



There must be many people in the cut-throat world of corporate finance who have vowed to abandon a life driven by money in order to do something to save the planet. But how many actually follow through?

Swen Lorenz (pictured left) did. And, while he may not be saving the entire planet, he's certainly doing more than his fair share to save an important part of it – because the former financier is now in no small measure responsible for the future of one of the world's most remote (yet best-known) archipelagos in his role as executive director of the Charles Darwin Foundation,

DARWIN-WIN SITUATION

When a City financier relocated to the Galápagos to head up the islands' conservation charity, it was almost \$2.5m in debt. Three years later, his shrewd management style has turned it around and attracted a new type of entrepreneurial philanthropist. Simon de Burton reports

which has overseen the protection and preservation of the Galápagos Islands since 1959.

Lying 1,000km west of Ecuador in the Pacific Ocean, the string of 19 major islands is celebrated as the spot where Charles Darwin carried out crucial research on evolution during his voyage aboard the expedition ship *HMS Beagle* between 1831 and 1836. There he found an array of wildlife – such as giant tortoises, marine iguanas and the famous “Darwin finches” – that only exists on the Galápagos due to its extraordinary ecosystem.

The region's true importance received recognition when the Charles Darwin Foundation was established to run an ongoing series of scientific projects focused on conserving the archipelago, with its combination of remote location and unusual climate. The Galápagos

were declared a Unesco World Heritage Site in 1978, with a marine reserve created around the entire archipelago 20 years later – yet the islands remain under threat from invasive animal and plant species, increasing human population, illegal fishing and, of course, the double-edged sword of growth in tourism, which remains uncontrolled.

In fact, the Galápagos was in danger of ruination back in 2005 when – as has become popular with moneyed, adventurous, planet-aware professionals – Lorenz decided to take a break from his job with a private-equity firm in London's Berkeley Square in order to visit the famous archipelago that he had heard so much about. Like most visitors to the islands, he was quickly taken with their awe-inspiring wildlife, atmosphere and remoteness. But his lateral-thinking

Main picture: marine iguanas on the rocks on Fernandina Island, one of Ecuador's Galápagos Islands. Inset: Swen Lorenz at the Charles Darwin Research Station





new home in the Galápagos – where he discovered that the Foundation had not only run out of cash, but was almost \$2.5m in debt.

“Accepting the job was a serious gamble, because if I hadn’t been able to turn things around I would have found myself at the centre of a high-profile failure,” says Lorenz. “Friends in the finance world already thought I was mad to get involved in the charity sector, and I knew the trustees were counting on me. I had no idea, of course, about what I was really taking on: I later discovered long-term mismanagement on a grand scale, a fast-deteriorating relationship with the government and an organisation that didn’t even know how many scientific projects it was supposed to be overseeing.”

Such hurdles are unlikely to have faded Lorenz, however. Having grown up in a small town south of Frankfurt in a middle-class family (his father is a biochemist and an expert on the development of hair dye), he went off to university to study economics – and dropped out within a year. At 19, informed by years of reading about stock markets, he set up a web portal providing financial information and his career took off from there.

As Lorenz had always worked for himself or freelance, the first time he signed an employment contract was when he arrived on the Galápagos to take over control of the Charles Darwin Foundation – by which time he had created

Clockwise from left: the Charles Darwin Research Station. A Charles Darwin Foundation scientist collecting data in the marine reserve. A whale shark



a string of financial companies and run a \$300m property fund listed on the London stock exchange.

“Because of my experience, I could see that the Charles Darwin Foundation could only work if it were run as a proper business, rather than an organisation that simply spends the money it receives through charitable donations,” explains Lorenz. “But my main assurance came from two areas. Firstly, I had recently met the three major donors to the Foundation – Galápagos Conservancy, based in Fairfax, Virginia; The Leona M and Harry B Helmsley Charitable Trust in New York; and Lindblad Expeditions – and then, when I became executive director, the Swiss watch brand IWC, which has been a really important supporter of the Foundation since 2009 and donates a significant sum each year to help secure its future. The second thing that gave me confidence was simply the fact that everyone who has ever visited the Galápagos or studied it knows that the Foundation is absolutely vital to its survival – and that means one can really count on people helping, both financially and otherwise.”

Indeed, Lorenz has discovered that the Foundation’s dire financial situation could be improved through some relatively simple steps. “It transpired, for example, that visitors to the islands were being asked to fill in paper forms so that they could be contacted and kept up to date with what was going on. But, apart

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business brain also spotted the opportunity to help establish a catering school to train chefs for the region’s burgeoning hospitality business. This venture came to the attention of the then-ailing Charles Darwin Foundation, whose executives were impressed by the way Lorenz had set up funding and provided a financial strategy for the scheme – and then came the inevitable question: “What can you do for us?”

“The CDF became very interested in the project and saw it as a model that could provide it with a higher degree of financial independence, because at the time

it was really struggling to keep going,” explains Lorenz. “I was asked to join the board in 2010 as a non-executive director, and quickly realised that the Foundation was going through the biggest financial crisis in its history – so I organised a boardroom coup and ousted the president and CEO. I had no ambitions at the time to run the organisation, but I was taken on for the task with an initial three-year contract in 2011 and will certainly be around for the next few years.”

Lorenz abandoned his high-flying city life, gave up his comfortable London apartment and headed off to his

