

[Edición del lunes](#)
[Medir el Mundo](#)
[El Verificador](#)
[¿Cuál es la voz?](#)
[Punto de Partida](#)
[Come y Bebe](#)
[Tercer Tiempo](#)
[Dossiers](#)

- [English Version](#)

Where is the international observer for the Galapagos Islands?





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...ms that the Charles Darwin Foundation has forgotten its main objective

***This text is a translation of [¿Dónde está el observador internacional de las Islas Galápagos?](#)*



I worked as Executive Director of the Charles Darwin Foundation (CDF) from July 2011 to May 2015, representing a cause that I love. The CDF carries out scientific work that is designed to support the long-term conservation of the Galapagos, a place where it has operated the Charles Darwin Research Station (CDRS) since 1964. The organisation does this work under a mandate provided by the Government of Ecuador, and acting as an advisor to governmental agencies, primarily of course the Galapagos National Park.

CDF is an unusual organisation. Legally domiciled in Belgium, it carries out virtually all of its activities in Ecuador, and employing about 85% Ecuadorian staff. It has a network of 150 scientists from abroad that come to the islands as so-called visiting scientists. The network that has grown over the decades, and its world-famous brand name helps to find and mobilise expertise in instances where the right skill-sets for solving a problem cannot be found in Galapagos or mainland Ecuador. Its international role is reflected in its legal status, with the CDF operating in Ecuador as so-called “International Organisation”, rather than as an “NGO”. Among its founders were the Government of Ecuador, as well as UNESCO, which is the scientific and educational arm of the United Nations.

CDF plays another, possibly less obvious, role that I believe is crucial for the conservation of the Galapagos Islands. It carries information about Galapagos to the world, and creates transparency about what is happening in a group of islands that is important for all of humanity. No other organisation can mobilise quite the same level of attention and credibility when speaking to an international audience about Galapagos, as does the CDF. When the CDF speaks, the world listens.

Following recent changes in Ecuador, however, I am not sure it can continue to live up to its role. Is the CDF still the international observer that the world sees it as and would like it to be, and can it operate in a way that ensures its successful operation as scientific advisor?

During my tenure, I was known as the world-travelling Executive Director of the Charles Darwin Foundation, the first ever non-scientist to be responsible for the organisation. The biggest part of my work was to drum up additional financial support for conservation-related science in the Galapagos Islands, and I literally had to travel far and wide to find such supporters. I regularly spoke to groups as diverse as school children in England, billionaires in Hong Kong, government officials in Japan, and university professors in the US. To these audiences, I explained and stressed the importance of science and conservation in protecting the Enchanted Islands.

In all of my talks around the planet, I have always praised the Government of Ecuador and the Ecuadorian people. All the current challenges aside, the Galapagos Islands are an incredible success story. In 1959, when Ecuador decided to set aside 97% of the land mass of a major archipelago, it took a decision to prioritise the conservation of the islands over the relentless exploitation of natural resources. Thanks to this landmark decision, the ecosystem of the Galapagos archipelago is in better shape than most any other ecosystem on the inhabited parts of the planet. Ecuador, its past and current governments, as well as its people, has every reason to be proud. I always urged my audiences to visit, but to visit responsibly.

I, in turn, always took pride in the fact that CDF played a significant role in this success. CDF is the oldest and biggest scientific organisation operating in the islands, and solely focussed on the Galapagos. A few years ago, it had reputational issues, with critics arguing that the organisation was carrying out science for the sake of science, instead of science for conservation. During my time at the helm, I refocused the portfolio of scientific activities of the organization; by 2014, no less than 100% of CDF's projects directly supported Galapagos conservation priorities as identified by the Government of Ecuador. The foundation does this work with funding made up of donations from the US, Europe, and elsewhere. It has never regularly received Ecuadorian government funding.

For the sake of transparency and informed public debate, scientific research organisations are most effective when their work is available to the public, and when they have the ability share their scientifically grounded facts and opinions on matters relating to their work. The ability for scientific research organisations to find answers to problems, and to contribute positively to the public discourse on matters relating to their work is seriously undermined in a climate of outright censorship, or even in one where intimidation leads to self-censorship.

Sadly, the CDF of today operates in such a self-censoring environment, where its voice is muted. Strict media publishing regulations and either censorship or self-censoring are virtually daily occurrences. Political interference, and a desire not to upset its host country for concerns over possible administrative repercussions, means that CDF increasingly can no longer freely publish the results of its scientific research and its opinion about what actions should be taken. This has been the case for years, but it worsened during recent times. I was there, and I saw it happen.

During my tenure, no other case illustrates this problem quite as vividly as the fate of Fernanda the Silky Shark.

In 2014, the CDF and several partner organisations, including the Galapagos National Park and OCEARCH, attached satellite tags to sharks in the Galapagos Marine Reserve in order to collect data that helps to better protect the marine reserve. Fernanda, as she was named, was a 7 foot / 215cm adult female shark that belonged to a heavily exploited shark species that is fished in the Eastern Tropical Pacific and is classified by IUCN as “vulnerable”. Sadly, as the satellite tag's data revealed, Fernanda ended up in the fish market of Puerto Ayora —the small town where the Charles Darwin Research Station resides. Fernanda was unfortunately part of the by-catch of fishermen using long-lining, one of the most detrimental methods for fishing because of the large number of unwanted species it catches.

Is Fernanda the Galapagos' very own case of Cecil the Lion? The world should have learned about the satellite findings, and it should have been used to rally support for the islands, its species, and the organisations working to protect them. Instead, Fernanda's demise led to a lengthy discussion with authorities about whether or not to publish a press release about the story, how to phrase it to not sound “alarmist”, and how to ensure that such news doesn't damage the Galapagos' reputation or affect the number of tourist arrivals. After a delay of four months, one of the organisations residing outside of Ecuador did finally publish the [story](#). CDF, by contrast, stayed quiet (as did the Galapagos National Park Service). Feeling intimidated, CDF effectively self-censored itself by simply never publishing the press release.

The case of Fernanda is just one example of many such cases in Galapagos where facts have been censored, an important message has been toned down, or doesn't get delivered at all. CDF once had to argue with the authorities over describing the Mangrove Finch as “critically endangered”, which is this exceedingly rare species' official classification in the Endangered Species register of the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN), but which was deemed to sound alarmist. In this matter, following much discussion, the CDF finally went ahead and published the dreaded truth.

Scientific information and the institutional opinion of a non-governmental organisation on matters in which it is mandated to work should never be subject to such restraints and hurdles. Not the least, in this particular case, because no matter what happens in the Galapagos Islands, the world is watching. Galapagos, after all, is no ordinary place.

In 1978, the Galapagos Islands were declared a Natural World Heritage Site by UNESCO. Not just any World Heritage Site, but the one with registration number 001 – meaning that it was the first ever World Heritage site to be officially recognised. Of all the World Heritage Sites, is there any more iconic than Galapagos?

The 1972 “Convention concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage”, ratified by 191 countries, is one of the most universally adopted international conventions ever developed. Ecuador is a signatory to the convention, and today has five World Heritage sites within its national boundaries. Having World Heritage status for the Galapagos has been a boon for Ecuador. It helps develop tourism, raise international support, and create awareness.

But World Heritage status comes with obligations. Ecuador must regularly report to UNESCO about the conservation status of Galapagos. Having been inside the system, I had an idea how information fed to UNESCO got “filtered” by the Galapagos National Park. Which, truth be told, is what happens in many countries with World Heritage site inscriptions —it is not altogether surprising that, when asked to report on their conservation efforts, countries tend to paint a rosy picture.

This, however, is one of the many areas where the balancing influence of an independent, strong and confident Charles Darwin Foundation used to come into play. In 2006, the CDF's reports on conservation matters were shared with UNESCO. These contributed to UNESCO's annual review of the state of conservation of the World Heritage site, and eventually led to the temporary inscription of Galapagos onto the list of World Heritage sites “in danger” The “danger” list is a Convention mechanism designed to draw additional national and international support in dealing with acute conservation challenges —it's not a punishment, but a call to action! The CDF's part in this process is one that, frankly, virtually anyone in the world concerned with Galapagos would want the CDF to play. This is true today, too. IUCN, in its 2014 World Heritage Outlook, highlighted “significant concern” for the well-being of the Galapagos.

During the past few months, the list of reasons for having significant concerns about the future of the islands seems to have grown longer. Following the changes to the Special Law, the Galapagos sea cucumber fisheries in Galapagos were opened again despite technic studies didn't recommend it, ending a four year moratorium. Galapagos sea cucumbers are officially classified as “endangered” by IUCN, and should not be fished at all. CDF was the organisation everyone expected to speak up, not the least as it carried out much of the original sea cucumber research in the 1990s. But the organisation remained silent.

One scientist was quoted in an [article](#) in Galapagos Digital: “This would deal a blow to a resource that in itself should not be exploited. Even after four years of closure, the fishery should not open even for another 15 years.”

To no one's surprise, this scientist "wished to remain anonymous". Scientists live in a constant fear of repercussions if they assert inconvenient truths.

The presence of a dedicated, independent NGO makes a critical difference in long-term conservation. The Galapagos needs the long-term commitment of the international community, via the World Heritage Convention, to help with funding and expertise; in turn, the global community wants to be reassured that conservation challenges in this, and in any other World Heritage site, are recognised and reported, so that they can be effectively addressed. After all, why donate funds to support work in the islands if results and conclusions cannot be freely discussed, shared and published?

CDF is now an organisation that has lost the will even to defend itself against the use of its own brand name by a few roadside vendors that are counterfeiting its products. The photo shows counterfeit products sold in Galapagos, a matter which CDF at the time was not able to pursue further because of the fear of political repercussions and the CDF board's opinion that laws cannot be enforced in Ecuador. Surely the international community wants a self-confident CDF that can stand up to for what is right? Even though there are numerous NGOs based outside of Ecuador that supposedly represent the interests of Galapagos, none of them stand for more than five decades of scientific excellence and are quite as closely related with the fate of Galapagos as the CDF.

One can be tempted to easily discount my view, for I am now seen by some as a “disgruntled” ex-employee. On May 20th I was fired from my position of Executive Director over the phone, just before boarding a plane to meet billionaire philanthropists from China who wanted to financially support the CDF's efforts to protect the islands. I have not been back to Galapagos since, and have only cursory knowledge of the developments since then.

Today, the CDF is led by the same person who, when employed as Director of the Galapagos National Park, didn't want “alarmist” news about Fernanda to be published. It's possible that the new Executive Director, Dr. Arturo Izurieta, finds a way for the CDF to operate with fewer restrictions. However, based on what I experienced in the position at the time, I see a need for increased attention from the outside world.

None of which is to say that the staff and scientists of the CDRS won't continue to do an incredibly valuable job. They are the unsung heroes of Galapagos conservation, working under challenging conditions and achieving important results against the odds.

Other unsung heroes are the many donors of the CDF, who are contributing private money to fill in gaps where government funding isn't available to deal with urgent issues. During my tenure, I had the Park directors turn up at my office asking for help with funding for a diverse number of urgent matters such as gravel for the Park's visitor site, field equipment for its staff, and repair costs for its patrolling boats. Evidently, funding support from the international donor community is still required in Galapagos. The gravel was needed to pretty up an area near the tortoise breeding centre for a high-ranking governmental visit.

Despite all that, does CDF play a vital role in the Galapagos? Of course it does. Conservation in Galapagos needs science to support it.

Do its hard-working employees contribute as much as they possibly can, even if circumstances are against them? No doubt.

Does the world, including the Ecuadorian public and Ecuador's younger generation, realise how CDF's character, role, and possibilities have changed in recent years? That I very much question.

Let's imagine for a moment that the CDF didn't exist and had yet to be founded. Would the international community back the establishment of an organisation without anything but iron-clad assurances that it can operate in an environment that fosters critical discussion and unhindered publication of scientific results? The freedom to publish evidence-based information and to express opinions based on scientific research mustn't be limited, or else the CDF as an organisation loses credibility and with it, the ability to raise the necessary funds for its survival.

The perfect opportunity for clarifying these and other points, beckons during the remainder of this year. In February 2016, CDF's current contract to operate in Ecuador expires. It was last extended in 1991, and it will be extended automatically by five years if neither party hands in notice. The latter seems unlikely though, as there is a real need for updating the existing, now quite dated, agreement.

Where the new leadership of CDF will take these negotiations remains to be seen. The only public record of Dr. Izurieta's thinking in this regard dates from late 2014. In his former role as Director of the Galapagos National Park he gave an interview statement to local radio channel, where he essentially called for the gradual transfer of the Charles Darwin Research Station to the Government of Ecuador. The entire interview remains available on the internet using this [link](#) (a back-up copy has been stored on this [link](#)); listen to the part between 1h 00min 15sec and 1h 03min 10sec.

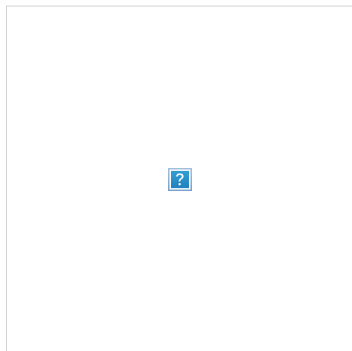
The role that the CDF's Board envisions for the organisation, and the future that its General Assembly (as CDF's highest authority) and the Government of Ecuador (as the host of CDF's operational arm, CDRS) see for it, currently remain a mystery for the public. It's also not known if this Board and General Assembly are prepared to take a corrective stance on the censorship-related issues that I point out so critically.

In this moment, all parties involved have a wonderful opportunity to clarify the role CDF should or shouldn't play, and the use of donations in furthering the organization's mission. It's a clarification that the world is eagerly awaiting.

For CDF, if it dares to speak its mind, it will be a golden opportunity to state needs, concerns and questions.

Ecuador, in turn, has an opportunity to recognize and embrace the contributions that have helped turn Galapagos into such a success story. All this in the lead-up to the Galapagos' 40th anniversary as the world's first World Heritage Site —a milestone that is to be celebrated in September 2018. Ahead of the anniversary, the world's eyes will be on Galapagos all the more.

During my four years in Galapagos, I have seen a chaotic, tumultuous, and politicised world. Despite these critical observations and recommendations, which are primarily based on the facts I gathered up to May 2015, I still have confidence that, in the end, both Ecuador and the CDF will successfully address these issues. They have always so done during the more than fifty years of collaboration, and they will hopefully succeed yet again.



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Llegó por primera vez a Galápagos en 2005. Cofundó y financió una escuela para capacitar a jóvenes galapagueños para la industria hotelera, que hasta ahora ha provisto a aproximadamente 300 estudiantes de secundaria de mejores oportunidades profesionales. Entre noviembre de 2010 y mayo de 2015 fue miembro de la Junta de la Fundación Charles Darwin, y desde julio de 2011 su Director Ejecutivo.

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