

A Bunch of Books, a Suitcase, and Many Trips by Boat: Chronicle of a Librarian Project in the Galapagos Islands

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ABSTRACT

The Galapagos Islands (Galapagos Province, Ecuador) are an archipelago located in the eastern Pacific, about 560 miles west from the Ecuadorian coast. Known for their unique biodiversity and for the visit of Charles Darwin in 1835 aboard the HMS *Beagle*, the islands are currently a highly protected area and, at the same time, witness to strong tourist pressure. The local population is about 25,000 stable inhabitants, all of them subject to severe regulations. In such a territory—full of debates and contradictions related, above all, to conservation policies—libraries and spaces for building knowledge, recovering memories, and debating informed decisions have been practically nonexistent. This article chronicles the implementation of the first mobile library program in the archipelago, emphasizing the natural and social contexts and the author's personal impressions.

Why a library? What for? How does it happen? How is a library or a library service born? What's behind the process? The chronicle outlined in the following paragraphs could have been an academic text that explained, from library and information science theory and user studies, the process of designing a mobile library program. However, it is not. It is a personal narrative—the author positioning himself in a particular territory and community and speaking from there, sharing his feelings, exploring the context, and acknowledging the ever-present (but rarely mentioned) motives behind the birth of those miracles that we continue to call “libraries.”

I'm lying on one of the last-row seats of that *fibra*, which is the name “boats” receive around here. September is coming to an end, and with it, 2018 is also going away. Right behind me

This text has been produced as a narrative of my personal and professional experience during my time in the Galapagos Islands while incidentally working for the Charles Darwin Foundation (CDF). It exclusively reflects my opinions and positions and in no way reflects the opinions and positions of the CDF. Information about the CDF is provided solely for context.

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there are three 200-horsepower outboard motors roaring with what I find to be an unnecessary fury, making vibrate my eardrums. And the rest of my body. To port and starboard, sea foam jumps in festoons that dissolve in the air and cover me with a fine, salty patina. Above my head a blinding blue sky unfolds, without a trace of cloud to tarnish its cleanliness. And around me, an even bluer ocean, calm, smooth as a pampa of water.

An ocean that the boat in which I travel—which, by the way, is called *Cally*—cuts through on the way from Santa Cruz Island to Isabela Island. In the Galapagos.

The boats that make the Santa Cruz–Isabela route leave every morning from Puerto Ayora, the harbor of Santa Cruz, at about 7:00 a.m. and return from Puerto Villamil, the Isabela counterpart, at 2:00 p.m. The same itinerary can be traveled by plane, but it is much more expensive. And boring. Unless one has the misfortune to travel on a rough sea day or does not tolerate ships at all, the journey between the two islands is a delight. After all, I am sailing the South Seas, the mythical waters of the eastern Pacific described in their diaries by pirates and whalers from the seventeenth through the nineteenth centuries. And before disembarking I will see those fantastic islets called “the Four Brothers” in the southeast corner of Isabela, or a strange volcanic caldera, split in the middle and sunken in the ocean, which on the maps looks like a thin waning moon and is marked as “Tortuga Island.”

Mine is not a pleasure trip (although, for a traveler like me, any trip is, regardless of the reason). Although I will try to make time to get to know some spots in Isabela that I have not visited yet, I am going there to evaluate the possibility of implementing a mobile library service in the Galapagos, which may begin its activities on that island, the largest in the archipelago—land of burning volcanoes, exciting stories, and unreal landscapes.

And no libraries.

II

The Galapagos Islands, or Archipiélago de Colón (Galapagos Province, Ecuador), are a volcanic archipelago made up of 19 islands, 42 islets, and 26 rocks located in the eastern Pacific, about 563 miles off the west coast of South America.

Isolated by the sea for hundreds of thousands of years, the islands witnessed the development of very particular fauna and flora that eventually transformed these small fragments of earth and rock into a true evolutionary laboratory, with their environments populated by unique biodiversity.

A biodiversity that includes the only diving iguanas on the planet (fig. 1), cormorants without flight, pear cacti the size of trees, finches with designer beaks, and the iconic giant tortoises that gave the place its name.

A mixture of rocky, desolate lowlands and green, usually cloud-covered highlands hidden in mist, the Galapagos were accidentally “discovered” by Spanish navigators in the fifteenth century. They were nicknamed “Las Encantadas,” the Enchanted Isles, because of the difficulty



Figure 1. Marine iguanas. Credit: author. Color version available as an online enhancement.

those sailors had in putting them on their charts. They thought that the islands changed places by art of magic and, therefore, believed they were bewitched, victims of an enchantment. That Hispanic difficulty—or ineptitude?—in locating them made them a safe harbor for pirates and corsairs during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and for seal hunters and whalers later. After the Latin American colonies gained their independence from the Iberian crowns in the early nineteenth century, Ecuador claimed the archipelago and occupied it with small populations with a history of their own. And after the HMS *Beagle* stopped on its shores in 1835, during its famous expedition around the world, and Charles Darwin collected specimens there and made the observations that would lead him to develop his evolutionary theory, the Galapagos Islands became a favorite destination of naturalists and biologists from Europe and North America.

At the beginning of the last century, the Galapagos received prisoners and settlers from the biggest Ecuadorian cities, as well as international scientific expeditions. One of these resulted in the publication of a book, *Galapagos: World's End* (Beebe 1924), that became a bestseller and inspired a handful of modern European “Robinsons” to populate their inhospitable landscapes. Human presence put intense pressure on the islands’ wildlife: many of the native species—hunted for food or as sources of oil for urban lighting, or captured to add specimens to the insatiable collections of Western museums and zoos—were brought to the brink of extinction. Beginning in the 1940s, a group of renowned European and American scientists devoted themselves to convincing the Ecuadorian government to declare the Galapagos a national park. That eventually happened in 1959, at which time strict measures were established for

the conservation of the archipelago. Only four islands (Santa Cruz, San Cristóbal, Isabela, and Floreana) were allowed to be inhabited and only in two sectors, which add up to 3% of the island surface—a small portion of land on the seashore (the port) and another in the highlands for agricultural uses. The more than 25,000 stable inhabitants of the archipelago reside there.

Later, the Galapagos were proclaimed a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve and the first World Heritage Site declared by that organization.

Days after the creation of the national park, the Charles Darwin Foundation (CDF) was born in Brussels, supported by UNESCO and the International Union for Conservation of Nature, with the aim of supporting the protection of the islands and their particular biodiversity. The CDF established its work base near Puerto Ayora, at that time a small town with few services and resources. This base, the Charles Darwin Research Station (CDRS), was officially inaugurated in 1964 with the aim of becoming the place where scientists and researchers could carry out their work, trying to understand and describe Galapagos biodiversity and, at the same time, to identify the threats to its survival.

The CDRS grew to become a modern and well-equipped institution where a group of highly qualified professionals carry out their activities. At the same time, it became the space in which the history of that work is preserved: the great and small narratives of academic achievements, and the social memory of the conservation of the Galapagos, with all its efforts, struggles, conflicts, and failures through the decades.

From the very beginning, a corner of the CDRS was devoted to a collection of books and magazines. That corner ended up becoming a full library, serving as such since at least 1971—the year that appears in the first preserved inventory—and was officially inaugurated in 1979 in its own building. It was named G. T. Corley Smith, in honor of a British diplomat who held high positions within the CDF and who played an important role in establishing this information repository.

Currently, the CDRS library is the oldest library, the largest, the only one that never closed its doors, and the most active in the entire archipelago. At the beginning of 2018, I arrived in Puerto Ayora to fill the position of coordinator of that unit—with all that means.

III

It cannot be said that Galapagos has been a territory fertile in libraries. Of the four inhabited islands, only two, Santa Cruz and San Cristóbal, have some type of library service at the time I scribble these lines. In little Floreana, there are no information units of any kind (and there is no record that there ever was one). In huge Isabela, the municipal library—the only one on the island—closed its doors 12 years ago. There, the efforts of a group of residents of Puerto Villamil to reopen it or create a new one proved unsuccessful.

In San Cristóbal there was a small municipal library, which disappeared in 2014, and another, closed for several years, in the Center for Environmental Education (CEA, in Spanish) that the CDF owns there in Puerto Baquerizo Moreno. Nowadays the only active library is private

and is located within the branch that the San Francisco de Quito University has in the island. For its part, in Santa Cruz, there is a library that is fairly significant due to the size of its collection and that is housed in a private school (Tomás de Berlanga, in the highlands) and a private/municipal library in Puerto Ayora, the most populous city in Galapagos, that has been closed for at least 6 years.

Thus, the CDRS library is currently, in a way, the most important in the archipelago. While representing an honor, it entails an enormous social and professional responsibility as well.

Unfortunately, given its origin and the structure in which it is framed, the profile of this library is far from being that of a public or school one. Its collection is essentially scientific, and it was always intended to respond in the first instance to the very specific information needs of researchers working at the CDRS. Even so, it is the only library that has permanent staff, good resources, LIS know-how, and a local history as a facilitator of access to information. Faced with the panorama of library scarcity that I have just described—in a world where information is power and, today more than ever, a strategic tool not only for the development of a society but also for the conservation of the planet we inhabit—I assumed the task of changing the profile of the G. T. Corley Smith and, at the same time, supporting the creation of new libraries in Galapagos and the recovery of those old spaces that ended up being abandoned.

My initial strategy was to take advantage of existing library structures. Thus, since mid-2018, I have been actively collaborating with local actors in the reopening of the library at Puerto Ayora, called Biblioteca Galápagos para el mundo (Galapagos Library for the World) and located in a beautiful space downtown. I also have led the rehabilitation of the specialized collection located in the CEA of Puerto Baquerizo Moreno, a round building with a conical roof located in the middle of a garden of native species.

However, where there were no preexisting structures or where such structures were no longer (re)usable, it was necessary for me to show or remind the Galapagos population—and its authorities—what a library is, what its services are, and what is its value and its usefulness. It was necessary to plant small seeds that, as pilot experiences, would serve to support the emergence of library services aimed at the local communities, their realities, their particular needs, their scarce resources—experiences that would serve to stir up an interest in libraries within societies without them. Seeds that had time to take root in their communities, respecting the slow, long, and parsimonious rhythms that characterize life in the Galapagos.

In this context, I had the idea of launching a mobile library project that, based on the CDRS library, its collections, and its resources, may try to provide information to the most needful users. A service that, in the long run, could lead to the birth of an insular stable network composed of libraries of different types.

This is how it was born—a project that, in my notes, I initially called “Traveling Libraries.”

The fact is that, before implementing an idea of this type, it is necessary to make a series of observations, hold talks, get to know the community, ask for their opinions, understand their

concerns and needs, explore their possibilities. It should be elaborated and carried out from a grassroots perspective. That was why I was traveling to Isabela. Going there with a project already assembled—just as it seemed best to me, from my professional position—and putting it to work (or should I say “imposing” it?) would not have been advisable at all. Although that is what the vast majority of librarians on the planet usually do.

IV

I've slept for a while. The “anautín,” the pill that practically all of us travelers take in Galapagos before one of these sea voyages, has had its effect. When I open my eyes, I see the unmistakable silhouette of Tortuga Island. It is the signal that we are approaching the port. Villamil's main pier is located inside a bay surrounded by reefs, rocks, and islets. Islets that, as the boat approaches, welcome us covered in brown pelicans, blue-footed boobies, and penguins. Yes, penguins. Some of them—endemic to Galapagos, and the only ones on the planet living north of the Equator—swim past our boat while the captain stops the engines and leaves us floating there, in crazily turquoise waters, waiting for the “water taxis” to arrive and transfer the passengers from the ship to the pier.

Water taxis are small. They can barely carry about 15 people, who must be distributed equally on both sides of the boat so that it maintains its balance and does not capsize. I pay, without question, the dollar that the ticket costs, although another passenger, a tourist, angrily asks the owner of the barge why he has to do such a thing. From the calm tone with which that tanned man delivers his brief explanation—the *fibras* cannot reach the pier due to lack of depth, the taxis are in charge of transporting the passengers there, and they make a living doing so they need payment—I suspect that he must repeat the same comment several times a day. And that is because the Galapagoan economy depends, above all, on tourism: agriculture, livestock, fishing, and industry are residual, survival elements in the entire archipelago. This dominant socioeconomic model, based almost exclusively on the tourist exploitation of a place labeled as “Eden-ic,” has created many problems in a strongly protected territory and within a community that needs that income to face a very high cost of living, caused by the dependence on supplies that inevitably arrive from the continent.

Once on land, I am greeted by the bellowing of the sea lions. They are lying on the sidewalk, some of them sleeping the eternal island siesta, others attentive to the arrival of visitors. I have to dodge them carefully. Not because they're going to do any harm to me: except during the mating season, when males become very territorial and aggressive, sea lions are completely peaceful. Too much, I would say. But the regulations of the national park indicate that a prudent distance of 2 meters from the local fauna must be maintained whenever possible.

Two meters is impossible to respect with animals that sit right in the middle of everything and do not even flinch in the presence of people. Or they directly approach them, curious. In this archipelago, these animals coexist with human beings in a way rarely seen in other places. The trusting attitude of the Isabelan sea lions—and the rest of the local fauna—is proof of it.

V

In the Galapagos Islands, environmental conservation has been turned into a sort of flag, an emblematic activity, and the battle horse of innumerable policies, both public and private. At the same time, it is strongly questioned and challenged, especially by a far-from-negligible sector of the local population. In a space like this, so full of potential and real conflicts, a library could, and should, play a fundamental role supporting both educational and informative processes (those that inform about conservation, actions, risks and needs), as well as decision-making, and academic and scientific research.

Sadly, due to a misunderstanding as widespread as it is discussed, conservation is usually seen only as an activity of scientists and environmentalists, or as a sum of dispositions of politicians and measures of administrators, instead of being approached as something that involves the entire society as a whole. As the specialized bibliography has been pointing out for at least three decades, conservation must be a social process, supported by up-to-date information that must be clearly transmitted through relevant channels: advertising campaigns, radio broadcasts, environmental education courses, outreach activities, training workshops, conferences, and a long and rich et cetera.

A library is prepared to provide the spaces, tools, contents, and techniques necessary to collect, organize, preserve, process, and transmit such information, in different formats and materials, and through different channels. Libraries create meeting places for knowledge and those who need it, using both the latest technologies and innovative ways of reusing old routines. All of it framed in international guidelines and programs, such as the quite hackneyed Agenda 2030 (United Nations 2015), and in much more elementary and “trench” processes, such as citizen science or degrowth.

That is the theory. A theory collected, among others, by the quite challenged movement known as “Green Libraries.” Reality, however, is somewhat more complex: ideas are rarely translated into practices, and if the latter exist, such actions do not always obtain the expected results. The scant systematization of library experiences, especially in Latin America, and the absence of a solid theoretical LIS structure (especially in Spanish) are determining factors in those absences.

VI

On my way from the pier to the hotel, walking under an inclement sun, I see a group of marine iguanas—enormous black-crested lizards—crossing the main street of Puerto Villamil, a strip of dirt and sand that runs parallel to the coastline. As they have done since they arrived on the island millennia ago, they move slowly from their lairs in the mangroves to the sea. Round trip. Every day. When humans built houses and streets on their ancestral routes to the ocean, they did not flinch: they continued to walk their trails, slowly, marking the sand and loose soil with their characteristic footprints, a zigzag line opened by their scaly tails, side-marked by the scratches made by their feet, armed with strong curved claws.

Isabelans placed notices where the paths of the iguanas intersect with those of vehicles, wooden signs that alert drivers of the reptiles’ passage. And that is how, on any morning,

you can see the garbage truck or the colorful *chivas*—old and colorful trucks equipped with wooden benches, that take passengers from Villamil to the highlands (fig. 2)—stopping to give way to a herd of large, medium, and small-sized iguanas that walk lazily to the beach. Cold-blooded animals as they are, they need the heat of the sun to get their metabolism going. And lots of seaweed for breakfast.

Thus, trying to respect the rhythm of nature (and failing many times), daily life unfolds in Isabela. And in the rest of the Galapagos. Places where human and nonhuman living beings try to learn little by little—and not without conflicts—to share the same space.

An essential part of the current conservation policies in the archipelago focuses on ensuring that the local population of “newcomers” respect the other local population, the one that arrived here mounted on logs or dragged by winds and sea currents thousands of years ago. This, despite the fact that some radical conservationists see humans as mere invasive species, or even as a pest that should be eradicated to preserve the paradisiacal purity of the Galapagos. A purity that, despite what the tourist brochures announce, ceased to exist a long time ago, if it ever existed on a totally interconnected planet.

Another task for a library: erase stereotypes, undo romantic or interested stories, and build a discourse that pays more attention to reality and its consequences.



Figure 2. *Chiva* truck. Credit: author. Color version available as an online enhancement.

VII

I am staying at a hotel called La Jungla, “The Jungle.” It stands among a forest of *jelies*, or button mangroves, on the western edge of Puerto Villamil. Westward, the Galapagos National Park begins, and on those lands, building is prohibited. Actually, it is forbidden to enter there: visits to the Park are limited to a handful of authorized sites and must always be led by an official naturalist guide and within the framework of a tourist tour.

The hotel is very well located: to the south, it overlooks Playa Larga, the Long Beach, a band of white coral sand that extends from where I am to a couple of kilometers beyond. To the west and north are lush mangrove forests among which exotic yellow warblers sing and a host of Darwin’s finches screech. To the east are the lagoons, a series of shallow vermilion water reservoirs, where black-necked stilts, ducks, moorhens, and Galapagos flamingos live.

I leave La Jungla, I walk 50 meters, and I stop at the beginning of the path that will take me, through wooden walkways, over those lagoons and then, along dirt and stone paths, to the local hatchery of giant tortoises, managed by national park staff. As soon as I start to walk, I find myself surrounded by water, mangroves, and aquatic plants. A squadron of iguanas of all sizes dozes on the walkway. Under it floats a couple of ducks that give me a look that I would say to be of boredom; after all, for them I am nothing more than the umpteenth curious, photographing tourist of the week. A little further on, a magnificent flamingo treads the muddy bottom of the lagoon with its mile-long legs and mows down the liquid—red, cloudy—with its curved beak, hunting for shrimps and those other tiny crustaceans that make up its diet (fig. 3).

Then I run into another iguana that swims through that mirror of brackish water. It goes around, making some very rumba-esque esses with its back, and leaving a cloudy trail of mud behind it. A pair of stilts walk across a sand island, and half a dozen dragonflies cross my path. Living here means being in direct contact, every day, all the time, with all this biodiversity. For the visitors, it is magical, wonderful, a unique experience. However, for the residents, it can be far from sublime: in such a protected site and with so many limitations (starting with those of space and resources), daily life can become a bit uncomfortable.

After several months living here, I have discovered that trying to talk about this topic is kind of taboo. Stating some discomfort, saying that one is not in paradise, or even complaining, is something that is not well seen. But once one establishes trust with the locals (and some long-time visitors), stories of all types begin to appear about the experiences in the “Enchanted Islands.” And then, a long list of pressures, conflicts, clashes, and vested interests can be written down that blur a little—or a lot—the Eden-ic image with which the Galapagos are sold.

All that, all that nature and territory, and all those beautiful and conflicting events, make up the social memory of that place—knowledge spun and interwoven throughout the generations, through the thousands of lived and transmitted experiences. It is something that a



Figure 3. Flamingo. Credit: author. Color version available as an online enhancement.

library should also take care of. Especially in conservation processes that should be discussed from a bottom-to-top perspective, instead of being imposed from a top-to-bottom position.

Libraries are—or may be, or should be—spaces where memories are woven, opinions are discussed, resistance is sown. From this perspective, all this activity would be extremely useful in this place.

VIII

The cultural life in the archipelago is certainly limited. The absence of libraries gives a clear clue. There is a conspicuous absence of places where activities such as theater or music take place, or activities related to reading, writing, or art. Of the latter, there are some, but they are subject to severe limitations. And that ends up being noticed. Education suffers from the same ills—ills shared by health services and others: the distance and the relative isolation to which the islands are subjected end up making an undeniable dent in the quality of life of the inhabitants. The most common solution is to look for what is missing in the cities of continental Ecuador, especially Guayaquil or Quito—with the investment of time and money that this means.

The creation of libraries could alleviate, to a certain extent, these absences and deficiencies. It would not be a definitive solution, but it would open the door to various interesting possibilities: options for reading, conferences, courses and workshops, talks, storytelling and small shows, film clubs, exhibitions. And interaction between different actors that, right now, do

not always have opportunities to connect. A library is an excellent tool for strengthening the cultural fabric and identity of a community and, with it, the social fabric itself. Libraries have demonstrated their effectiveness in this task through thousands of experiences developed, in the case of Latin America, in many and quite different contexts. They very well could do it in the Galapagos.

Among the multitude of suggestions, warnings, and recommendations that I received before coming to settle here, there was a curious one: "You are going to be a thousand kilometers from the nearest bookstore." It's true. In the Galapagos, there are no bookstores. Not even one. It is not the only thing missing. It is easier to get some diving fins than a CD, a newspaper, or a magazine. Life makes its way, and culture is no exception: young people download music through their cell phones, adults listen to the radio, everyone reads newspapers through their computers, and television offers cheap entertainment at all hours. But it is necessary to give a twist to all that, go to the next level, open horizons, create expectations.

Especially if a solid conservation policy on the islands is meant to be supported.

As I pointed out before, conservation is a social process. And that process cannot take place—it cannot take place *successfully*, I hasten to clarify—if there is no appropriate information, a well-designed and sustained environmental education, a discussion about production models based on pertinent knowledge. A debate at all levels about the type of life that is desired to develop in the archipelago: analyzing, in the process, opportunities and dangers, faults and problems, failures and gaps, memories and knowledge, experiences and hopes, fears and misgivings.

And in this social process of debate and construction (and, why not, deconstruction), the library should be a key player.

IX

During the days I stay in Isabelan lands, I spend all my time from here to there. I visit the local schools, I knock on the door of the park rangers, I meet a delegation from the local association of naturalist guides, I talk to a group of mothers from Villamil, I chat with people in restaurants and lunchrooms, I ask for opinions, I listen to anecdotes.

All the people I talk to, in one way or another, end up expressing their pressing needs for books, documents, up-to-date information. Schools don't have libraries, neither does the national park, and the municipal library has been closed for so long that some don't even remember there ever was one. The initiatives to create one, for different reasons, have ended up failing or being forgotten.

Despite all that, life continues unabated on the island, with the arrival of tourists at the pier every day, with the work of the fishermen, with the *chivas* going up and down to the highlands and stopping to make way for the iguanas, with the teenagers surfing at Playa Larga. It could very well continue without a library, static or mobile, large or small, specialized or not. It has

done so for years. That, as a matter of fact, is the opinion of some local politicians: a library is a lost investment, a wasted effort, idealistic nonsense that leads nowhere. I am familiar with that kind of opinion; I've been hearing them for all my professional life. My opinion is that life could well go on with a library. Actually, it could go on very well with a library, especially if that space, its services, and its activities are designed in response to the features of the territory, to the needs of the population, to the requirements of teachers and cultural actors, to the doubts of working population, and to the urgencies of women and elders.

The doors that a library can open in general, and in Galapagos in particular, are countless. A library is capable of displaying a whole range of possibilities, some of them quite unexpected. The "why" and "what for," usually absent in many library-related proposals, would in this case be abundant, complex, even inspiring. But, in a libraryless land like this, it is necessary to take a first, previous step—a basic, elementary one, although at the same time a foundational and groundbreaking one, innovative, if you will. It is necessary to bring a small library, plant it here, and see what happens.

From that point on; from the reactions it provokes; from the many dialogues, debates, and talks that will surely follow; and from many other visits to Isabela, with its comings and goings, its twists and turns, it will be possible to build, with some luck and a lot of tenacity, a solid, pertinent, and relevant library structure.

Or not. Who knows?

X

When, a week after my arrival, already doped up by the indispensable anautin, I head toward the pier to get on the *fibra* that will take me back to Puerto Ayora, I have a buzz in the back of my head. It's a mix of all the many voices I have heard, along with my own, and the barrage of ideas that have come to me during my solitary walks through the nocturnal streets of Villamil, along the sands of Playa Larga, or along the paths of the national park.

I also carry the image of a troop of red and blue crabs scurrying across coal-black stones, and of an oyster catcher flipping shells on the sand at sunset, and of an enormous pelican that passed 3 feet above my head in low flight and scared the heck out of me. I carry the flavor of the local *bolón*—an Ecuadorian delicacy made of baked, mashed, and kneaded plantain mixed with cheese and pork rinds—and that of the coconut water I drank in a run-down beach bar while listening to the stories of a group of Isabelans having beer and local firewater. I carry my anguish when I was in front of the Wall of Tears, a huge wall of volcanic rocks erected by the prisoners who lived in the penal colony of Isabela half a century ago and who died there, victims of mistreatment, negligence, and oblivion.

And I carry the hope that a library can help, in some way, to collect all that—all the places and the lives, all the networks of knowledge and memories, all the stories—and safeguard it for the generations to come, and use it for the ones that are struggling today.

Leaning against the wooden railing of the pier, waiting for the water taxi to arrive, and absentmindedly watching the graceful movements of a sea turtle rearing its head for breath, I decide that it's worth a try. A system of mobile libraries—"Traveling Libraries," I will definitely call them—can be a good starting point. The turtle dives in, and I start walking down the ramp toward the small boat that is already calling travelers.

XI

It is the last days of September 2019. I embark for Isabela. Coincidence: the *fibra* that I am to board is the *Cally*, the same boat in which I kickstarted my visits to that island. Next to me rolls the first traveling library that goes there: a huge, dark gray suitcase, with its extendable handle and wheels, covered by a transparent plastic protector on which a sticker is attached displaying books and Galapagoan people and animals and the message, "Bibliotecas viajeras"—Traveling Libraries.

The day is gray. The sky is covered with strange low clouds, and only a while ago it stopped drizzling. I go through the biosanitary controls to enter the pier, and I stay there, waiting for the departure of my boat. Beneath the thick posts of the dock swim a handful of whitetip reef sharks, and a school of small golden rays passes by, flapping their fins in such a synchronized way that they seem to have rehearsed that group movement. When I look up from the sea and rest my gaze on the enormous grayish curtain that surrounds me, I see the flight of the white herons. They pass every morning, around six o'clock, punctually. They wake up in the mangrove swamps on the coast and, in small groups, head toward the highlands to feed there. They are like short chalk lines, white paths that leave no trail. At six o'clock in the evening, punctually, they will do the same route, but the other way around. This is how it will be every day of every month of the whole year, reminding everyone of the meaning and value of natural cycles. I say to myself that humans are not so different: just check our libraries. It happens that we do not always have enough perspective to notice it.

Finally, they call the passengers of the *Cally*, and I get on the water taxi that takes us to the *fibra*. The passengers who share the boat with me look at me, curious.

"Are there books in there?" one ends up asking me, pointing to the suitcase by my side.

I nod mutely, with a half-smile.

"How many can fit?" the person next to me, a young man, wants to know.

I answer that at that time, there are about 40. But it all depends on the size of the books. And on how they are organized.

"Well, it's great that there's going to be a library in Isabela," he replies. My Spanish-speaking companions nod and smile, some make comments among themselves. And I feel good. I haven't had to hear that books are useless, that young people don't give a damn about reading, why do I make such an effort. On the contrary, I see looks of encouragement.

Not a bad start. We'll see where this path takes us.

Epilogue

August 2022. I write down these paragraphs in Isabela, again. I am sitting in front of a rough sea, taking shelter from the drizzle under a red mangrove that sinks its elastic roots, like fingers, into a mix of sand and basalt. Four meters from me, a huge marine iguana is striding toward its shelter, totally ignoring my presence, and in the mud to my left, a troop of ghost crabs is not ignoring it at all; from their subterranean lairs, they show me their Lilliputian pincers in a threatening way.

After all this time, Galapagoan nature still amazes me. So do the people. In fact, I think they are the most interesting fauna in this place. Those with the most to show and to tell.

The entire territory, in fact, has a lot to say beyond the worn-out discourses on evolution, biodiversity, and conservation. There are many lessons to be learned, gained, and shared. On my way to this point on the Isabelan coast, I crossed paths with a huge tortoise that was walking along the main road at the national park (fig. 4). It took more than half an hour to get over a small hurdle. However, it did not seem in a hurry. At 100 or 120 years—I estimated that age from its size—it was aware that time was nothing more than an accident.

Those of us who work with the memory of people and with the knowledge of the world are also aware of this.



Figure 4. Tortoise. Credit: author. Color version available as an online enhancement.

Imitating those slow steps and borrowing that awareness, the Galapagoan library universe has already begun to walk. The road to this moment in which I write has been long. And that is just the beginning.

To fully describe it would take much more than a few pages. Suffice it to say that today, the Traveling Libraries program is present in schools on the four inhabited islands of the Galapagos. It managed to bring the first library to Floreana and to implement the first library service at the Santa Cruz Special Education Unit. It has worked closely with teachers to provide them with relevant materials according to their needs and is expanding its reach by collecting documents specifically for environmental education. It also seeks to collaborate with other segments of the local population, including park rangers and naturalist guides. All this has been achieved through intense dialogue with all parties, maintaining an open attitude and, especially, a broad vision of the meaning of the term “library” in the islands.

At the CDRS, the profile of the G. T. Corley Smith has been progressively changed. In addition to adding an archive and a museum to its area, and having opened a window on the virtual world through the digital project Galapagueana, it currently offers a wide variety of services in addition to the strictly scientific ones: it promotes leisure activities (including literature reading), opens its doors to the community, and generates reading-writing spaces for both academics and nonacademics.

The Galapagos Library for the World in Puerto Ayora was reinaugurated in 2019 and is still active today. And the CEA in Puerto Baquerizo Moreno is expected to reopen its doors soon.

Finally, in 2022, a bookstore was established in Puerto Ayora. The taste for books seems to be contagious.

Every time I leave the CDRS toward the pier, dragging the library suitcase on duty, there are already many who greet me and celebrate. “Where are you going this time?” they want to know. “Another one is going out there!” some comment, smiling. “I imagine you’ll be up to your neck in anautin,” joke those who know me. That a project of this type becomes part of the landscape and the local reality is as important as it is satisfying.

There is still a long way to go to achieve the creation of a basic Galapagoan library network. But the first steps have already been taken. Now, it’s a matter of keep moving on. And sailing.

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