



Analysis of Public Outreach at Charles Darwin Research Station, Galápagos: Recommendations for Improving Financial Stability through Public Outreach



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Introduction

The Charles Darwin Foundation (CDF) is an international organization that has fought for the conservation of the Galápagos Islands since 1959 by conducting scientific research and providing technical assistance for the Galápagos National Park Service (GNPS). The main campus of the CDF is the Charles Darwin Research Station (CDRS), located in the Galápagos Islands. The CDF serves a unique role in the Galápagos by conducting a broad scope of multi-disciplinary research with a far-reaching network of international scientists.

The Charles Darwin Foundation has recently experienced a major financial crisis, and has virtually no cash reserves and considerable debt. Public outreach is not included in their central mission as a research facility. However, public outreach may be able to generate much needed income through fundraising programs (Sven Lorenz, executive director of the CDF, 2012).

The purpose of this project is to present recommendations to the CDF on how improvements to public outreach can be made.

Materials and Methodology

In order to consider enhancement of public outreach at the Charles Darwin Research Station, a multi-method analysis was conducted in Summer 2012. This analysis included an on-site assessment of the CDRS grounds, a one-week-long trial outreach program (July 31-August 6, 2012), and a bilingual paper survey that was completed by 105 tourists who answered questions relating to their understanding of CDF and its outreach efforts (Figure 2). The surveys provided both quantitative and qualitative data (Litwin, 1995). The qualitative data was analyzed using a thematic content approach (Denzin and Lincoln, 1998). In January 2013, six current and prior CDF staff and scientists were interviewed by email to obtain their unique insights on factors relating to public outreach. In addition, CDF Facebook statistics were analyzed to investigate the impact of social networking on public outreach.

Analysis of the data reveals several "Challenges" and "Opportunities" associated with different factors that affect public outreach at the Charles Darwin Research Station. Recommendations were made to the CDF based upon these challenges and opportunities along with tourist survey and staff interviews.

Challenges and Opportunities for Public Outreach

Sometime in 2010, the relationship between CDF and guides was lost, as guides stopped informing CDF about tourists who might be interested in contributing a potential donation.²

The quality of the guide services program largely depends on the individual guides as well as the interest level of their audience.²

Van Straelen Interpretive Center is co-managed by the CDF and the GNPS. The CDF needs GNPS approval if any public outreach program is conducted or if any improvements are made there.³

Currently, Van Straelen Interpretive Center is being overshadowed by more developed interpretive facilities run by the GNPS on other islands.³

In the past, the CDF and the GNPS have struggled to collaborate.³

Co-management of Van Straelen Interpretive Center provides an opportunity for these two organizations to reestablish collaborative efforts.³

Tourists may project their perceptions of Van Straelen Interpretive Center on the CDF in general. This reflects negatively on the capacity of the CDF.³

Van Straelen Interpretive Center already has established interpretive displays, but these displays need to be improved in order to expand their effectiveness as tools for public outreach.³

Construction of a new interpretive center would be an expensive project, and therefore is unlikely to be practical until financial stability of the CDF greatly improves.³

The CDF investigated building a new interpretive or visitors center in 2009. This would allow the CDF to have a more active role in public outreach.³

Sponsorship from donors or collaborating institutions could be made in order to help with financing the construction of a new facility.³

The construction of a modern building would allow freedom to construct dynamic and modular displays, offering up-to-date science information and interesting exhibits, encouraging the local community and schools to visit.³

Public outreach facilities at the CDRS are underdeveloped, making it more difficult for on-site interpreters to work effectively.^{2,3}

Improving on-campus facilities will require further investment, and this may not produce immediate results.³

Lack of Facilities to Stage On-site Outreach Programs

The road through the CDRS (Figure 1) gets a lot of foot traffic, therefore improvement of on-campus facilities may improve public perception and interest in the CDF.³

It may be difficult to find a staff member or volunteer with sufficient public relations, sales, or marketing background in Galápagos.³

Galápagos has restrictive immigration laws for non-science personnel.³

If an official CDF program was implemented, new materials need to be designed; a process which would require professional assistance as well as funding.²

Long periods of down-time between groups of visitors, and public relations staff need to have other responsibilities.^{2,3}

Staff members can be trained to sufficient levels if the CDF invests in a public relations program.³

CDF-National Park Service Co-management

Issues with Content

New Visitors Center?

Van Straelen Interpretive Center

Public Outreach at the Charles Darwin Research Station, Galapagos

On-site Public Outreach

Small Property Footprint of the CDRS

Staff and Volunteers Requirements

Online Outreach

Internet Access in the Galapagos

Primary Website

CDF Social Networking

Guide Services

Important Source of Information for Tourists

Assistance with Donations

Significant Influence on the CDF's Public Image

Historically, guides would point out potential donors to the CDF. This yielded substantial results in the past.²

The CDF has no direct control over guide content.² Guides may misadvertise their trip to the neighboring GNPS Tortoise Breeding Center as a "trip to the CDRS". This blurs the line between the two facilities and causes confusion among tourists.^{1,3}

If the relationship between CDF and guides can be improved, guides can more effectively communicate about the importance of the CDF.² Guides have the opportunity to serve as ambassadors for the CDF.²

Currently the CDF does not have any dedicated web communication or social media team. This presents a technical challenge for part-time contributors.²

Contributors need to be extremely careful about the content of their posts, since internet users are quick to expose and publicize those mistakes virally.²

Social networking appears to be moving away from the free model for organizations, and could require financial investment in the future.²

The future of social networking is uncertain, and it is hard to predict how long trends will remain popular.² The CDF needs to have public relations staff that are keeping up with the current trends so that their online outreach effort stays relevant through time.

Currently, CDF web content is being delivered from servers located in the United States. This complicates CDRS programming.²

Internet is often unreliable at the CDRS since it has low-bandwidth and an intermittent connection. This creates significant technical challenges for staff and scientists at the research station.²

On a local level, computers are more available in Galápagos than books, and CDF's website help to provide information for both local student groups as well as management agencies.²

The CDF is currently changing to a content management system, which should make updating the website easier and fix the problems associated with the agency in Quito.²

¹Survey Data (on-site paper survey), ²Interview Data, ³Personal Assessment, ⁴CDF Facebook Statistics, ⁵(Merlen and d'Ozouville, 2009)

Survey and Public Outreach Pilot Project Conducted with Tourists Passing Through the Charles Darwin Research Station

Figure 1: Charles Darwin Research Station, Galápagos, Ecuador



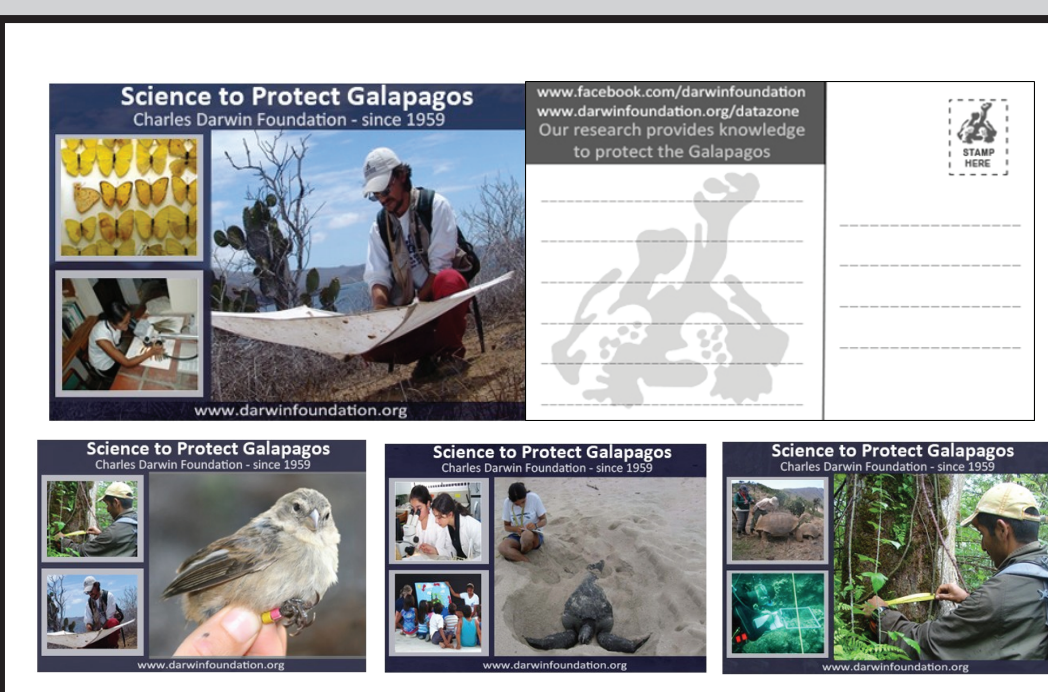
Figure 2: Cover Letter and Survey



Landscaped median in the center of the main road that passes through the CDRS, and site of the pilot project (Figure 1), facing southwest. A Charles Darwin Foundation volunteer greeted tourists as they entered the CDRS. The volunteer gave them postcards (Figure 3) that contained information about the CDF.



Primary road that passes through the CDRS. Picture faces northwest towards Van Straelen Interpretive Center (not shown) and the road to Puerto Ayora. A Charles Darwin Foundation interpretive display is seen on the right.



In the pilot program, tourists were given postcards that were designed to communicate the CDF's primary purpose as a research facility, as well as inform tourists about the CDF website and Facebook fan page.

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Recommendations

Challenges and opportunities for public outreach at the Charles Darwin Research Station were considered along with suggestions from the tourist survey and CDF staff interviews to develop three sequential recommendations:

- 1. Commit to Online Outreach and Social Networking:**
 - Online outreach has the potential to reach a larger audience.
 - Minimal investment required for using online methods.
 - The CDF needs to invest in a dedicated public relations staff with sufficient training in marketing and public outreach.
 - Online public outreach should be used with the understanding that social networking may not be a permanent solution, especially as it moves away from a free model. Online fundraising should be used to invest in more conventional and more stable forms of public outreach.
- 2. Invest in Established Programs:**
 - Restoring the historic relationship between the CDF and guides using trained public relations staff will allow for better communication of the CDF's message.
 - Investment in Van Straelen Interpretive Center may be too complicated due to the joint-management with the GNPS, and is therefore not recommended.
 - Small-scale campus improvements (i.e., improving signs, distinguishing GNPS/CDF borders) are encouraged.
- 3. Engage in On-site Public Outreach:**
 - The CDF should commit to long-term investment of public outreach facilities at the CDRS, including well marked pathways, interpretive signs, and improvements built with tourism in mind.
 - These improvements may include the construction of a new CDF interpretive center (or, if relationships improve, a reconsideration for investment in Van Straelen Interpretive Center).
 - Interpretive programs directly managed by the CDF are a possible option once improved facilities are in place.