortunately, since the mid-20th century, many libraries in the continent (especially those that have a closer contact with society: public, popular, school, rural, mobile libraries) have tried to close the gap with a lot of hard work. They have been able to carry out an intense grassroots work, collaborating with their patrons and their communities, and addressing the problems they identify around them within their possibilities and with the tools they have (including information). And, step by step, besides becoming a place for militancy and cultural activism, they have developed an important educational, social and political work to face certain adverse circumstances (e.g. poverty, unemployment, violence, displacement...).

On the other hand, those libraries are increasingly aware that they stand on a land with ancient traditions, and that they move under a sky in which a plurality of past and present events merge. They understand that, just as they need to add all the potential improvements and advances from a global perspective, they must also include, in their collections and services, the oldest voices, the popular knowledge, the cultural diversity, and the traditional formats used to transmit knowledge in Latin America. They are realizing that "library" is a concept that cannot remain anchored in the past; it must be deconstructed, decolonized and rebuilt, so that it can evolve, as well as its collections, structures, formats and activities. Libraries are accepting that, in order to be true community spaces, they have to embrace all perspectives, all identities, all

languages and thoughts of a land that many call "Abya Yala": the landscapes enclosed by four horizons and four oceans, and all the bloods and the stories populating them.

Today, in Abya Yala there are libraries. And also houses of knowledge, information centers, reading corners, living books, amoxcaltin... Places where the words nest.

Follow me and learn about them.

Chapter XI

Where words take shelter

[Part of a micro-series devoted to the libraries in Latin America]

Through the six directions of Abya Yala, words have found numerous corners where to take shelter. And not just in libraries and information / documentation centers. Or in the "houses of knowledge", reading corners, cultural centers and other popular and community-managed spaces.

In fact, the most essential "library collections" in the continent are not shelved, or stored in digital databases. They are still found —although perhaps not for long— in the memories of narrators, wise men and women, storytellers, shamans, artisans, weavers... Those collections (generally unknown) jump from mouth to ear, go from hand to hand, navigating the intricate —and little mapped— geographies of orality. Sometimes, some fragments go to paper, or to an audiovisual medium. But, in general, all this knowledge —and the linguistic forms that encode it and through which it is expressed in an inimitable way— remain in the unstable and variable intangibility of the spoken word.

It is in their memories and in their mouths, as well as in their hands, that artisans (the few who continue to carry out trades as old as the society to which they belong)

preserve the handbooks, guidelines and methods of their work, along with the treatment of materials, the local particularities of each technique and each element. Builders of flutes and basket makers, creators of masks and clothing, goldsmiths and carvers, all of them and many others keep, preserve, enrich and transmit their personal "library collections" through speech and memory.

The narrators do the same with the stories of their people, especially those of creation: those that tell how rivers, mountains and lagoons appeared; the ones speaking of the floods and fires that killed off the primal races; those that recall the origin of plants and animals, of feathers and furs, of howls and hisses; those celebrating the exploits of ancient heroes and repeat, so that they may never be forgotten, the vileness of evil spirits. Also, those collecting the many steps that people has taken throughout the (spoken or written) pages of History. Tales of invasions, wars, famines, migration, abuses, losses, colonizations, forgetfulness. Too common stories, unfortunately, in all the latitudes cutting Abya Yala from side to side.

The same thing is done by those who remember genealogies: those bloodlines that link one generation to the next, a clan with its neighbor, a distant ancestor with all his/her many descendants. Those who know about the herbs that heal and kill, and about the insects that can be eaten, and about the fruits that cannot. Those help the earth and the women give birth. Those who archive in their mind the detailed maps of a coast or a mountain range: those plans in which each corner, each running wind, each rock and each hollow are named, and in which the hunting troughs and the clay deposits are marked.

Or those who combine all of the above: true bibliographers who connect spaces and landscapes with the people who inhabited them and the stories —from mythical times, from current times— that they lived. Walking encyclopedias that unite all knowledge in a single thread.

All of them can collect, organize and transmit knowledge using the spoken word, and the gestures that always, unfailingly, accompany it. And, also, by using many other sounds: song, music, or a heterogeneous mixture of story, song and melody. Or through other intangible means: dance, for example, or "dramatized" performances, or perhaps some children's games...

Another series of "library collections" of these lands enclosed between two oceans consist of objects in which information has been encoded. Objects that have nothing to do with a "book" as such, at least morphologically, but that fulfill a similar function: that of preserving a series of data on them or inside them— thus rescuing them from oblivion. They can be made of woven wool or vegetal fibers in which stories from ancient times are knotted. They can be masks that contain, in their carvings and ornaments, a handful of beliefs and hopes. They can be ceramic pots, whose more or less polished, more or less decorated surfaces reflect the schematic representations of the universe. Or they can be tangible elements that have a short lifetime: a face painting, an arrangement in the hair, a set of threads in the hand, or a drawing in the sand.

And finally, there are the books: from the Zapotec, Mixtec, Mayan and Mexican codices to modern monographs, magazines or dictionaries, whether on paper or digital. And, along with them, many other types of documents: the video and audio files that circulate through the network of networks, photographs and slides, large maps, letters, brochures and pamphlets...

In Abya Yala, sometimes words are nothing more than air that moves; others are tied to the fibers of a paper sheet, or represented on a piece of wood, or converted into binary codes in an optical memory. Be that as it may, all of them have found numerous corners in which to shelter: libraries, "living books", cultural centers, community houses... None of them should have greater value, nor more importance, nor a different status from that of the others, despite the many opinions (and many other policies) that bet on modernity and abandon or condemn to oblivion the previous ways of storing and transmitting knowledge. For all of them preserve small fragments of the identity, memory and culture of an entire continent.

Fragments that, like tesserae in an immense mosaic, allow us to appreciate the whole image when they are (re)united.