

Edgardo Civallero

Letters from the library

- part I -



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Charles Darwin
Foundation
GALAPAGOS

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- part I -

Project Galapagueana
Galapagueana to take away

Charles Darwin Foundation
Library, Archive and Museum
Puerto Ayora - Santa Cruz
Galapagos Islands - Ecuador - 2023

"Letters from the Library" is a regular, bilingual column published since 2020 on the blog of the Charles Darwin Foundation for the Galapagos Islands (CDF) and since 2022 on the *Galapagueana* platform. In it, the author, coordinator of the Library, Archive & Museum area of the institution between 2018 and 2023, shares the stories behind many documents in the collection.



#01

A love postcard

It was a postcard. It appeared inside one of several boxes of old papers that someone decided to discard at the CDF and, therefore, came first to my hands to check if there was something useful or valuable for the archive. And there was plenty of that. Virtually everything there was interesting material... although most of the documents were seriously damaged by humidity, dirt, insects and other living things — as the pair of geckoes that came out of the boxes as soon as I opened them.

I said it appeared all of the sudden, and it immediately caught my attention because postcards are not a very common element among the material we preserve in archives, the historical and social memory of our community. But there it was, showing me, on its illustrated face, a bunch of camels crossing a road somewhere on a deserted spot. Nothing too special. I wouldn't have had any reason to keep it, if I hadn't turned it over and found an text written in English that started with a "Dear M."

It was a love postcard. A woman who had met a man —probably an old member of the CDF— during a research project in a country in the Near East, and had had a brief but intense story with him. Her words were those of someone who loved and who knew as a fact that she would never see again the object of her feelings. It was the sweetest "goodbye" and "thank you" I had ever read. A true jewel.

And there I was, twenty years later, ignoring the identity of the protagonists of that story and their final destiny, but fully aware of the huge value of that piece of reality I had between my hands. Needless to say, I decided to keep the postcard. Because those of us who work with cultural heritage, knowledge, information or historical artifacts, need to be remembered, from time to time, that the elements we recover, organize, make visible and disseminate were, are and will be part of a story.

A human story, with people who write a couple of lines to thank the love they received. And others that keep those lines, despite being aware of the unavoidable effects of distance, time, and oblivion. Maybe for someone like me to find them and remember — or learn— that life is, too (or above all), those little, big moments. And that libraries, archives and museums are meant to rescue and treasure those fragments. Fragments that hide behind a book, a portrait, or a clay pot.

Or a postcard with camels crossing a sandy road.

Qui IS NOT PERMITTED TO READ WHEN YOU

PLEASE DO NOT LEAVE BOOKS
OR MAGAZINES IN THE WASHROOM

NOTE: Scientific articles are not to be used as toilet paper.)

THANKS

POR FAVOR - NO DEJAR LIBROS
O REVISTAS EN EL SERVICIO.

#02

In the bathroom

The history of bathroom reading is a history still to be written.

I speak of "history" because I assume that, from that glorious moment in the past when humans invented the toilet or some similar device in which to sit down, the need to read appeared. Simply to pass time. I would like to add that, long before that (or perhaps in parallel), reading materials used as an entertainment during that natural physiological process had a complementary use as personal hygiene elements. Or, at least, that's what oral tradition says.

We seem to have this habit of taking reading material to the bathroom. What's more: there are "bathroom libraries" (an actual trend on Pinterest). One which I have personally enjoyed scrolling through. There, I have found literary jewels such as Dante's *Divine Comedy* illustrated by Doré, or Ambrose Bierce's *Devil's Dictionary*, a satire frankly recommended both inside and outside the toilette.

The fact is that we librarians have a serious problem with these types of "libraries." To be honest, our level of hysteria rises to stratospheric levels when we have to deal with any environment, person, or object that may put at risk the immaculate whiteness of the pages we care for, or the binding of the books we catalog with such love. To tell the truth, we are a bunch of paranoids.

My predecessor at the Charles Darwin Foundation was no exception. Getting a book brought over from the mainland was painstakingly complicated — just for it to be used by people who could not really appreciate the true art of reading. This led libraries to develop a strategy to deal with these issues.

I was able to find evidence of those strategies. Of course, I did that in our archive, which stores most of our memory: those small and great things that make us who we are today.

Reviewing an old box full of crumpled and half-torn papers, I found a letter from the 2000s from a former CDF collaborator, Phyllis Bentley, addressed to one of our former directors, Alan Tye. For those who were born in the age of emails and the Internet, I'll quickly explain that a "letter" was an envelope (with sender and recipient, names, stamps...) within which several elements used to be included, especially messages. In this particular envelope, eaten away by time on this island and marked by the jaws of what I suppose would be several cellulose-hungry beetles, there was a handwritten note, with several attached photos. The note, addressed to Alan, read "Some more pictures for your amusement".

Among the included pictures, I found the one I'm sharing here: a bilingual poster placed in one of the Station's bathrooms (specifically, in the bathrooms of the "library, archive and museum", that has now been converted into a conference room) around 1982-3, asking for people to not cause nightmares to the librarian and be so kind as to not leave the reading material in the toilets.

[As expected, some anonymous contributors added a personal note to the poster.]

After laughing for a while, I separated the photo and put it in one of the boxes where I store materials that I consider valuable. I did this because of everything the picture represents. Not only the librarian's hysteria at its best, which is a good reason by itself. Also because of the excellent humor of the person who took a picture and sent it, as a funny memory of her life in Galapagos. I love the human touch to the poster as it represents one of those details that spices everyday life in any workspace. Something that, after all, is part of the history and the identity of the Charles Darwin Research Station.

Something, by the way, that speaks quite well of the inhabitants of the Station: readers so intense that they took their books even to the bathroom, and left that room so absorbed by what they had been reading...

...that they forgot the book next to the toilet.

[I need a linden tea now. The single idea of "book next to the toilet" has awoken my librarian's paranoia. Things of the trade.]



#03

With a little sea lion on the lap

The CDF Archive has an audiovisual section that, while not extensive, is rich in content. It is a collection that includes hundreds of photographs, slides from all eras (with glass, metal, plastic and cardboard frames), negatives, proof prints, films and videos in all the formats produced by the industry —including a few rolls of the infamous cellulose nitrate—, audio cassettes, and the magnetic and optical media that are more familiar to the new generations: floppy disks, ZIP disks, CDs and DVDs.

It is a true kaleidoscope of formats: the paradise for a librarian interested in knowing how materials used to save memories from oblivion and transfer information to the next generations evolved. After all, that's what librarians, archivists, and related professionals do for a living.

Among all the documents of the still incomplete inventory of the audiovisual collection, those that attract more attention and provoke everybody's interest are the oldest ones. Maybe because they rescue from the jaws of time facts, landscapes and people who hardly have left more traces than those who survived on those materials.

The oldest collection of photos in the CDF Archive is, so far (and I say "so far" because we continue opening boxes and discovering things week after week), the so-called "Nourmahal" album, a collection of pictures printed on paper and dated in 1930.

The Internet tells us that the *USS Nourmahal* was a ship of about 80 m in length, built in 1928 as a recreational yacht for the American billionaire Vincent Astor in the Krupp shipyards of Kiel, Germany. It was the third yacht of the Astor family that bore that name (which in Hindi means "Palace Light" and belongs to the heroine of a poem included in *Lalla Rookh*, a novel by Thomas Moore of 1817). The cover of *Time* on February 6, 1928 proclaimed it the best ship of its time. In 1940 the boat was acquired by the US Coast Guard for a million dollars, and in 1943 it was turned into a gunboat to face World War II. Luckily for her, she never needed to go into combat. In 1946 it was confiscated, and in 1948 it was abandoned. Its history ended in 1964, when it was sold for \$27,000 and disarmed.

Between 1928 and 1942, besides purely recreational uses, the ship was used for philanthropic purposes, including serving as a means of transportation to various naturalist expeditions. Specifically, between March 23 and May 2, 1930, Vincent Astor brought a group of American scientists to Galapagos on a trip for collecting biological samples. The researchers belonged to the New York Aquarium, the American Museum of Natural History and the Brooklyn Botanical Garden. The album "Nourmahal" shows details of that journey, panoramic views of the lush, forested nature of the upper part of Santa Cruz Island, and moments of the identification, collection, and handling of specimens.

And among them, one curious picture is the one I share here: a sailor with a young sea lion on his lap.

The image draws attention to the way in which the island's wildlife was handled back then. A treatment that lasted until recent times and that was reflected in other photographs, much closer chronologically, and also preserved in our Archive.

As a whole, the album "Nourmahal" is a valuable historical item that documents academic and scientific practices that today may generate at least some debate, although such work composes the foundation of what is known today about Galapagos. From nowadays' point of view, many of the scientific expeditions of those times carried out real looting of the Galapagoan biodiversity.

Personally, every time I take a look at the picture, I put aside academic matters or ethical disquisitions and end up wondering who that sailor was, what did he feel when carrying the sea lion on his lap, or what was the fate of that animal.

For the images that we keep in libraries and archives have the ability to send us to other times and places, in a personal and intimate experience of "time travelling." The magic of those small fragments of memory and history —encapsulated on a piece of paper or photographic film— is that, as if they were windows, they allow us to connect directly with that moment already gone and with its protagonists. With a minimum effort of imagination, and if we get carried away, they allow us to even feel them close, breathe the air they breathed, hear their voices...

And that includes that sailor who worked on one of the best yachts of his time and came to the Encantadas at the beginning of the last century, and a small Galapagos sea lion

that was torn from its native islands to face a trip without return and with an uncertain destination.

little ones
their tail curved



to touch them
reaches slowly & on
their level. They
enjoyed.

very good bathes. Then
with cold sausage,

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#04

Georgina's diary

The notebook was wrapped in a light blue cardboard, neatly folded for protection. There, inside that sort of box, it had been invisible for years. No one seemed to have requested it for reading in the library's main room, so its quietness had not been disturbed at all. It placidly slept in the corner of one of the library's wooden shelves, a corner that some friendly hand had assigned to it. I guess that, because of that lack of visibility, it managed to bypass my radars.

It happens that the little book I am talking about could not maintain its anonymity much longer. It underwent a general revision of our collections that involved, among other things, the re-cataloging and the physical reprocessing of each and every one of our books. A revision that took it from its well-guaranteed invisibility.

When she took it out of its light blue case, one of my colleagues —the one who had the chance to work with that particular document— showed it to me. I think she already knows about my taste for old papers and antiques.

It was a small notebook, of yellowed paper and blue lines, covered in a brownish fabric that might have been white or cream in the past, before time gave it its own patina, and with a handwritten note on the cover.

Diary of Galapagos.

I did not recall seeing any document with that title in our collection...

[...and here I will open a parenthesis and will hasten to explain, not without a blush, that we librarians do not always know our entire collection, nor have we read all of our books... Except in cases of general inventory, we rarely touch all the items of our collections. And although we touched and reviewed them, sometimes we don't know those books' and those boxes' contents. We tend to learn about our documents over time, according to the requests of our users, or our own investigations: those trips that some librarians embark on and that take us to navigate among our shelves for years...]

...and since it didn't ring a bell, I crossed my fingers and wished that I was facing one of those jewels that could contain surprises.

And boy, did it contain them...

That *Diary of Galapagos* turned out to be the travel log of Rosamond Georgina Lloyd, the wife of a British chemist / botanist named Thomas Taylor. Along with him, Georgina was in Galapagos in 1938-9, as part of the scientific expedition led by the now famous (and then unknown) David Lack.

The diary is a treasure for many reasons. Because it is an original document, manuscript and unpublished, and it is perfectly preserved. Because it was specifically donated by

Georgina to G. T. Corley Smith, a CDF member and promoter of our library. Because it describes the entire trip, from his departure from London to his arrival in the same city several months later, in great detail, and from a daily and personal perspective. Because it is the voice of a woman, who was scarcely heard back then. Because it is the voice of a non-scientist participating in a scientific expedition, and giving her own opinion about what she saw (which was not always polite). Because it is the voice of a high-class British speaking about South America. Because the expedition lived in Santa Cruz and Georgina describes life in Academy Bay at the beginning of the 20th century, and her coexistence with characters such as the Angermeyer brothers, Captain Stampa, or the Küblers and their daughter, Carmen (today Angermeyer) who then would not exceed 10 years. Because it describes, in the first person, native landscapes and species, and investigations that were then ongoing and that later marked the history of science in the Galapagos (the one of Lack with the finches, or the one of Taylor himself with plant pigments). Because it clearly reveals many tics (racist, classist, sexist) and, also, many behaviors that were advanced for a woman of the time...

That surprising, interesting, and even moving, can be those little handfuls of sheets that we preserve, with all the possible care, on the shelves of our libraries and on the boxes of our archives.

I would like to close these notes by sharing a fragment of *Diary of Galapagos*. These are the notes that Georgina scribbled in her notebook on Sunday, April 2, 1939, when she left the islands (never to return). I think that the ones that I will write down in my own diary when I leave the archipelago will not be very different.

"Goodbye, Indefatigable; good bye, all you people, who have been so kind to us, and who quarrel so fearfully among yourselves; good bye, the iguanas and tortoises and turtles, and the birds under the cliff, and the night herons who bark and grunt at sunset; good bye, nice dogs sitting on the balcony silhouetted against the sky, and the five cats slinking among the palms and the papayas, and the wild donkeys who all night long keep up an interminable chorus all over the island.

Good bye, Galapagos".

CHARLES DARWIN
AMINTIRI DESPRE DEZVOLTAREA
GÎNDIRII ŞI CHARACTERULUI MEU
AUTOBIOGRAFIA
(1809—1882)

ЧАРЛЗ ДАРВИН
ВОСПОМИНАНИЯ
О РАЗВИТИИ МОЕГО УМА
И ХАРАКТЕРА
(АВТОБИОГРАФИЯ)
—❁—
ДНЕВНИК РАБОТЫ
И ЖИЗНИ

Полный перевод с рукописей Ч. Дарвина,
вступительная статья и комментарии
проф. С. Л. СОБОЛЯ

#05

Darwin at the Tower of Babel

The figure of Charles Darwin — Darwin the scientific, but also the thinker, the believer, the citizen— has attracted the attention of specialists and laymen alike for more than a century. Not in vain his ideas revolutionized the 19th-century academic thought, and even today they continue provoking debate, as well as inspiring studies and advances in countless fields and disciplines.

The gravity of such a star has drawn countless satellites around it: a myriad of authors determined to describe the Englishman, his life, his travels and his publications from every possible perspective, reaching levels of detail sometimes exaggerated. And this happens despite the fact that the voluminous Darwinian work already includes, among other texts, an official autobiography and the detailed diary of the travel aboard the *Beagle* — which incidentally turned that journey into one of the most famous scientific expeditions in Western history.

Understanding that the words of the "Father of Evolution" did not need more interpreters and apologists, some specialists in Darwin's work and life have made their contribution in a different way: translating his words. By transferring the ideas of the distinguished scientist to other alphabets, other grammars and other vocabularies, they have managed to extend the reach of his thoughts.

Among its many books, our library treasures a collection called precisely "Darwin", displaying all the texts produced by the British scientist in their original language, plus a good number of biographies, analyzes and comments written by other pens.

And yes: it also includes translations. One (small) Babel of them.

There are books in Italian —many of them— and in Spanish, obviously. But there are some works that result more "exotic" to the common reader. Like the translations of *The Voyage of the Beagle* into Korean (1993, 2006) by Soon-Keun Chang, an emeritus scientist at the Korean Polar Research Institute, who also wrote his own text (2003) about Darwin's theories — those theories developed throughout his trip around the world.

Alongside those volumes, printed in the curious Hangul alphabet, there is the translation of Darwin's autobiography —originally titled *Recollections of the Development of my Mind and Character*— by S. L. Sobol. It was the first one in Russian, and was launched in Moscow in 1957 by the publishing house of the then famous USSR Academy of Sciences. Prof. Sobol translated Darwin's complete works; for the *Recollections...* he used the microfilmed version of the original manuscript, kept in the library of the University of Cambridge (United Kingdom).

Interestingly, that text served as the basis to prepare the Romanian translation, which is also in our library, and which was edited in 1962 by the Academic Publishing House of the Romanian People's Republic in Bucharest.

On the same shelf, a little further, there is a Japanese translation prepared by an expert in Darwin and the theory of evolution: Yasugi Ryūichi. The book was published in Tokyo in the early 50's of the last century and, like all Japanese books, it begins with what in the West would be considered the back cover.

Most of the books in the "Darwin" collection are dedicated to the Station and autographed by their authors. Aware that the CDF library is one of a kind, they wanted to leave a sample of their work —and their love for Darwin— on their shelves.

It is the work of the library (among many others) to safeguard those books and make them accessible to everybody. As far as the limits imposed by the mythical Tower of Babel allow, of course.



#06

Everything is hidden in memory

The man, already aged but with a vitality that many twenty-somethings would want for themselves, walked with us the bunch of yards from the CDF library until the entrance to the "Station Beach". We were interviewing him for our oral history program. Throughout the journey we were chatting about times gone by, about people who are no longer among us, about events that were recorded only in some corner of his head, about things said and done, about adventures and misadventures, and about other memories — some of them quite blurred, others not that much.

Step by step, laughter after laughter, we approached the beach, and the buildings that stand there.

"There was my house," he said.

A couple of days earlier he had shown us a photo of "his house". It was a simple, quadrilateral building, with an even simpler roof. It had been "his place" for some time, and he had fond memories of that corner in the Galapagos where he had shelter and where, I suppose, he produced ideas and projects, he dealt with failures and problems, and he developed his academic research and conservation work. For the man I am talking about is one of the great names of science in the islands, an active and respected

member of the CDF, and one of the voices that have survived over the years to continue reminding us, the youngest ones, where we come from.

Basically because if we do not know our past it will be difficult for us to understand where we are standing, or where we can go.

"There, there was my house," he repeated, in a Spanish tinted with northern accents. And so it was. His home had been located on that stone esplanade, a spot where other houses, built long after, are located today. We thought that there would be no vestige of those times. We were wrong. The man commented that the two tall Opuntias that still force their roots in that rough, stony land had been his neighbors, his companions.

We went to the tallest and oldest one, and take him a photo by its side. And when we were going to do the same with the second Opuntia, the man laughed out loud and pointed at a black boulder that loomed at the feet of the plant, almost resting on its brown and scaly bark.

"That's my doll!", he exclaimed.

We looked at each other, between doubtful and amused, thinking that memory was playing tricks on our companion. That half-buried stone was just another of the thousand volcanic fragments that cover the surroundings of the Charles Darwin Research Station. The man looked at us, smiling, perhaps perceiving the doubt in our eyes, and explained himself.

In the old days, when he lived in that place, he found a huge rock with a feminine shape: a torso with a well-marked head, shoulders, and breasts. He placed it against the Opuntia at the entrance of his house, and kept it there. It was his "doll". Over the years, the works to build the street connecting Puerto Ayora and the Research Station threw a lot of rubble to the sides — and covered that stone "bust", without anyone noticing it.

It was enough for us to play archaeologists and push aside part of that rubble to discover shoulders below the head. And further down, the rest of the "doll". Our interlocutor laughed, pleased, and touched his temple, in a silent sign that he did remember well.

The man was Tjitte de Vries. And her "doll" was, is, and will continue to be there: buried up to her neck, right at the base of the Opuntia standing at the entrance of the first houses of the Station.

That is how memory works. Sometimes it uses the most unexpected fragments of the past to relive, through them, an entire period, a whole history. Sometimes it is capricious, and it seems to throw in our face elements that seem irrelevant, or simply anecdotal. But they should not be discarded. One never knows what may be behind those little memories.

For, as the Argentinean songwriter León Gieco points out in one of his lyrics, "everything is hidden in the memory, / the refuge of life and history".

Whales Beneath the Ice

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#07

In Kichwa. In Inuktikut

One goes over the spines of the documents that make up the collection of the CDF Library and comes across a small linguistic mixture. In addition to English and Spanish, the stronger languages, many others have nested among the old wooden shelves: from Mandarin, Japanese and Korean to Russian, Swedish and German, going through French, Italian and Dutch.

And even a couple of indigenous languages.

Due to the strong presence of migrant communities of the *Otavaleño* and *Salasaca* peoples in Galapagos, both of them coming from the Andean area of continental Ecuador, it is almost logical that in our collection we have a small —unfortunately, still very small— handful of works that include translations into Quechua, Kichwa or Runasimi (literally, "the human language" or "the language of the people").

The book *Siémbreme en tu jardín: jardines nativos para la conservación de Galápagos* ("Plant me in your garden: Native gardens for the conservation of Galapagos") (2017) is an excellent example of such works. On its pages, which present files on island plants, the corresponding Runasimi translations are included. The title of the work, in that language, reads *Kanpa sisapampapi tarpuway: Galapagos suyu kuskata kamankapak sisapampakuna*.

We also have a book that is printed in Runasimi, which refers to Darwin's arrival in Galapagos: *Charles Darwin Galapagos yawatipi kashkamanta: 15 kuski killamanta, 20 wayru killakama 1835 watapi* (a sentence that, according to my rusty knowledge of Kichwa, would translate as "About Charles Darwin's stay in the Galapagos Islands: from September 15 to October 20, 1835").

Finally, we have a children's story, *Sisa: descubriendo la diversidad cultural de Galápagos* ("Sisa: discovering the cultural diversity of Galapagos") (2013), with a bilingual Castilian-Kichwa text.

And that's it, I thought. What would be my surprise when I came across a WWF report entitled *Whales beneath the ice* (1986), the text of which is written in English... and Inuktikut!

The Inuktikut language is spoken by the Inuit —one of the indigenous peoples popularly known as "Eskimos"— and has various forms of writing, depending on the group or "tribe" that uses it. The Inuit living in the Nunavuk and Nunavik regions of Quebec, Canada, use a system called *qaniujaaqpait*. It is a syllabary, that is, a code in which each sign represents a syllable (as in the case of Japanese hiragana).

The graphic form of each sign is very curious, and its history, even more. The system is the adaptation of a script developed by missionary James Evans around 1830 for the Cree and Ojibwe indigenous societies of Canada and the USA. Other evangelizers

brought that idea to the far north of the Americas and there, in the solitudes of the Arctic, they used it to print the Gospels and to transmit Christian doctrines to the "Eskimos". The *qaniujaaqpait* consists of a dozen basic graphs to which the orientation is changed and annex symbols are added; in this way it is possible to represent the entire range of Inuktituk phonemes.

I found these letters one afternoon, as I finished sliding my finger down the spines of the documents that make up our bibliographic collection. I understood that, beyond the curiosity and amazement that these forms of writing produce, it is interesting that in our information repository we have such samples of the cultural diversity of our species. They remind us that on this small planet that we inhabit, knowledge is produced, circulated and reproduced in a multitude of media, codes and systems. And, at the same time, they allow us to contemplate our own wealth: the fantastic plurality of our identities, speeches and worldviews.

A plurality to value, care for and defend. Because it is equivalent to that other plurality, the biological one, that we protect in the CDF every time we fight to prevent the disappearance of a species. Because we know that, without these threads (big or small, it doesn't matter), the natural and cultural fabric of our world would end up unravelling.



#08

A story in a picture

I remove the slide from the plastic sheet, which stores other nineteen, all in consecutive order. I take a look at the small notes crowded on the edges of the plastic (or cardboard, or glass, or metal) frame, sometimes scribbled directly onto the material, sometimes written on labels that barely hold there, sometimes typed on pieces of paper glued to the frame — and already showing a worrying brown color...

...and then I look at the picture against the light, trying to find out if I am holding the slide the right or the wrong way — head up or head down...

...and then I place the slide on that gadget from the 60s that I recovered from a corner of the archive. A gadget that some intelligent colleague from the past kept because s/he knew that at some point in the future it would be useful: a metal box with a thin, white, translucent plastic surface with a pair of lamps illuminating with all their power under it...

...and I bring my face close to the slide, and I put between my right eye and the film that other device, also inherited and also found in a corner of the archive: a kind of magnifying glass...

...and then, just then, I can see the picture.

And I realize that once upon a time —years ago, decades ago— there was someone who was in front of what I am seeing now, and decided to capture it, to keep it beyond their retinas so that others could enjoy what s/he was watching and experiencing. And they did that so that the picture, and the story that the picture represented, would not be lost.

Because there is always a story behind any picture: that is something known to all of us who devote ourselves to the preservation of the past. There is a story there, so the future generations may know about our adventures and dreams. It does not matter if it is a snapshot of a landscape or a simple and melancholic passport photo: in those skies, in those eyes, in those animals, in those groups of friends who hug and smile at the camera, there are one or several stories.

And sometimes, in rare occasions, the image is the summary of a long story, or the sum of many of them.

This is the case of the photograph that I am sharing alongside this letter: a slide that I rescued some time ago from one of the folders in the audiovisual collection of our archive, and that left me with my face stuck for a long time to the magnifying glass and to the bright screen, smiling, until the heat from the lamps made me turn away.

Among the thousands and thousands of slides that we have already reviewed for digitization, I have found countless pictures that reflect different moments of the giant tortoise breeding program in Galapagos. Pictures immortalizing many of the program's

architects, participants and collaborators, both from the Galapagos National Park and the Charles Darwin Foundation.

But I think this one condenses in itself the entire program, the entire project, all the ideas that drove that work, all the desires that gave it wings. Seeing that smallness on top of that enormity, and knowing that thanks to us, to our work, the former may have at least one chance to become the latter, is absolutely exciting.

It is a long story of hopes and efforts —and the promise of another story, that of a tortois life in some Galapagoan corner— embedded in a colorful 3 x 4 film rectangle, stored alongside thousands of other stories that are waiting to be discovered, remembered and relived...

...to become links in other different stories, which may be collected in other pictures.

[The slide, whose authorship has not yet been confirmed, was used in a WWF program entitled "Galapagos: The islands at the end of the world", and was part of those sets of slides that, together with a written script and, at times, several audio cassettes, were distributed by the organization at least 40 years ago for environmental education and awareness purposes].



#09

A green heart

Sometimes I find it difficult to understand what I read. I try to find fragments of my old knowledge of palaeography in the back of my memory, but to no use: Some of the handwritings that cover —like a tight carpet of scribbles— the pages of the manuscript I am transcribing resemble real hieroglyphs. Or some of those exotic writings still to be deciphered: those that only their original scribes would be able to understand.

And there are dozens of different handwritings in this notebook. A large, old notebook, attacked by insects that, bite after bite, carved endless grooves in its leaves. It came into my hands back in 2018, when I was checking out a handful of dampened boxes, loaded with discarded papers. I remember that the picture accompanying this post fell from among its pages: An owl that, according to the note on the back, was photographed by Tjitte De Vries. The document turned out to be a guestbook: A kind of improvised "log" in which nearly a hundred hands wrote summaries of a hundred researches and field work carried out on Isabela Island between 1969 and 2003, both by the Charles Darwin Foundation (CDF) and its visiting scientists, and by staff of the Galapagos National Park.

This notebook that I am transcribing — ninety pages containing about thirty years of the history of science and conservation in the archipelago— was the guestbook of "El Corazón Verde".

"El Corazón Verde" (Spanish for "The Green Heart") was a house that the CDF built and maintained in La Esperanza neighborhood, Santo Tomás, in the highlands of the largest of the Galapagos Islands. It was built at the request of Jacinto Gordillo, the CDF's man in Isabela since July 1966. With the support of Roger Perry and Tjitte De Vries —CDF's director and assistant director, respectively—, in 1967 the materials for the building were gathered and, by October 1969, the house was officially inaugurated. The place was taken care of by Jacinto Gordillo himself and another emblematic man in CDF's history: Arnaldo Tupiza, a National Park guard, and the carpenter who built the main structure of the house (along with another guard, Antonio Constante).

The space was conceived as a "science shelter": A base of operations and a refuge for all the scientific expeditions carried out on Isabela. As De Vries noted...

CORAZON VERDE stays for a centre of scientific and conservational activities. That this heart is still green signifies the hope: conservation without hope is blind, science without hope is lame.

The different visits were carefully noted in the pages of the guestbook, alongside the activities carried out and the corresponding dates and signatures. Such notes were made in English, sometimes. Or in Spanish. Or, most of the times, in a recently learned, unsure Spanish, funny but a little bit difficult to understand.

Especially if the damned handwriting is added to the poor grammar and the crazy spelling.

[There are honourable examples, such as the entry on September 30, 1987, of a scientist whose name I will keep for myself, who, after writing half a page in "Spanish" without a single accent, added all of them later... using a different ink.

And dishonourable examples, such as texts full of terrible misspellings, written by Spanish-speaking researchers].

Beyond being a special document, the record of several original discoveries and ideas, and the witness of events such as the eruption of Cerro Azul in 1979, the terrible fire of March 1985, the delimitation of the grounds of the National Park, or the construction of a refuge in Sierra Negra, the notebook compiles an inventory of what true field work means: Exhaustion, long trips, dirt, cockroaches and chiggers, rain, humidity, blisters, worn clothing, repetitive and boring work... A lot of little winks, included here and there in the different texts, make absolutely it clear.

[The importance of a cold beer or good rum is also clear].

Here are some examples:

January 1971

Agradezco mucho a el Sr. Gordillo y los Sres. Tupiza y Cartagena para todo: reflectando desde la sopa de tomate de arbol por Alemania, los días en las faldas de Fernandina y Cerro Azul, el meeting en Marchena, hasta las alegres fiestas.

[I am very grateful to Mr. Gordillo and Mr. Tupiza and Mr. Cartagena for everything: the tree tomato soup in Germany, the days on the slopes of Fernandina and Cerro Azul, the meeting in Marchena, and the joyous festivities].

July 1977

Cinco daneses estuvieron aquí realizando colecciones de plantas. Después de dos días con garúa tan espesa como sopa de arvejas en la caldera logramos ver la vista fantástica. El resultado de la colección fue muy excelente — y la estadía aquí y la expedición a Sierra Negra fue un éxito total, gracias al señor Tupiza, quien nos ayudó lo más posible. ¡Excursión y vacaciones al mismo tiempo!

[Five Danes were here collecting plants. After two days with rain as thick as pea soup in the caldera, we managed to see the fantastic view. The result of the collection was very excellent — and the stay here and the expedition to Sierra Negra was a total success, thanks to Mr. Tupiza, who helped us as much as possible. Excursion and holidays at the same time!]

July 1979

The shelter provided the best, dry moments in the past 5 days. A tip to future travelers to the crater: watch out for fending macho bulls.

December 1979

Viajar cincuenta kilómetros a pie fue algo muy cansado. Pero todo lo visto en Volcán Chico, Pampas Coloradas y todo el camino vale la pena cualquier cansancio.

[Traveling fifty kilometers on foot was very tiring. But everything seen in Volcán Chico, Pampas Coloradas and all the way is worth any fatigue].

June 1982

Otro día estuvimos en Sierra Negra — que por cierto para mí fue muy negra la caminata debido a mis zapatos estrechos

[Another day we were in Sierra Negra [Black Range] — which, by the way, the walk was very black for me because of my narrow shoes].

November 1985

[In the list of members of an expedition]

Además: varios caballos, volquetes, cucarachas, perros domésticos y salvajes, y niguas.

[Also: various horses, tippers, cockroaches, domestic and wild dogs, and chiggers].

September 1987

Ha sido un placer, poder asistir a una becaria de la PUCE, la señorita [...], en su trabajo de entomología, aunque solo me utilizó para hacer hoyitos y poner sus milagrosos vasitos y mantenerme 5 días completamente sucio.

PD: Gracias a [...] por las cervezas

*[It has been a pleasure, to be able to assist a PUCE fellow, Miss [...], in her entomology work, although she only used me to make holes and put her miraculous glasses into the ground, and kept me 5 days completely dirty.
PS: Thanks to [...] for the beers].*

The guestbook of "El Corazón Verde" bears witness to the excellent work carried out by the caretakers of the CDF, and by collaborators such as Pedro Cartagena, about whom I will speak again in this space. But, above all, it is a demonstration of scientific work and love for a small corner of the world that left no one insensitive.

I wish it to be a pleasant process before this heart is ripe.
Tjitte De Vries, October 31, 1969



#10

A chest full of treasures

—We found a huge trunk under the stairs. Nobody remembers who put it there. It looks like it has videotapes in it. Shall we bring it to you?

It seems that one of the roles of the coordinator of an archive —like the one at CDF— is to receive this type of news. And questions.

I must confess that such news always fills me with joy. I like to think that those documents that appear "unexpectedly" in previously unattended places are survivors of a bygone era who have lurked in the shadows for years, waiting for the right moment to re-emerge. Managing an archive implies, among other things, welcoming those survivors with open arms and, as a good guest, taking care of their well-being and spending time talking with them.

Because they usually have many stories to tell.

So they bring me the trunk, which actually turns out to be massive and weighs like a coffin. It's black, made of plastic, has rusty metal locks, airline tags and strings attached to the handle, and white stencil-painted lettering on the lid. The letters indicate that the container was once owned by Elizabeth Pillaert, a renowned scientist who has not been at the Charles Darwin Research Station for at least a decade and a half.

As I open the trunk, I think of Carter and Carnavon opening King Tut's tomb at the beginning of the last century: with bated breath, and longing for a surprise. I know, because I've already gotten the damn spoiler, that there are videotapes inside. But... who knows which ones, of what type, of what periods, in what format...

And, of course, I get my surprise.

[We, archivists, are almost certainly prone to being easily surprised. Or maybe life, pitying us for all the hours we spend among old papers, insects and dust, rewards us with real surprises]

Inside that plastic container are dozens and dozens of videocassettes. Hundreds, probably, stacked on top of each other. I'm sure they were dumped there by someone who needed to store all those records somewhere and repurposed "Elizabeth Pillaert's property" to try and protect them. The most curious thing is that, crowning that mountain of tapes, there are two black rubber flip flops. A classy touch.

I take a look over and begin to understand that in front of my eyes and my hands I have a huge exercise in media archaeology: the study of audiovisual and information media's history. An exciting sub-discipline of archival and library sciences that is concerned with tracking the evolution of photographs, slides, films, audio recordings, floppy disks and CDs...

I look at the labels as I pass. That is a treasure chest, a kind of time capsule through which I get a lot of audiovisual scraps from the past: work done by CDF scientists and by the communications department, by environmental education programs...

An initial inventory lists 425 items. More than 300 are videocassettes and mini-videocassettes of different types (8mm, Hi8, metal), including brands such as Sony, TDK, Fuji, HG, Panasonic or Maxell. The rest are DAT drives, Data Cartridge drives, old audio reels, Mini-CDs, Jaz drives, Zip drives, Optical Disks, and several more.

I still don't know how I am going to visualize all these materials: each type requires its own player, which obviously I do not have. Therefore, at the moment I will not be able to sit down to dialogue with them. Hence, for the time being I will welcome them, clean them, review and repair possible damage, identify them, organize them and gradually recognize them.

A true exercise in media archeology. One that, I'm sure, will give me many more surprises.



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