

## History Beyond the Classroom:

Galapagos Fieldwork, May 26 to June 2, 2017

<https://historybeyondtheclassroomblog.wordpress.com/>

There is also a gallery of our photographs (click on the menu icon/3 horizontal lines in the upper right corner, and scroll down).

This was the second History Beyond the Classroom trip for graduate students of the Department. Both trips were funded through the generosity of a private donor and organized by the Department of the History of Science, Harvard University. As previously, much of the organization was carried out by a graduate student during the previous semester. The 2017 trip included 10 graduate students and 2 teachers (Janet Browne and HU Center for the Environment Fellow Laura Martin). We flew almost 3000 miles to Quito, Ecuador, and then 865 miles more to the Galapagos Islands. Our aims were to engage with the circumstances and historical context of the travels of Charles Darwin and Alexander von Humboldt in Ecuador, as well as conservation management and the consequences of ecotourism in fragile and historically significant areas. A deeper aim was to explore ways to use landscape as a form of 'text' or living historical document to illuminate our research as historians of science. We felt that these imaginative teaching aims were true to the intellectual values of our donor and would have greatly interested him.

The itinerary was first, to explore colonial history in Quito, then travel to Mount Cotopaxi (climbed by Alexander von Humboldt in 1802), and study the ecology, vegetation zones, and geology; and second, to transfer onto a short and economical cruise (four days) in the Galapagos Islands, in order to learn about Darwin's time there

and the subsequent history of land management up to the present day, particularly in relation to invasive species. A cruise (rather than a land-based stay) was explicitly chosen so that students could experience something of the nineteenth-century marine mode of travel. The ship was our moving home and we landed on each island in turn, in imitation of Darwin.

The expedition was preceded by two days of intensive classroom reading and discussion in the Department about the physical geography and ecology of the region, the written and visual documentation of Darwin's and Humboldt's voyages, including a visit to the rare books collection of the Museum of Comparative Zoology. We chose to focus on the background work while we were at Harvard, so that we did not need classes or lectures in the conventional sense while we were traveling. Instead, on our travels we assigned a daily reportage assignment to each student (including photography, blog posts and one documentary movie) and each evening after dinner reviewed the day's findings as an informal seminar group. It was an experimental and participatory way of teaching that we all found illuminating. An incidental benefit was that some of the other guests on our boat became engaged with our project and wished to know more, leading to stimulating and friendly exchanges.

**Quito:** we stayed in the capital city of Quito for three days, learning about the history and culture of Ecuador before moving to the Galapagos Islands themselves. We took a walking tour of the historic city center, rode the Teleferico cable cars up Pichincha volcano, watching the vegetation change as we ascended, met a pair of guanacos, visited the botanical garden and ethnographic museum, and climbed Cotopaxi volcano, following in Alexander von Humboldt's footsteps. Humboldt's "Essay on the Geography of Plants", which we had read, records his theories regarding how alpine vegetation

changes as one ascends a mountain. Spending time thinking about the Ecuador that Humboldt encountered, and how he wrote about those encounters, was inspiring, not least because of Humboldt's influence on Darwin's nature writing. We also recognized, on the ground, the importance of thinking globally about science and the problematic (and changing) role of European dominance—both then and now.

**Galapagos Islands:** On our four-day cruise in the Galapagos, we entered into a variety of terrains and met a wide variety of plant and animal life. Visiting four islands—Santa Cruz, Genovese, Rabida, and Santiago (the latter of which Darwin also visited)—we were able to witness firsthand the natural diversity of Galapagos. We walked on red sand beaches, rocky cliffs, and lava flows. We saw a staggering variety of birds, including three types of boobies, two types of frigate bird (a flock of which accompanied our ship), flamingoes, and at least three types of finches. The animals were remarkably unafraid of us and we each experienced some astonishing moments of closeness with nature. We noted that the finches all look much the same and came back with a new understanding of the difficulty Darwin had of distinguishing these birds. We also saw the famed Galapagos tortoises, sea turtles, lava lizards, marine and land iguanas, sea lions, a school of dolphins, rays and fishes, and the *Opuntia* cactus and palo santo vegetation. Astounded by both the ecological diversity and the proximity of the animals, we took time in the evenings to compare our experiences with Darwin's—some of us even struggled with the same seasickness that plagued Darwin nearly 200 years ago. The landscapes we encountered are being restored to an ideal that sometimes the very ground betrayed—we walked on lava flows that did not exist in Darwin's time. And while our experience necessarily had a managed quality to it, we were reminded daily of the unpredictability of nature—we were never exactly sure what we would see or how the animals would behave.

The spontaneity, and the sense of wonder it provoked in us, resonated with our reading of Darwin and Humboldt. We learned how difficult it was for Darwin to come to any conclusions about the natural history of the Galapagos and how skilled Humboldt needed to be in order to articulate his zones of botanical habitation, as well as the complex management and infrastructures that allow tourists to encounter the Galapagos as seemingly pristine lands. We are incredibly grateful for this extraordinary opportunity, from which each of us returned enriched. Remarks from some of the graduate student participants are given below.

Comments from participants:

For just about anyone, traveling to the Galapagos is a once-in-the-lifetime opportunity. But in my trip to the Galapagos with wonderful colleagues, I was able to explore these islands in *two* lifetimes -- in our own, and in that of Darwin and his fellow travelers and naturalists. It was a truly unforgettable experience.

Before venturing to the Galapagos, I considered myself a historian with an interest in science and exploration. After returning, I considered myself an explorer of the past. More than a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, our encounter with the worlds of Humboldt and Darwin was both intellectually and personally transformative. The experience that Mr. Arango enabled left me with a profound feeling of connection to my field of study, and a deep appreciation for the power of history and the value of what can be learned beyond the classroom. It has altered my intellectual and personal worldview in a way this is difficult to convey, but one that I know is shared by all those who joined us.

This was the trip of a lifetime. I can't think of a period in my life when I learned more, experienced more, enjoyed more, wondered more. I felt closer than ever to our field, to the natural world, and to the past. I've come back with a treasure trove of memories, a wonderful set of friendships with my fellow travelers, and a strange itch to travel straight back...