Fundación
Charles Darwin
Foundation
GALAPAGOS

IMPACT REPORT 2025

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Our marine birds conservation team conducting routine health checks on a flightless cormorant.
Photo: Camila Bermúdez / CDF

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EXPLORING | UNDERSTANDING | SHARING

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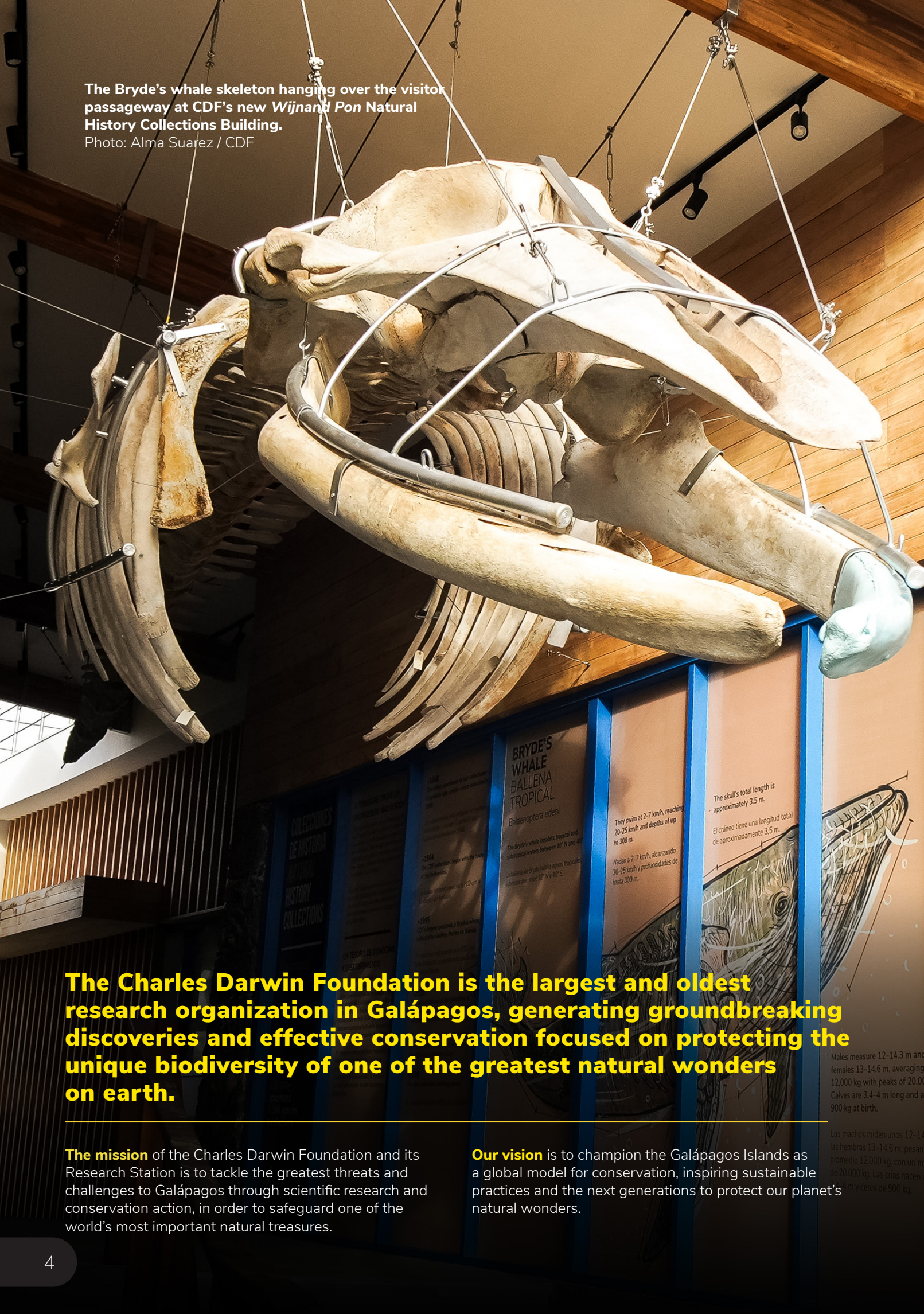


The Bryde's whale skeleton hanging over the visitor passageway at CDF's new *Wijnand Pon* Natural History Collections Building.
Photo: Alma Suarez / CDF

The Charles Darwin Foundation is the largest and oldest research organization in Galápagos, generating groundbreaking discoveries and effective conservation focused on protecting the unique biodiversity of one of the greatest natural wonders on earth.

The mission of the Charles Darwin Foundation and its Research Station is to tackle the greatest threats and challenges to Galápagos through scientific research and conservation action, in order to safeguard one of the world's most important natural treasures.

Our vision is to champion the Galápagos Islands as a global model for conservation, inspiring sustainable practices and the next generations to protect our planet's natural wonders.

LETTER FROM OUR PRESIDENT

Photo: Joan Villa / CDF

Dear friends and supporters,

In a world marked by growing environmental pressures and increasing uncertainty, the role of science in guiding effective conservation has never been more critical. Across 2025, global challenges—from accelerating biodiversity loss to shifting geopolitical and funding landscapes—have continued to test the resilience of conservation efforts worldwide.

Against this backdrop, the Charles Darwin Foundation (CDF) remains steadfast in its mission to protect Galápagos through scientific research and conservation action. For more than six decades, our work has been rooted in a unique and enduring partnership with the State of Ecuador and the Galápagos National Park Directorate—one that continues to deepen as we invest, as an independently funded institution, in scientific capacity in and for the country, so as to further strengthen the foundations for long-term conservation success in Galápagos.

At a time when credible, actionable science is more important than ever, CDF is positioned to meet the moment—combining scientific excellence, operational strength, and trusted collaboration to support the effective stewardship of this extraordinary archipelago.

We have also continued to strengthen our governance, deepening engagement with our more than 150 General Assembly Members—an international community of scientists, leaders, and public representatives united by a shared commitment to the future of Galápagos.

Our progress would not be possible without the leadership and dedication of our Board, our Executive Director, and the entire team at the Charles Darwin Research Station. Nor would it be possible without the trust and generosity of our supporters around the world, whose commitment sustains our work and enables us to meet both immediate challenges and long-term ambitions.

As we look ahead, we remain focused on strengthening partnerships, advancing science, and delivering conservation impact where it matters most. Thank you for your continued trust and support.

Sincerely,

Yolanda Kakabadse
President of the Board of Directors
Charles Darwin Foundation for the Galápagos Islands

LETTER FROM OUR EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Dear Members, Friends, and Supporters of the Charles Darwin Foundation,

2025 tested us on many levels, yet it ultimately made us stronger.

Early in the year, the dismantling of USAID resulted in the sudden loss of major funding for our shark conservation and sustainable fisheries programs. A few years ago, this would have represented an existential threat to operations. Instead, thanks to the commitment and agility of our teams and our partners, we secured alternative funding to continue both programs, albeit at a smaller scale. We also secured full reimbursement of funds owed by USAID—an incredible accomplishment given the circumstances.

At the same time, we operated in a complex and ever-changing local environment. For example, there was considerable turnover in leadership at key public institutions, including at the Galápagos National Park Directorate, our most important partner. Through all these changes, CDF remained steady—continuing to deliver conservation science, and act as a trusted partner to these institutions when stability mattered most.

STRATEGIC HIGHLIGHTS

One of the most significant milestones of the year was the successful completion of the Wijnand Pon Natural History Collections Building—a transformational investment in the future of science in Galápagos. Delivered in fourteen months, on budget and within a tightly managed timeline, this project reflects CDF's ability to execute complex, high-impact initiatives in a remote environment. Built with strong local expertise, the facility safeguards one of the world's most important biodiversity collections while strengthening Ecuador's long-term scientific capacity.

2025 was also the year CDF became a formal co-executor of the Floreana Ecological Restoration Project—one of the most ambitious restoration efforts ever undertaken in the archipelago. This invitation reflects the growing trust in CDF as both a scientific leader and a partner capable of delivering conservation at scale. This expanding work will play a defining role in restoring ecosystems and reintroducing species once lost from the island—offering a blueprint for island restoration in the archipelago and beyond.

More broadly, we strengthened our institutional foundations. We reinforced our leadership team with the appointment of Pablo Kerblat-Bonnet as Director of Education, tasked with developing a structured Higher Education platform that positions CDF as a long-term academic partner for universities connecting learning with real-world conservation in Galápagos. And we closed the year in a strong financial position that allows us to plan ahead with confidence.

This strength is also reflected in the remarkable support behind our work. In 2025, more than 1,000 donors contributed over $13 million to sustain and expand our programs. In a year that brought unexpected funding challenges, our community responded with generosity and trust—ensuring continuity in critical areas such as ocean and fisheries conservation, restoration, and invasive species management.

SCIENCE IN ACTION

In 2025, our science revealed both the fragility and resilience of Galápagos ecosystems, while helping shape how they are protected.

The year brought important advances that highlight this dual reality. At sea, our teams documented the return of the coral *Rhizopsammia wellingtoni*—once thought extinct after the 1997–98 El Niño event—underscoring the importance of long-term monitoring in detecting recovery in the face of climate change.

On land, ecosystem restoration efforts are beginning to show tangible results. On Floreana, the removal of invasive species led to the incredible documented record of the Galápagos Rail, the first in nearly 200 years, as well as a significant increase in the breeding success of the critically endangered Medium Tree Finch.

Another major milestone came after more than a decade of extensive collaborative work: the submission of the

Photo: Mara Speece / CDF

biocontrol dossier targeting *Philornis downsi*, one of the most significant threats to Galápagos birds. Pending approval, this could enable the first controlled release of a biocontrol agent in the coming years—offering a scalable solution to protect endemic species.

Our scientific work is also increasingly shaping policy and conservation. In 2025, CDF contributed to national and regional decision-making—from presenting the first Ocean Account for the Galápagos Exclusive Economic Zone at the United Nations Ocean Conference, to advancing a science-based coral conservation plan that will guide reef protection in the years ahead. Our research also continues to provide critical evidence to support fisheries management, marine protection, and ecosystem restoration across the region.

Photo: Carlos Espinosa / CDF

What defines this work is its growing relevance. Today, CDF research is not only expanding knowledge—it is helping shape how conservation is implemented in practice, in the face of growing and multiplying pressures.

LOOKING AHEAD

As we look to 2026 and beyond, our focus is on scaling impact while deepening our engagement with the Galápagos community— recognizing that conservation success depends on the people who live and work in the archipelago.

Key priorities include expanding restoration efforts on Floreana, supported by the hiring of a new Principal Investigator to lead this strategic program, completing the construction of our *Tomas Fischer* building which houses our terrestrial researchers, and developing a new, world-class natural history museum experience that brings our science closer to visitors and the community. We will also continue to build out our education platform, strengthening links between science, local communities, and global learning.

To our donors, supporters, partners, and friends around the world—thank you. Your trust and commitment sustain this work, your generosity makes all the difference. In a year that tested us in many ways, your support gave us the stability to move forward, the confidence to take on ambitious challenges, and the ability to continue safeguarding Galápagos for the future.

With deep appreciation,

Rakan Zahawi
Executive Director
Charles Darwin Foundation for the Galápagos Islands

2025 SCIENCE REVIEW

In 2025, the Charles Darwin Foundation (CDF) consolidated its role as the leading scientific institution supporting conservation in Galápagos—advancing from knowledge generation toward a more integrated, system-level understanding of how ecosystems function and respond to change.

Across the archipelago, and the region, our research increasingly connects biodiversity, ecosystem processes, human activity, and policy making, reflecting a deliberate shift toward interdisciplinary science embedded in real-world conservation challenges. This approach, central to our science strategy, brings together natural and social sciences to inform decisions that sustain both ecosystems and the communities that depend on them.

Throughout the year, our teams expanded research across all four bioregions of Galápagos, working in more than 80 study areas spanning the Galápagos Marine Reserve (133,000 km²) and the Galápagos National Park (7,995 km²), from highlands and volcanoes to deep-ocean ecosystems nearly 3,000 meters below the surface. This ridge-to-reef-to deep ocean perspective continues to reveal the interconnections between land and sea that underpin the resilience of the archipelago.

FROM DATA TO DECISIONS: SCIENCE THAT INFORMS ACTION

A defining feature of 2025 was the growing role of CDF science in informing policy and conservation action at national and regional scales. Our work contributed directly to:

- Ocean governance, including the first Ocean Account for Ecuador's insular waters and the regional collaboration through the Deep Ocean Alliance within the Eastern Tropical Pacific (ETP)
- Species protection, supporting international policy processes such as IUCN and CITES
- Ecosystem management, from coral conservation planning to invasive species control and restoration strategies

This reflects an ongoing and important shift, which we are seeing accelerate: science is going beyond documenting change to increasingly shaping how conservation decisions and policies are made, in line with our Science Strategy.

STRENGTHENING GALÁPAGOS AS A GLOBAL RESEARCH HUB

Since its founding, the Charles Darwin Research Station (CDRS) has served as the principal scientific hub in Galápagos, providing facilities, administrative and logistical support, and field access for visiting researchers. Today, CDF continues to build on this legacy—positioning Galápagos as a global center for high-impact, mission-driven science.

In 2025, we hosted 98 visiting scientists from 19 institutions, representing 22 nationalities, working alongside our teams across terrestrial and marine ecosystems. This work is part of a much broader collaborative network: through partnerships spanning more than 500 researchers and institutions worldwide, CDF enables the exchange of expertise, data, and technology needed to address increasingly complex conservation challenges.

In recent years, we have invested significantly in improving our campus' facilities to strengthen this role, including new laboratory spaces, upgraded offices, and a dedicated Natural History Collections facility—expanding our capacity to host a growing global scientific community as well as the number of specimens that represent the Galápagos biodiversity.

At the same time, 2025 highlighted an emerging challenge. Compared to 2024, when 150 scientists from 50 institutions conducted research in Galápagos, evolving administrative requirements are making it more difficult for researchers to access the archipelago. This is an area of growing attention, and CDF is working closely with Galápagos and Ecuadorian authorities to help streamline procedures and ensure that the islands remain accessible to high-quality science.

Enabling responsible research is essential to fully realizing the potential of our scientific infrastructure—and to ensuring that conservation in Galápagos continues to be guided by the best available evidence.

SCIENCE AT SCALE

15,158
biological samples mobilized for varied research

500+
global collaborators

98
visiting scientists from 19 institutions, representing 22 nationalities

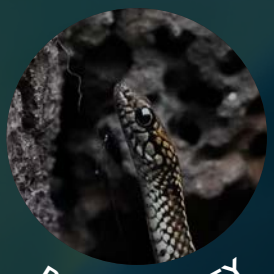
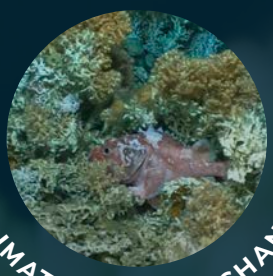
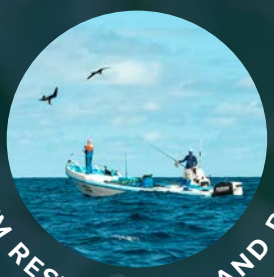
97
Scientific & policy events (27 international, including UNOC, IUCN, CITES)

72
peer reviewed publications

80+
Active study areas across the archipelago

Ocellated Eagle Rays (*Aetobatus ocellatus*).
Photo: Joshua Vela

DELIVERING ON OUR SCIENCE STRATEGY

SCIENCE PILLAR	HIGHLIGHTS WE DELIVERED IN 2025	PAGE
 BIODIVERSITY	• Rediscovered *Rhizopsammia wellingtoni* after coral thought extinct	Pag.39
	• Advanced preparations for species reintroductions on Floreana	Pag.17
	• Generated genetic insights for Little Vermilion Flycatcher conservation	Pag.19
	• Advanced understanding of mangrove ecology	Pag.44
 BIOINVASIONS	• Detected a new introduced mantis species (*Musonia margheritae*)	Pag.27
	• Submitted the *Philornis downsi* biocontrol candidate (*Conura annulifera*) for regulatory review	Pag.22
	• Controlled blackberry in key habitats, supporting endangered landbird recovery	Pag.24
	• Strengthened regional monitoring and early-warning systems for marine invasions across the ETP	Pag.42
 CLIMATE & OCEAN CHANGE	• Tracked first hammerhead birthing migration, exposing protection gaps	Pag.49
	• Presented Galápagos' first Ocean Account at the UN Ocean Conference	Pag.54
	• Advanced Deep Ocean Alliance collaboration in science and Marine Protected Area design	Pag.40
	• Generated high-resolution 3D reef models for climate research	Pag.43
	• Conducted first archipelago-wide seabird health assessments	Pag.46
 ECOSYSTEM RESTORATION AND RESILIENCE	• Galápagos Rail rediscovered after 180 years on Floreana Island, showing signs of ecosystem recovery post-invasive species control	Pag.17
	• Generated critical evidence on tortoise health, reproduction, and climate resilience to guide conservation and management	Pag.32
	• Achieved record breeding success for Little Vermilion Flycatcher on Santa Cruz	Pag.18
	• Confirmed that *Scalesia* restoration is rebuilding ecosystem health from the ground up, restoring key invertebrate communities and food webs	Pag.26
 SCIENCE TO ACTION	• Developed a science-based Coral Conservation and Management Plan, guiding protection of vulnerable reef ecosystems	Pag.38
	• Contributed scientific advances at the UN Ocean Conference, IUCN Conference, and CITES, helping to shape global ocean policy	Pag.38
	• Assumed national presidency of IUCN, strengthening Ecuador's leadership in conservation	
	• Secured re-election to the co-presidency of GOAP, advancing international collaboration on ocean protection	
	• Engaged thousands of community members through hands-on science and educational activities	Pag.58

Nesting male Great Frigatebird (*Fregata minor*).
Photo: Rashid Cruz

Read our 2023-2028 science plan

CDF's new *Wijnand Pon* Natural History Collections Building.
Photo: Mara Speece / CDF

IN FOCUS:

THE *WIJNAND PON* NATURAL HISTORY COLLECTIONS BUILDING: DELIVERING FOR SCIENCE IN GALÁPAGOS

The Charles Darwin Foundation hosts one of the world's largest scientific collections dedicated to Galápagos biodiversity, with more than 137,000 specimens representing over 7,500 species—endemic, native, and introduced—from across the archipelago.

This extraordinary archive of life is a cornerstone of scientific knowledge for Galápagos, underpinning research on biodiversity, evolution, and species distributions, and informing conservation decisions and policies advanced by the Galápagos National Park Directorate (GNPD) and the global scientific community.

DELIVERING A NEW HOME FOR THE NATURAL HISTORY COLLECTIONS OF GALÁPAGOS

For more than six decades, CDF has safeguarded these collections on behalf of the State of Ecuador. Following an intensive construction phase throughout 2025, a major milestone was reached at the turn of 2026 with the completion of a state-of-the-art facility for the natural history collections, designed to secure this cornerstone of science for decades to come.

Named in honor of its main benefactor, Wijnand Pon, and made possible through the support of the COmON Foundation, the new building stands as a long-term investment to advance science in Ecuador and internationally.

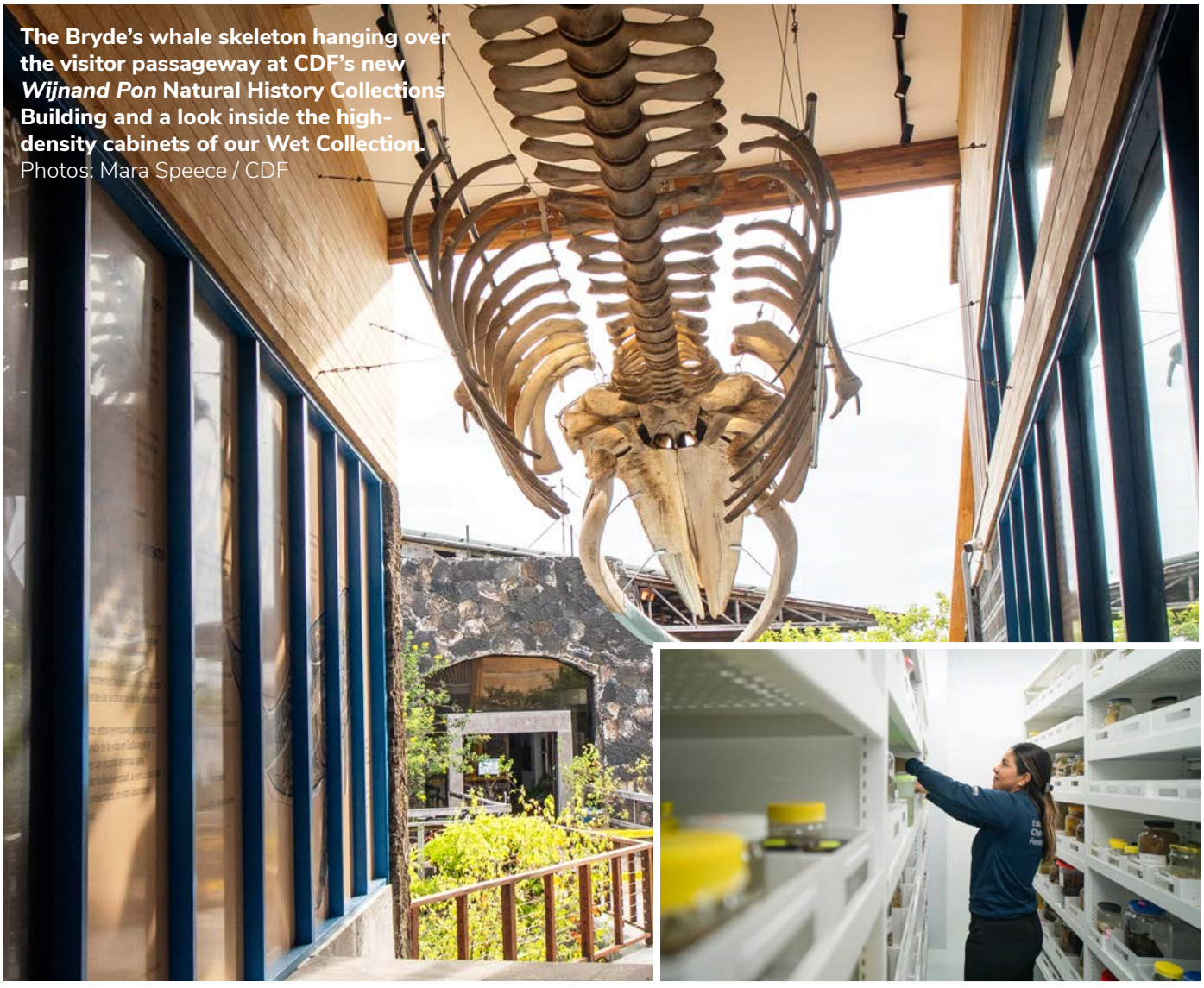
Beyond its scientific importance, the project represents a significant operational achievement. Constructed in under fourteen months, the facility was delivered on budget, within a tightly managed timeline, and with only a minimal delay of a few weeks—successfully navigating the logistical challenges of working in one of the most remote research stations in the world. The project relied heavily on local craftsmanship and expertise, demonstrating the capacity to deliver complex scientific infrastructure in Galápagos while strengthening local skills and ownership.

The building combines modern design but also represents the complete renovation of an existing 1990s structure—optimizing resources while minimizing environmental impact.

A PLATFORM FOR SCIENCE AND GROWTH

The facility provides optimal conservation conditions, with climate-controlled systems, specialized laboratories, and high-density cabinets designed by Bruynzeel Storage. It significantly expands capacity: 75% more space for vertebrate collections, 60% more for wet collections, an herbarium that can grow up to 2.5 times its current volume, and invertebrate collections with potential to expand twentyfold.

Beyond safeguarding specimens, the building transforms how science is conducted and knowledge is shared—positioning CDF as the mobilizing force to foster a new generation of research, partnerships, and conservation outcomes in Galápagos.



The Bryde's whale skeleton hanging over the visitor passageway at CDF's new *Wijnand Pon* Natural History Collections Building and a look inside the high-density cabinets of our Wet Collection.
Photos: Mara Speece / CDF

137,000+
specimens

7,500+
species represented

1,415
specimens catalogued in 2025

4
scientific papers published based on the collections

4
iconic giant tortoise and whale specimens digitized in 3D

OPENING SCIENCE TO COMMUNITY

Beyond its scientific role, the new facility opens the CDF Collections to the public for the first time through an external observation corridor. Large windows allow visitors to view into each of the four floors where collections are housed, and to observe scientists preparing specimens, all while a suspended Bryde's whale skeleton anchors the space from above. Beginning in 2026, rotating specimens will be displayed in the windows alongside the corridor to invite visitors to explore the remarkable biodiversity that makes Galápagos one of the planet's most extraordinary ecosystems.

NEW ADDITIONS TO THE COLLECTIONS

In 2025, the CDF Collections also grew with several remarkable additions, including the first preserved specimen of the Critically Endangered Galápagos pink iguana (*Conolophus marthae*) ever held in a scientific collection, providing an invaluable reference for future research, thanks to a donation by Galápagos Conservancy. Researchers also incorporated several rare giant tortoise specimens (*Chelonoidis donfaustoi*, *C. vandenburghi* and *C. vicina*) adding important material for comparative studies. In addition, the collections expanded their marine holdings with whale specimens recovered from strandings in Galápagos, including sperm whale jawbones and teeth, and pilot whale fins—specimens that will help scientists to better understand the anatomy and diversity of marine mammals in the archipelago.

Today, the Galápagos Natural History Collections are far more than a repository of specimens. They connect discoveries from the past, research in the present, and the decisions needed to protect the future of Galápagos. By opening this scientific heritage to the world, the CDF is transforming decades of knowledge into a powerful and transformative tool for conservation—ensuring that the story of life in Galápagos continues to guide science, policy, and protection for generations to come.

LAND

EL CASCAJO
0°40’08.6”S 90°16’13.8”W

©Alma Suarez / CDF

IN FOCUS:

CDF BECOMES A CO-EXECUTOR OF THE FLOREANA ECOLOGICAL RESTORATION PROJECT

The Floreana Ecological Restoration Project is one of the most ambitious island restoration initiatives ever undertaken. Now entering its 14th year, the project aims to restore ecological balance on Floreana through a holistic approach that combines invasive species eradication, habitat restoration alongside the reintroduction of 12 extirpated species, and community engagement and empowerment throughout the entire process.

The initiative is led by the Galápagos National Park Directorate and the Galápagos Biosecurity Agency, and co-executed by Island Conservation, Fundación Jocotoco, and the Charles Darwin Foundation with the support of many partners and donors.

Although CDF has contributed scientific-based knowledge and technical support since the project's inception, 2025 marked a turning point: the Galápagos National Park Directorate formally designated CDF as a co-executing partner. This role places CDF at the core of the project's implementation and ensures that ecological monitoring, scientific research, and adaptive management directly guide restoration actions across the island.

As the archipelago's largest scientific institution, CDF contributes expertise across multiple disciplines—including landbird conservation, habitat restoration in both arid and humid zones, terrestrial invertebrate monitoring, invasive species control, and reef-to-ridge biodiversity research—helping track ecosystem recovery and prepare Floreana for the return of species once lost from the island.

The highlights below reflect CDF's scientific contributions to the project in 2025 with an even more expansive role anticipated for 2026.

TRACKING THE RETURN OF NATIVE BIRDS

Following the near-eradication of rodents and cats in 2023, CDF scientists continued monitoring landbird populations on Floreana in 2025, revealing encouraging signs of ecological recovery.

In February 2025, our team rediscovered the Galápagos Rail–one of the 12 species planned for reintroduction. Incredibly, the species was last recorded on the island over 180 years by none other than Charles Darwin. Blood samples were collected to determine whether these birds represent a previously undetected remnant population or individuals that recolonized the island from elsewhere in the archipelago, with results expected in 2026.

Floreana Mockingbird (*Mimus trifasciatus*) on Champion Islet.
Photo: Carlos Espinosa / CDF

Monitoring also documented a major positive uptick in Galápagos Dove populations, while mockingbirds from neighboring islands have begun visiting Floreana—suggesting the island is becoming a safer habitat for native birds.

Unfortunately it is not always a simple story! While the invasive species control benefitted native and endemic birds, it also benefitted non-native birds such as the Smooth-billed Ani whose population expanded rapidly, likely benefiting from reduced predation pressure due to the temporary relocation of owls from the island. This is a concerning development which we are monitoring closely with our partners in order to effectively adapt management measures as the species has negative impacts on native birds and other fauna.

MEASURING ECOSYSTEM RECOVERY FROM INSECTS TO REEFS

To track how Floreana's ecosystems are recovering, our scientists also monitored changes across the food web—from terrestrial invertebrates to coral reefs. Long-term

Floreana Island and its main village, Puerto Velasco Ibarra.
Photo: Carlos Espinosa / CDF

invertebrate monitoring recorded 26,136 individuals in 2025, contributing to a four-year dataset of more than 100,000 specimens. Early analyses reveal shifts in community composition following the almost complete removal of invasive rodents and cats, suggesting the first signs of ecosystem recovery.

Monitoring also expanded into the marine realm this year. In collaboration with the Scripps Institution of Oceanography and Island Conservation, CDF's marine biodiversity team surveyed permanent reef plots around Floreana and Española to assess how island restoration might be influencing surrounding marine ecosystems. The study will provide one of the first empirical baselines to test whether seabird recovery can drive cascading benefits for coral reef ecosystems.

PREPARING THE ISLAND FOR SPECIES REINTRODUCTION

To prepare for future bird species translocations and reintroductions, CDF's landbird conservation team implemented molecular sexing protocols for multiple bird species. We also conducted a full health assessment of 65 Floreana Short-eared Owls held in captivity by partners as a precautionary measure after the 2023 invasive species control campaign.

Meanwhile, CDF's Galápagos Verde 2050 team advanced restoration efforts across multiple sites on Floreana Island. In a remote area facing Champion Islet, where the Floreana Mockingbird still persists, we are restoring an ecological corridor aimed at enabling the species' future reintroduction to the main island. This site, free of human presence, represents a key stepping stone for reconnecting habitats. Within this corridor, a total of 1,037 native and endemic plants were monitored, with 45% surviving under challenging environmental conditions.

In parallel, restoration efforts extended to Puerto Velasco Ibarra, where the local community is actively involved with the "Cucuve Refuge." With more than 20 restoration sites across the island, these actions link ecological restoration with environmental education and community engagement. Across all sites, 1,415 newly planted plants are being monitored, supported by seedling production, and the rescue of naturally regenerating individuals.

Finally, CDF secured funding in 2025 to launch a major expansion of the Floreana research program that will focus on large-scale restoration of Floreana's *Scalesia* forests, located in the blackberry-invaded humid zone, with a Principal Investigator scheduled to begin work in the second half of 2026.

LANDBIRD RECOVERY IN ACTION

Once a common sight across multiple islands, the Little Vermilion Flycatcher (*Pyrocephalus nanus*) is now extinct on two islands and rare on others, where it is threatened by habitat degradation, introduced predators, and parasitism by the invasive Avian Vampire Fly (*Philornis downsi*).

In 2025, together with our partners, we advanced science-driven conservation to reverse declining population trends across the archipelago. CDF's integrated management approach — combining habitat restoration, innovative parasite control, genomic research, and reintroduction planning — is delivering measurable results and building the foundation for long-term recovery.

A TURNING POINT FOR THE LITTLE VERMILION FLYCATCHER

On Santa Cruz Island, the 2024–2025 breeding season was the most successful since monitoring began in 2017. A total of 39 fledglings from 19 nests were recruited into the population — more than double compared to previous years (15 fledglings in 2024 and 12 in 2023).

This success was driven by an exceptionally long breeding season (October 2024–April 2025), expanded habitat availability due to our ongoing restoration efforts, and — for the first time — Avian Vampire Fly (*Philornis downsi*) control relying exclusively on the self-fumigation dispenser technique.

The recovery is striking: from an estimated 20 individuals remaining in 2022 to approximately 60 birds today. The current 2025–2026 season has also started strongly, with 19–20 breeding pairs, including eight yearlings now breeding, and 13 fledglings already produced by year's end.

The trend towards recovery is clearly positive and gaining momentum.

Santa Cruz population (since 2022): 20➔60 birds

25

hectares under restoration

19–20

breeding pairs today

Female Little Vermilion Flycatcher.
Photo: Alma Suarez / CDF

Male Little Vermilion Flycatcher (*Pyrocephalus nanus*).
Photo: Alma Suarez / CDF

RESTORED HABITATS FAVOUR SPECIES RECOVERY

Behind the flycatcher's rebound lies years of hands-on restoration efforts. In close collaboration with CDF's ecological restoration teams and Galápagos National Park rangers, dense stands of invasive blackberry and other non-native plants have been cleared to restore a total of 25 hectares of native *Scalesia pedunculata* forest on Santa Cruz.

As sunlight reaches the forest floor and native trees are able to regenerate, food resources return, nesting sites improve, and breeding success rises. This restored habitat now provides the foundation for landbird population growth — and for future reintroduction efforts. Looking ahead, CDF aims to scale restoration through innovative financing models that strengthen long-term invasive plant control while reducing costs per hectare.

SCIENCE GUIDING THE NEXT CHAPTER

CDF field assistants heading out to clear *Scalesia* plots at the Little Vermilion Flycatcher nesting site Mina de Granillo, on Santa Cruz Island.
Photo: Alma Suarez / CDF

HOW MANY VERMILION FLYCATCHERS ARE THERE IN GALÁPAGOS?

Groundbreaking new DNA evidence published by CDF this year showed that Vermilion Flycatchers colonized Galápagos around 1.3 million years ago and diversified into at least eight genetically distinct lineages. These include the now-extinct San Cristóbal species (*Pyrocephalus dubius*) and seven island populations currently classified as a single species called the Little Vermilion Flycatcher (*P. nanus*). These findings reinforce the need for island-specific conservation strategies. On Floreana, they confirm that the original population was unique — meaning that any future reintroduction will involve birds from a different but ecologically similar lineage. On Santa Cruz, where numbers remain low, the results underscore the urgency of protecting a distinct evolutionary lineage that has evolved independently for approximately 500,000 years.

Read more about the study

BUILDING THE PATH FOR REINTRODUCTION

Four expeditions to Santa Fe and Pinzón Islands in 2025 advanced plans for reintroducing the Little Vermilion Flycatcher to Santa Fe, where it has been absent for nearly a century.

Field assessments revealed challenges related to seasonal food availability but, critically, confirmed the absence of resident populations of the Avian Vampire Fly — a major constraint for the species' survival elsewhere in the archipelago. These findings are helping determine whether Santa Fe can support a viable population.

A successful translocation from Pinzón to Santa Fe would serve as a test case for future reintroductions, including the planned return of the species to Floreana as part of that island's large-scale ecological restoration program. By validating methods and habitat suitability now, CDF is reducing risk and strengthening one of the most ambitious species recovery efforts in Galápagos.

HOPE FOR THE MANGROVE FINCH

With fewer than 100 individuals remaining in the mangroves of Isabela, the critically endangered Mangrove Finch is one of the rarest birds in Galápagos.

In 2025, our researchers strengthened further preventive management actions over the course of four strategic field expeditions. For the first time, insecticide-treated nesting fibers targeting the Avian Vampire Fly were distributed before the reproductive peak, aiming to protect the nests in advance of infestation.

19
breeding attempts

12
permanent camera traps installed

20
treated-fiber distribution points refilled twice a month, monitored with 12 cameras.

Within the first weeks of monitoring, six fledglings from four pairs were recorded — the strongest early-season result in more than a decade. Across 19 breeding attempts from 12 pairs, eight fledglings were documented in 2025, with reduced parasite impact compared to previous seasons. Birds hatched in 2023 were confirmed joining the breeding population — a critical sign of generational turnover. And in September 2025, an additional fledgling was found outside the breeding season.

By installing permanent camera traps to monitor invasive rats and cats year-round, the team strengthened long-term protection for Galápagos' rarest landbird.

Mangrove Finch (*Camarhynchus heliobates*)
Photo: María Igual / CDF

Mangrove Finch collecting treated nesting material.
Photo: María Igual / CDF

Researchers analyze the contents of Mangrove Finch nests after they are vacated by the breeding pair to assess the presence of *Philornis downsi* and determine whether insecticide-treated nesting materials were used.
Photo: María Igual / CDF

Read more here

A ONE HEALTH APPROACH TO SAFEGUARD RECOVERY

Saving a species is not only about increasing numbers — it is also about preventing hidden threats. Because Galápagos landbirds share landscapes with domestic poultry and human settlements, disease surveillance is essential to prevent spillovers that could rapidly reverse conservation gains.

In 2025, CDF researchers analyzed 421 blood samples from 14 landbird species across 5 islands, screening for *Mycoplasma* spp., adenovirus, and herpesvirus. The study identified seven novel adenoviruses and three novel herpesviruses, expanding the archipelago's disease baseline–providing critical insight into emerging disease risks.

In collaboration with the University of Arizona, researchers also found that avian pox prevalence increases with temperature but declines with elevation — insights that can help guide monitoring and possible mitigation under changing environmental conditions.

By integrating wildlife health into conservation planning, CDF is protecting not only individual species, but the long-term resilience of Galápagos landbird populations and the ecosystems they depend upon.

Mangrove finch nest.
Photo: María Igual / CDF

421
blood samples

10
novel viruses identified

14
landbird species screened

Landbird conservation PI Birgit Fessl and David Anchundia monitoring landbird populations on Floreana Island.
Photo: Carlos Espinosa / CDF

***Philornis downsi* fly and pupae at different stages of development.**
Photo: Carlos Espinosa / CDF

~9,000
pupae reared in lab conditions to sustain biological control colonies and research.

8
experiments conducted to improve laboratory mating rates.

~250
days of monitoring up to 100 traps for female flies.

Final dossier submitted to experts and regulators for evaluation.

GETTING CLOSER TO A BIOLOGICAL CONTROL SOLUTION FOR THE AVIAN VAMPIRE FLY

For more than 13 years, the Charles Darwin Foundation (CDF) has led research to tackle one of the most serious threats to Galápagos' landbirds: the invasive Avian Vampire Fly (*Philornis downsi*). This parasite feeds on the nestlings of at least 21 endemic and native species, causing high mortality and contributing to declines in 10 endemic landbird species that are threatened by extinction.

Together with the Galápagos National Park Directorate (GNPD), the Galápagos Biosecurity Agency (ABG) and international partners, our scientists are exploring safe and effective methods to reduce the parasite's impact and improve bird survival. Key advances in 2025 brought this goal significantly closer.

A MAJOR STEP TOWARD BIOLOGICAL CONTROL

After 12 years of laboratory and field research, CDF scientists—working with the University of Minnesota, ESPOL, and INABIO—completed safety and efficacy studies of a candidate parasitoid wasp (*Conura annulifera*) as a biological control agent against the Avian Vampire Fly.

The team submitted a comprehensive dossier to the GNPD, outlining the scientific evidence supporting its potential use in a biological control program. This dossier was reviewed by globally renowned biological control experts and is now under review by national regulators. If approved, the program could move to the next phase of evaluation in 2026 or 2027.

ENSURING CONTINUITY: REARING FLIES

To sustain experiments evaluating biological control agents against the Avian Vampire Fly, our team must maintain large laboratory colonies of the parasite. In 2025, researchers reared approximately 9,000 fly pupae, ensuring a stable supply for candidate agent colonies and critical reproductive studies.

This work is particularly challenging because Avian Vampire Flies rarely mate under laboratory conditions, meaning colonies must be sustained by capturing fertile females in the field. Midway through the year, wild fly availability dropped sharply—an unusual pattern compared to previous seasons. The team quickly adapted, shifting collection schedules and checking traps at dusk to capture flies during peak activity. These adjustments ensured production targets were met and prevented delays in critical experiments.

At the same time, researchers intensified efforts to solve one of the program's key bottlenecks: enabling flies to reproduce reliably in the lab. Experiments tested the influence of light conditions, diet, fly size, pheromones, humidity, temperature, population density, and mating arena design on mating success. These studies are ongoing and aim to establish a sustainable laboratory breeding system to accelerate biological control research.

***Conura annulifera* being studied at the controlled ESPOL lab in Guayaquil.**
Photo: Carlos Espinosa / CDF

***Philornis downsi* larvae.**
Photo: Carlos Espinosa / CDF

Restored *Scalesia* forest plot at Mina de Granillo, Santa Cruz Island.
Photo: Anne Guézou / CDF

RESTORING THE ENDANGERED GIANT *SCALESIA* FORESTS

Scalesia forests are the only tree-dominated ecosystem endemic to the Galápagos archipelago. These remarkable highland forests support rich communities of plants, insects, and birds found nowhere else on Earth.

Today, however, less than 1% of their original range remains. The forests that survive now face a major threat from invasive plants—particularly blackberry *(Rubus niveus*)—which fragment and degrade these ecosystems across several islands.

In 2025, the Charles Darwin Foundation (CDF), together with the Galápagos National Park Directorate (GNPD) and partners, accelerated ongoing restoration efforts on Isabela and Santa Cruz, combining advanced mapping, invasive plant control, and targeted reforestation to rebuild these forests.

ISABELA: RECOVERING A SPECIES ON THE BRINK

Just a few years ago, the population of *Scalesia cordata* on Isabela Island was estimated at only about 300 trees. Since restoration efforts began in 2021, our team has focused on locating remaining individuals, restoring their populations, and reconnecting fragmented habitats.

Drone mapping conducted in 2025 identified 2,700 previously undocumented trees, increasing the known population to date to more than 4,500 individuals—a dramatic shift in our understanding of the species' status.

Restoration was also scaled up significantly. During the year, 2,585 trees were planted across protected areas and agricultural landscapes, strengthening habitat connectivity and expanding the species' distribution. At the same time, invasive plant control allowed natural regeneration to begin at multiple sites, where hundreds of new seedlings are now established.

BOSQUE DE LOS NIÑOS: GROWING THE NEXT GENERATION OF FOREST GUARDIANS

In 2025, more than 60 community members joined CDF scientists to plant 81 *Scalesia cordata* trees in Isabela's Bosque de los Niños–a piece of private land used for educational activities since the 1980s. This initiative connects local families and students directly with restoration efforts, helping cultivate the next generation of stewards for one of Galápagos' most threatened forests.

Read about this inspiring story here

SANTA CRUZ: GRADUALLY REBUILDING A LOST FOREST

On Santa Cruz Island, where restoration focuses on the blackberry invaded *Scalesia pedunculata* forest, we continued to expand our restoration efforts at Mina de Granillo Rojo and Los Gemelos, with an additional 3 hectares under continuous invasive plant control, and bringing the total managed area on the island to 25 hectares. These sites are a priority as they are the preferred nesting area for the island's remnant population of the Little Vermilion Flycatcher (see page 18).

Within restored areas, scientists documented strong natural regeneration with thousands of *Scalesia* seedlings emerging naturally–clear evidence that removing invasive plants allows this endemic forest to regenerate. Active restoration further accelerated recovery: more than 2,000 nursery-grown *Scalesia pedunculata* trees were planted, alongside additional endemic species to rebuild the forest's health, structure, function, and ecological services.

Looking ahead, the goal is to scale restoration efforts across the highlands, gradually pushing back blackberry and other invasive plants. When sustained over time and implemented at landscape scale, this approach can deliver lasting recovery for one of Galápagos' most unique ecosystems. However, restoring *Scalesia* forests is labour-intensive and costly as it requires continuous invasive plant control for at least a decade, making long-term funding a critical challenge for expanding and consolidating this work.

Researcher Miriam San José conducting vegetation monitoring on Isabela Island.
Photo: Mara Speece / CDF

Members of the Isabela community gathered at the newly restored Bosque de los Niños site, 2025.
Photo: Mara Speece / CDF

Researcher Patricio Picón and CDF volunteer Jeremy Squire collecting insects in the field.
Photo: Jacqueline Rodríguez / CDF

IN FOCUS:

WHAT 10 YEARS OF INVERTEBRATE MONITORING REVEAL ABOUT FOREST RECOVERY

Restoring the iconic *Scalesia pedunculata* forest on Santa Cruz is not only about removing invasive plants and planting endemic trees and shrubs—it is about rebuilding an entire ecosystem and its health, from the soil to the canopy.

At the heart of that ecosystem are invertebrates. Beetles, spiders, true bugs, and microwasps drive essential processes such as pollination, nutrient recycling, pest control, and food supply for birds. Understanding how these communities respond to restoration efforts is key to knowing whether the forest is truly recovering.

Since 2014, CDF scientists have conducted one of the longest-running invertebrate monitoring programs in Galápagos, surveying 34 permanent plots in the *Scalesia* forest at Los Gemelos—half of which are invaded by blackberry (*Rubus niveus*) and other invasive plants, and other half under active invasive plant removal. After a decade of monitoring, analyses completed in 2025 provide the clearest picture yet of how invertebrate communities respond to restoration.

11
Years of Monitoring

34
permanent plots in invaded and restored habitat

A HIDDEN WORLD OF DIVERSITY

Over eleven years, researchers recorded more than 11,000 beetles across 97 genera and 76 species, including 33 endemic species found nowhere else on Earth. Plots where invasive plants were removed hosted slightly more endemic species and fewer introduced species, suggesting restoration efforts may favor native biodiversity.

Monitoring also documented 4,030 true bugs across 41 species, and 7,365 wasps, bees, and micro-wasps—many of them parasitoids that naturally regulate insect populations.

11,304
beetles recorded
97 genera • 76 species • 33 endemic

7,365
wasps & micro-wasps
natural pest regulators

4,030
true bugs
41 species recorded

42
spider species
key prey for endemic birds

SUPPORTING BIRDS AND ECOSYSTEM HEALTH

The study also revealed the importance of spiders as a key food source for Galápagos landbirds. Identification of 441 spider specimens confirmed 42 species, most of them endemic or native to Galápagos. These protein-rich prey are particularly important for species such as the Little Vermilion Flycatcher and Darwin's finches during the rearing of their chicks.

ENDEMIC ANTS THRIVING IN RESTORED FOREST

Monitoring also revealed that the endemic carpenter ant *Camponotus planus* is strongly associated with restored forest areas. The species has not been recorded in invaded plots since 2022, and nesting in dead *Scalesia* logs was documented for the first time—showing how restoration creates habitat for native and endemic species.

Together, these findings show that restoring *Scalesia* forests helps rebuild the complex invertebrate communities that sustain biodiversity. Long-term monitoring allows scientists to track changes and therefore ecosystem recovery.

SPOTLIGHT ON ENDEMIC BEETLES

In 2025, CDF launched a Poster and Guide to Endemic Beetles of the *Scalesia pedunculata* forest, showcasing the remarkable beetle diversity of this ecosystem. Developed using scientific records and high-resolution imagery, the guide aids in species identification, education, and public awareness.

Download the guide:

FIRST DETECTION OF A NEW INTRODUCED MANTIS

Long-term monitoring and taxonomic verification through the CDF invertebrate collection enabled the first confirmed detection of a second introduced mantis species in Galápagos, *Musonia margheritae*. The species appeared most frequently in forest plots invaded by blackberry, underscoring an interesting association of non-native species to each other, and highlighting the importance of continued monitoring to detect new emerging invasive species.

Two major worker endemic ants (*Camponotus planus)* attacking a termite.
Photo: Jeremy Squire / CDF

AMENAZADAS

EX | CR | EN | VU | NT | LC

*EX= Extinto, CR= En peligro crítico, EN= En peligro, VU= Vulnerable, NT= Casi amenazada, LC= Preocupación Menor

ARID ZONE: RECOVERING RARE PLANT SPECIES

Arid ecosystems in Galápagos have been pushed to the brink by decades of degradation, leaving some endemic plant species on the edge of extinction. Yet in 2025, signs of recovery are beginning to emerge—alongside a clearer understanding of just how difficult restoration can be in these extreme environments.

Through the Galápagos Verde 2050 program, the Charles Darwin Foundation, together with the Galápagos National Park Directorate are combining science, restoration, and long-term monitoring to reverse this decline. The results this year reveal a dual reality: while some species are showing the first signs of natural recovery, others continue to struggle against drought, low seed viability, and harsh conditions.

RECOVERING RARE PLANTS:

CR ***Scalesia retroflexa* (Santa Cruz)**
With fewer than 50 plants recorded in late 2025 at Punta Núñez, this species is one of the rarest plants in Galápagos. The remaining population is protected by a fence, while active propagation and reintroduction efforts are underway to support its recovery. Encouragingly, natural seedling recruitment has been documented at the site for the first time this year.

At the same time, our team has initiated propagation for reintroduction at a second site near El Garrapatero, discovered in early 2025. Germination has proven a major challenge: of 450 viable seeds, only five germinated ex situ and just three survived—these seedlings are now being prepared for reintroduction into the wild.

EN ***Scalesia affinis* (Santa Cruz)**
Native to urban Puerto Ayora, this species has suffered population decline due to urbanization, low seed viability, and herbivory. In 2025, researchers recorded natural seedling recruitment for the first time in years–an encouraging sign. From 3,000 treated seeds, the team also propagated new plants with 92.3% survival at restoration sites. While populations remain low, ongoing work combines seed treatments, urban restoration, and community engagement to improve long-term survival.

EN ***Lecocarpus lecocarpoides* (Española)**
Restoring this species has highlighted the challenge of reintroducing a species once thought locally extinct. While early work resulted in successful germination and seedling establishment, all repatriated plants died by 2025 due to the lack of rain, revealing it to be a critical barrier to recovery. In response, researchers produced 18 new seedlings ex situ, overcoming the challenge of high seed dormancy. These will be transplanted in 2026 using lessons learned from previous interventions to enhance survival and strengthen long-term success.

CR ***Galvezia leucantha (CR)* (Isabela)**
From just 6 plants in 2007 to 28 in 2025, recovery is underway despite major challenges from low seed viability and drought. Today, 20 plants have established at Playa Tortuga Negra, and 8 at Canal Bolívar—where the species had not been recorded for over 60 years. Some are now flowering and producing seeds, marking a critical step toward natural regeneration.

Background: Playa Tortuga Negra, Isabela Island
Illustration: Researchers collect pollen from the critically endangered *Galvezia leucantha*
Illustrator: Alexandra Negoita / CDF
Photo: Paúl Mayorga / CDF

HOW WE DO IT

Species selection

Restoration experiments

Populations search

Threat identification

ARID ZONE: REBUILDING ECOSYSTEMS

While recovering individual species remains gradual and uncertain, restoration at the ecosystem level is beginning to show more sustained progress.

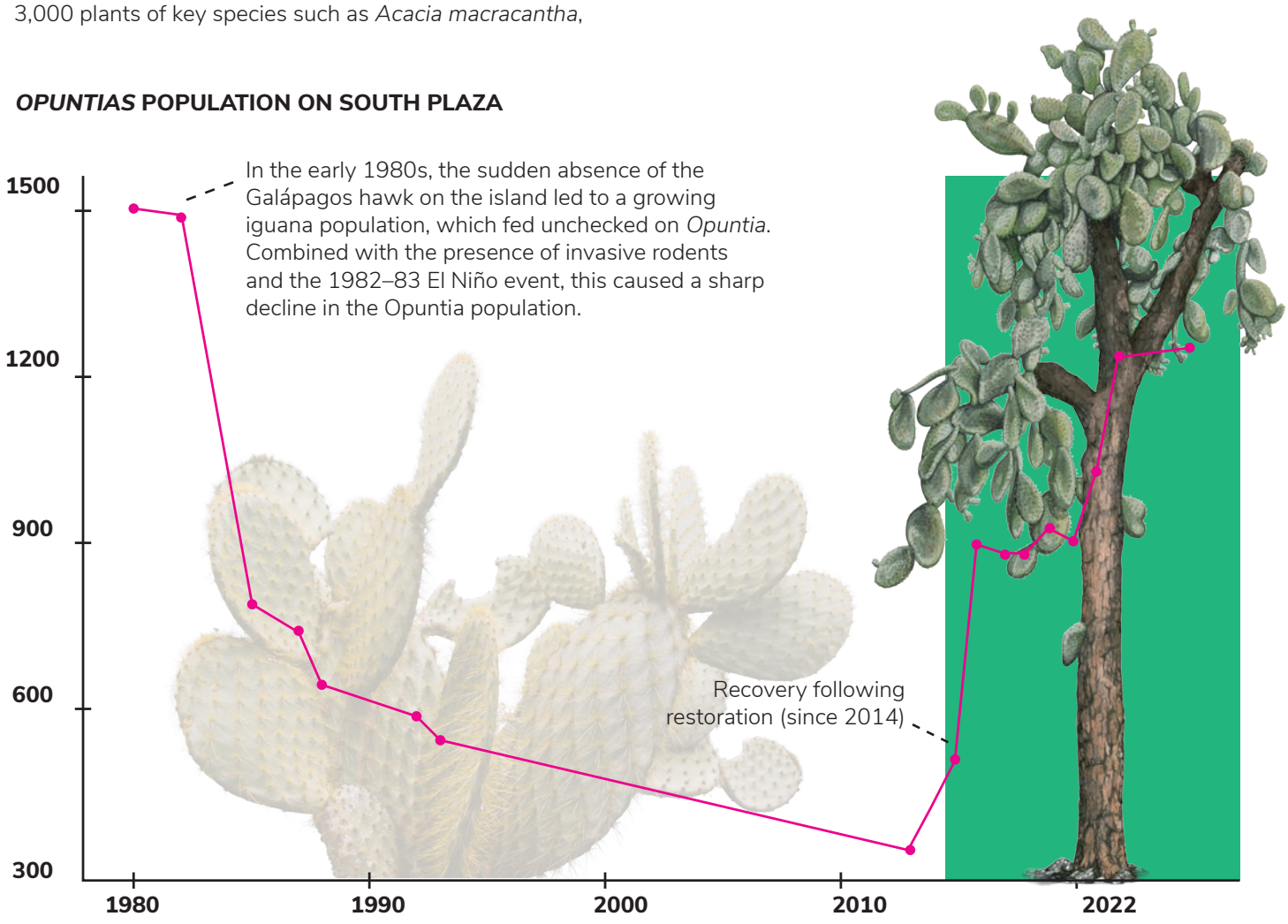
1 **Plaza Sur: a historic reversal**
On Plaza Sur, restoring *Opuntia echios* var. *echios* has reversed decades of decline driven by intense land iguana predation, which had reduced the population by up to 90%. Since restoration began in 2014, sustained management has recovered the population to more than 1,180 plants today—over three times pre-restoration levels—with low mortality (5.7%) and most individuals in good condition. Most notably, natural regeneration was recorded for the first time in nearly 70 years, marking a critical shift from survival to recovery, with the species once again supporting key wildlife such as Darwin's finches.

2 **Baltra: from strength to strength**
After more than a decade of intervention, Baltra—an arid island heavily altered by human activity and invasive species—is now showing sustained signs of recovery. Native vegetation is being restored, with over 3,000 plants of key species such as *Acacia macracantha*, *Bursera malacophylla*, and *Lycium minimum* showing 88.8% survival across seven intervention sites.

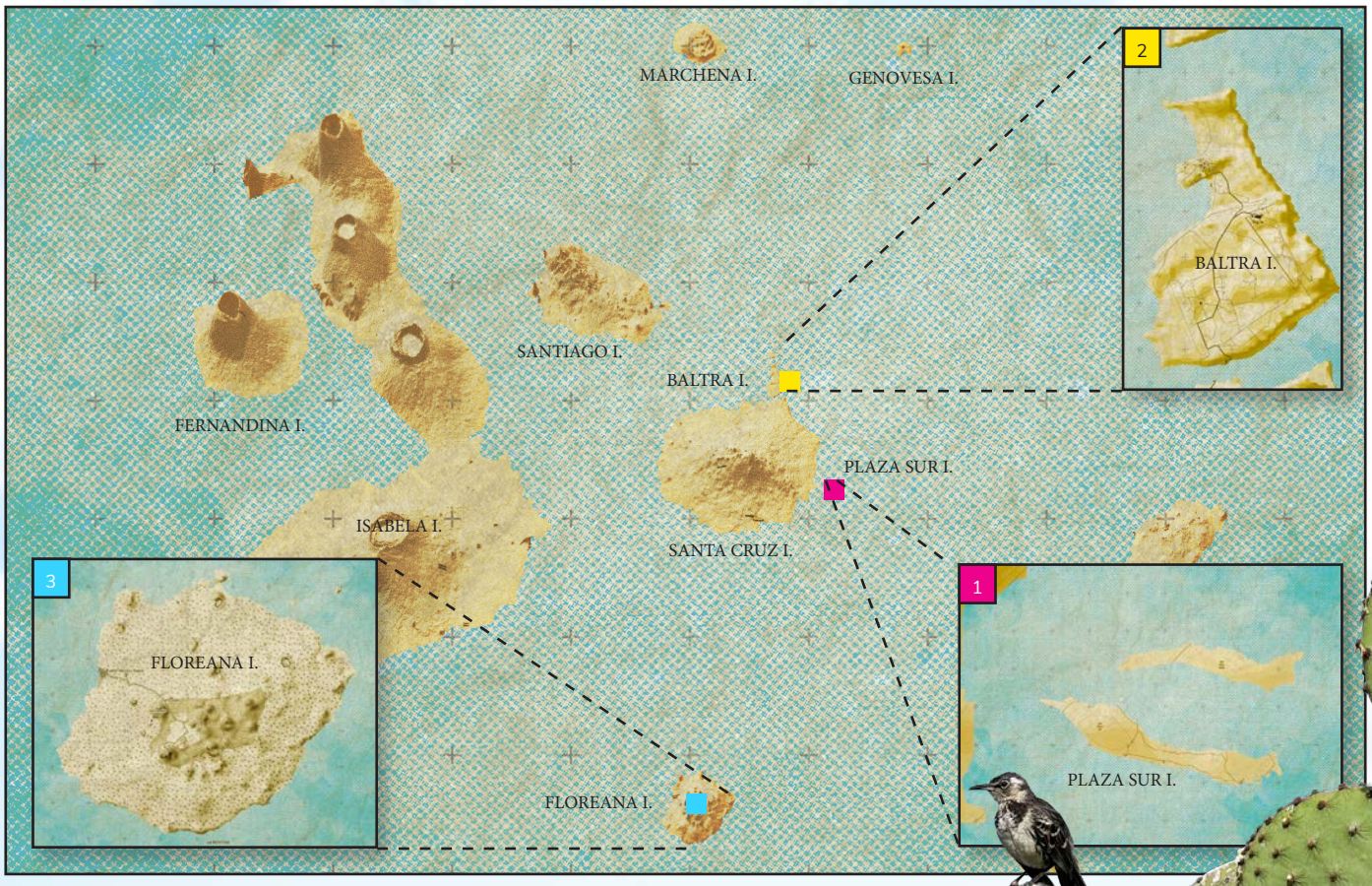
Encouragingly this year, our experts documented natural regeneration of *Opuntia echios* for the first time in 12 years, following the introduction of exclusion zones as an adaptive management action, which reduced herbivory and enabled better seedling establishment. High survival of juvenile *Opuntia* confirms the effectiveness of this approach, while the return of finches and land iguanas signals a shift toward a self-sustaining ecosystem.

3 **Floreana: a corridor for the mockingbirds**
On Floreana, restoration efforts to recover habitat for the planned reintroduction of the Floreana Mockingbird continue, with over 1,000 native plants established across two planting phases (2024 and 2025). Despite challenging conditions, nearly 45% of plants have survived, providing a growing foundation for the return of this iconic species.

OPUNTIAS POPULATION ON SOUTH PLAZA



Caption: Estimated population of *Opuntia echios* var. *echios* on South Plaza (1980–2025). The shaded area marks the start of restoration efforts in 2014. Data sources: Snell *et al.* (1994), Sulloway & Noonan (2015), and GV2050 monitoring data. Ecological restoration and species recovery plan for Baltra, South Plaza, Española, and North Isabela 2025-2029 (P. Jaramillo, N. Velasco, & A. Calle-Loor, Eds.; Vol. 1). Charles Darwin Foundation.



Background: Plaza Sur island.
Right: Floreana Mockingbird (*Mimus trifasciatus*)
Photos: Juan Manuel García , Patricia Jaramillo / CDF

RESTORING DEGRADED ECOSYSTEMS

In 2025, our team contributed a high-impact study on the restoration of quarries and garbage dumps in Baltra, Floreana, and San Cristóbal, demonstrating how restoration and long-term monitoring can support the recovery of highly degraded ecosystems and guide management decisions by the Galápagos National Park Directorate.

Read more on the study here:

Galápagos Hawk on top of a giant tortoise (*C. vandenburghi*) at Alcedo Volcano on expedition in 2024.
Photo: Carlos Espinosa / CDF

Scientists taking health samples from Eastern Santa Cruz giant tortoises (*C. donfaustoi*) in 2025.
Photo: Carlos Espinosa / CDF

PROTECTING GIANTS: SCIENCE DRIVING CONSERVATION OUTCOMES

In 2025, our giant tortoise ecology and conservation team published critical research to inform better protection for four endangered giant tortoise species across the archipelago. This year marked significant advances in reproductive biology, health monitoring, contaminant research, and ecosystem services — translating research directly into management decisions by the Galápagos National Park Directorate (GNPD) and key partners.

The following highlights show how science is actively shaping giant tortoise conservation on the ground:

HEALTH BASELINES & DISEASE DETECTION

Our researchers published four peer-reviewed studies that significantly advanced our understanding of Galápagos giant tortoise health. The team identified the fungal pathogen *Aphanoascella galapagosensis* as the cause of shell lesions, detected established rates of adenovirus infection across previously data-deficient islands, and established the first hematology and plasma biochemistry reference intervals for four tortoise populations on Isabela. These standardized health baselines allow us to strengthen disease surveillance, enable earlier detection of emerging threats, and provide critical guidance for conservation planning and the use of tortoises as bioindicators of environmental change.

TRACKING TORTOISE HEALTH: MICROBIOMES AS EARLY INDICATORS

Our team collected 45 cloacal samples and 12 fecal samples to advance our health and microbiome research and understand how giant tortoises' migration exposes them to human-altered landscapes. A collaborative effort led by the Saint Louis Zoo Institute for Conservation Medicine, this project analyzes variation of the tortoises' microbiome across land-use gradients and seasons. By examining these microbial profiles, we can detect early signs of environmental disturbance, effects of human-wildlife interactions, and land-use impacts on tortoise health, providing essential indicators to guide conservation strategies and urban-rural development in order to protect populations from emerging threats.

REPRODUCTIVE SUCCESS & CLIMATE RESILIENCE

Our work on reproductive research achieved immediate conservation results while providing long-term insights into nesting success and climate resilience. By intensively monitoring nests of the critically endangered Eastern Santa Cruz giant tortoise, our team protected dozens of nests and released 119 hatchlings, preventing mortality from nest entrapment. We additionally collected valuable samples from hatchlings to understand the impacts of movement on population-level reproductive health. Nest temperature loggers have generated essential multi-year data on incubation conditions. Because Galápagos tortoises, as other reptiles alike, exhibit temperature-dependent sex determination, these findings are crucial for predicting how climate change may shape future population sex ratios and overall viability.

GIANT TORTOISES AS ECOLOGICAL ENGINEERS

Our ecosystem services research highlights giant tortoises as ecological engineers. Analyses of 32 mud, 12 fecal, and 12 pondwater samples are quantifying nutrient transport and their role in maintaining freshwater ponds that support insect life cycles and provide water resources for other wildlife. A manuscript synthesizing data from 2018–2024 is nearing submission, and will underscore the importance of conserving tortoise movement ability across landscapes.

Giant tortoises (*C. darwini*) in Santiago Island, 2025.
Photo: Carlos Espinosa / CDF

46	40	119	43	26	238	33
nests monitored for hatching success	additional nests located and protected	hatchlings liberated	dataloggers across 24 nests	samples collected from embryos/ deceased hatchlings	cloacal swabs collected from 119 hatchlings	blood samples collected

Endemic Galápagos rice rat (*Aegialomys galapagoensis*) eating a cactus pad.
Photo: Rashid Cruz

CDF Executive Director Dr. Rakan Zahawi conducting vegetation monitoring on Santa Fe Island.
Photo: Mara Speece / CDF

IN FOCUS:

SANTA FE: UNDERSTANDING ECOSYSTEM RESPONSE TO RESTORATION

Few conservation stories capture attention like the return of giant tortoises. But restoring an ecosystem goes beyond reintroducing a species—it means understanding how landscapes respond as lost ecological processes return.

Santa Fe Island offers a unique opportunity to study this transformation. Once home to its own endemic giant tortoise, the island's ecosystems were dramatically altered after the species was hunted to extinction and invasive goats reshaped the vegetation. Following goat eradication and the reintroduction of tortoises by the Galápagos National Park Directorate (GNPD) in 2015, Santa Fe is becoming a living laboratory to understand how ecosystems respond to large-scale restoration interventions.

Since 2015, more than 800 giant tortoises from the closely related Española species (*Chelonoidis hoodensis*) have been introduced to restore lost ecological functions such as grazing, seed dispersal, and nutrient cycling. While these processes are expected to influence vegetation over time, understanding their effects—both positive and potential trade-offs—remains an ongoing area of research.

To track these changes, our scientists monitor vegetation across 20 permanent plots spanning Santa Fe's landscapes. In 2025, the team completed full rainy-season monitoring, revealing just how dramatically the island transforms during this brief period of productivity. Seasonal rains triggered the emergence of grasses and herbs that had once been heavily overgrazed by goats. These short-lived plants provide critical food pulses for native herbivores such as giant tortoises and endemic land iguanas. As the dry season returns and these plants disappear, herbivores shift their diets to giant cacti, which provide water and nutrients when little else is available.

Our researchers are also tracking the growth and survival of 223 individual woody plants from three key species: the endemic giant cactus *Opuntia echios* var. *barringtonensis*, the endemic shrub *Scalesia helleri*, and the native tree *Bursera graveolens*. These long-term measurements will reveal how native vegetation is recovering decades after the removal of goats.

At the landscape scale, drone surveys and ground monitoring are building the first quantitative maps of vegetation on Santa Fe. For example, in one 6.7-hectare study area, scientists documented 385 giant cacti, providing the first baseline estimate of cactus density on the island.

Together, these efforts are helping scientists move beyond assumptions—providing evidence to understand how ecosystems respond to restoration, and informing future species reintroductions across the archipelago.

Opuntias on Santa Fe Island, 2025 expedition.
Photo: Mara Speece / CDF

Read about how our landbird team is evaluating habitat suitability for the potential return of the Little Vermilion Flycatcher to Santa Fe Island on page 19.

OCEAN

GALÁPAGOS PENGUIN
0°45'39"S 91°01'22"O

A devil ray jumping out of the ocean.
Photo: Rashid Cruz

IN FOCUS:

A REMARKABLE YEAR FOR THE OCEAN

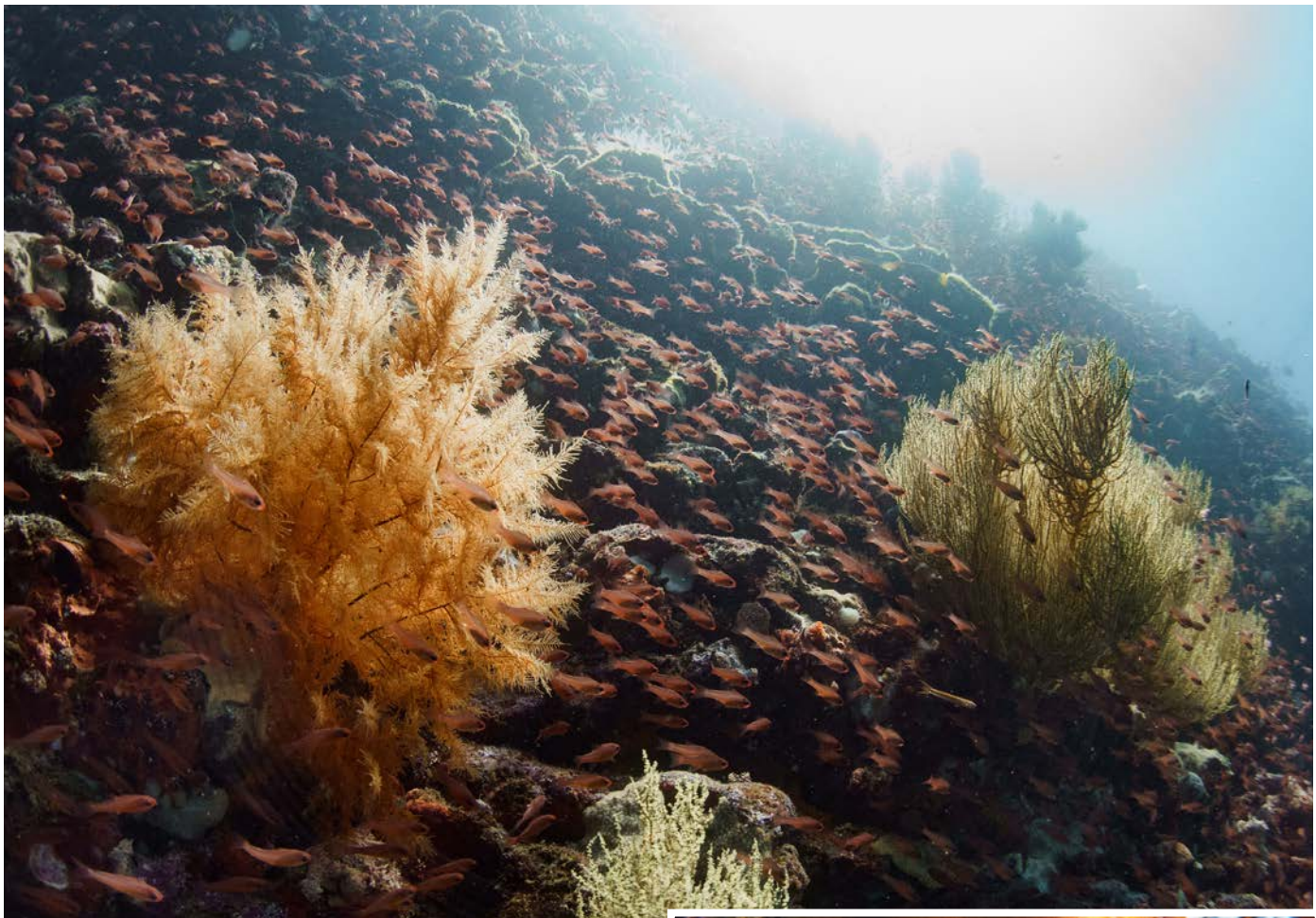
The ocean surrounding Galápagos is one of the most biologically rich and strategically important marine regions on the planet. From coral reefs and seamounts to migratory corridors for sharks, turtles, and whales, these waters form the ecological heart of the Eastern Tropical Pacific (ETP). Yet they are also increasingly exposed to global pressures—including climate change, ocean acidification, pollution, illegal fishing and growing demands on ocean resources. Safeguarding this ocean therefore requires more than protection alone: it requires science to guide policy, conservation and management.

In 2025, collaboration, discovery, and international engagement defined a remarkable year for ocean conservation at the Charles Darwin Foundation (CDF). Our scientists advanced critical knowledge on the resilience, the dynamics and economic value of Galápagos marine ecosystems while helping translate this evidence into tools that strengthen ocean governance across the region.

CDF researchers brought Galápagos science to the global stage throughout the year. At the 2025 'One Ocean' Science Congress and United Nations Ocean Conference (UNOC3) in Nice, our team contributed scientific evidence and policy perspectives drawn from more than six decades of research in the ETP, calling for stronger protection of high-biodiversity seascapes and improved international cooperation to safeguard migratory species and marine ecosystems. At the IUCN World Conservation Congress, attended by CDF's Science Director, key motions on the conservation of endangered hammerhead sharks were advanced, helping build momentum toward stronger global protections. In parallel, our shark conservation team supported proposals to uplist shark and ray species at the November 2025 CITES Conference, reinforcing efforts to regulate international trade and reduce pressure on vulnerable populations.

Several initiatives launched in 2025 are helping turn science into actionable management tools. For example, CDF developed the first Ocean Account for the Galápagos Insular Exclusive Economic Zone, revealing the ecological and economic contribution of protected marine ecosystems and providing innovative approaches to guide sustainable ocean management. Our researchers also contributed to the Galápagos Coral Conservation and Management Plan, a collaborative roadmap published in 2026 that guides research and priority actions through 2030 to protect these ecosystems that are essential for biodiversity, fisheries, tourism, and coastal resilience.

CDF also strengthened regional collaboration across the ETP. Our scientists helped launch a regional alliance for deep-sea research, expanding exploration of ecosystems that remain largely unknown. In parallel, we promoted knowledge exchange among park rangers, scientists and



Vertical coral gardens at Guy Fawkes.
Photo: Joshua Vela

partner organizations in marine biosecurity practices, rapid response protocols, strengthening prevention of invasive species that threaten island biodiversity.

Long-term scientific monitoring in the Galápagos Marine Reserve also led to an extraordinary rediscovery: a coral species not recorded in Galápagos since the 1997–1998 El Niño event. This finding illustrates the value of sustained research and long-term monitoring—revealing both the vulnerability and resilience of ocean ecosystems in a rapidly changing climate.

Together, these advances made 2025 an exceptional year for the ocean at CDF—one in which science, collaboration, and global engagement helped strengthen the foundations for protecting the marine ecosystems of Galápagos and the wider Eastern Tropical Pacific.

1 National Ocean Account developed

A coral species **rediscovered after 25+ years**

Regional alliance for deep-sea science launched

Read our UNOC3 Ocean Manifesto

Wellington's solitary coral.
Photo: Inti Keith / CDF

A CORAL THOUGHT LOST RETURNS

Long-term reef monitoring by CDF scientists and collaborators led to the rediscovery in 2025 of Wellington's solitary coral (*Rhizopsammia wellingtoni*), a Galápagos endemic species not recorded since 2000 and previously considered extinct. Researchers documented more than 250 living colonies across multiple sites around Isabela and Fernandina, offering a rare sign of resilience in Galápagos reefs and demonstrating the value of sustained scientific monitoring.

STRENGTHENING DEEP-OCEAN SCIENCE FOR CONSERVATION

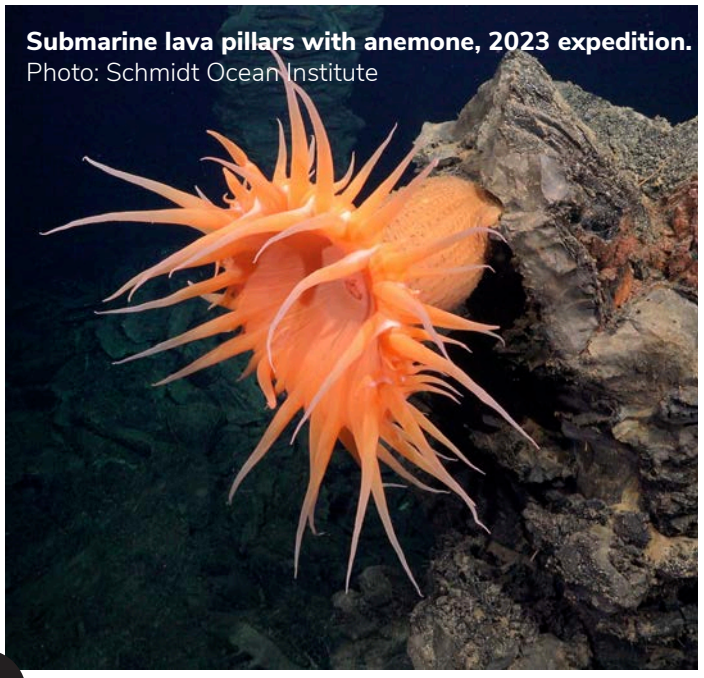
The deep ocean of the Eastern Tropical Pacific (ETP) remains one of the least explored ecosystems on Earth. Extending to depths of over 5,000 meters, these vast environments support unique yet unknown biodiversity that are facing growing threats—with globally, only about 1% of deep-ocean areas effectively protected.

Deep habitats (below 200m) make up around 96% of ETP Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) representing a critical frontier for conservation. In 2025, CDF strengthened the scientific foundation of deep-ocean research while advancing the regional collaboration and tools needed to protect these ecosystems at scale. Key highlights included:

STRENGTHENING INTERDISCIPLINARY SCIENCE FOR THE DEEP OCEAN

Our deep-ocean team expanded from two to seven specialized researchers, building an interdisciplinary group with expertise spanning taxonomy, marine genomics, seafloor mapping, ocean governance, outreach, and marine protected area (MPA) design—significantly strengthening CDF's capacity to develop deep-ocean science and support improved ocean governance in the region.

Operationally, we processed more than 1,500 biological samples and curated 148 terabytes of deep-sea imagery, while continuing the analysis of over 1,250 hours of ROV and video-transect footage from major international oceanographic expeditions undertaken since 2023. Together, these efforts are consolidating one of the most comprehensive scientific baselines for deep-ocean ecosystems in the Galápagos and the ETP.



Submarine lava pillars with anemone, 2023 expedition.
Photo: Schmidt Ocean Institute

ADVANCING REGIONAL COLLABORATION AND OCEAN GOVERNANCE

As co-founders of the Deep Ocean Alliance for the Eastern Tropical Pacific that was launched in 2024, CDF coordinated national deep-ocean exploration efforts with partners in Colombia, Costa Rica, and Panama to align research priorities and strengthen regional capacity. This collaboration advanced deep-sea research and monitoring in Malpelo and Yuruparí–Malpelo islands (Colombia). It also supported Costa Rica's deep-sea knowledge base and the approval of the ~97,000 km² Bicentennial Marine Management Area, and enabled Panama's first ROV-based seamount surveys.

By filling critical knowledge gaps and strengthening regional capacity, these efforts are directly supporting 30×30 commitments for marine protection and advancing coordinated ocean governance across the region.

ROV Subastian coming out of the water, 2023 Galápagos expedition.
Photo: Misha Vallejo / Falkor Too

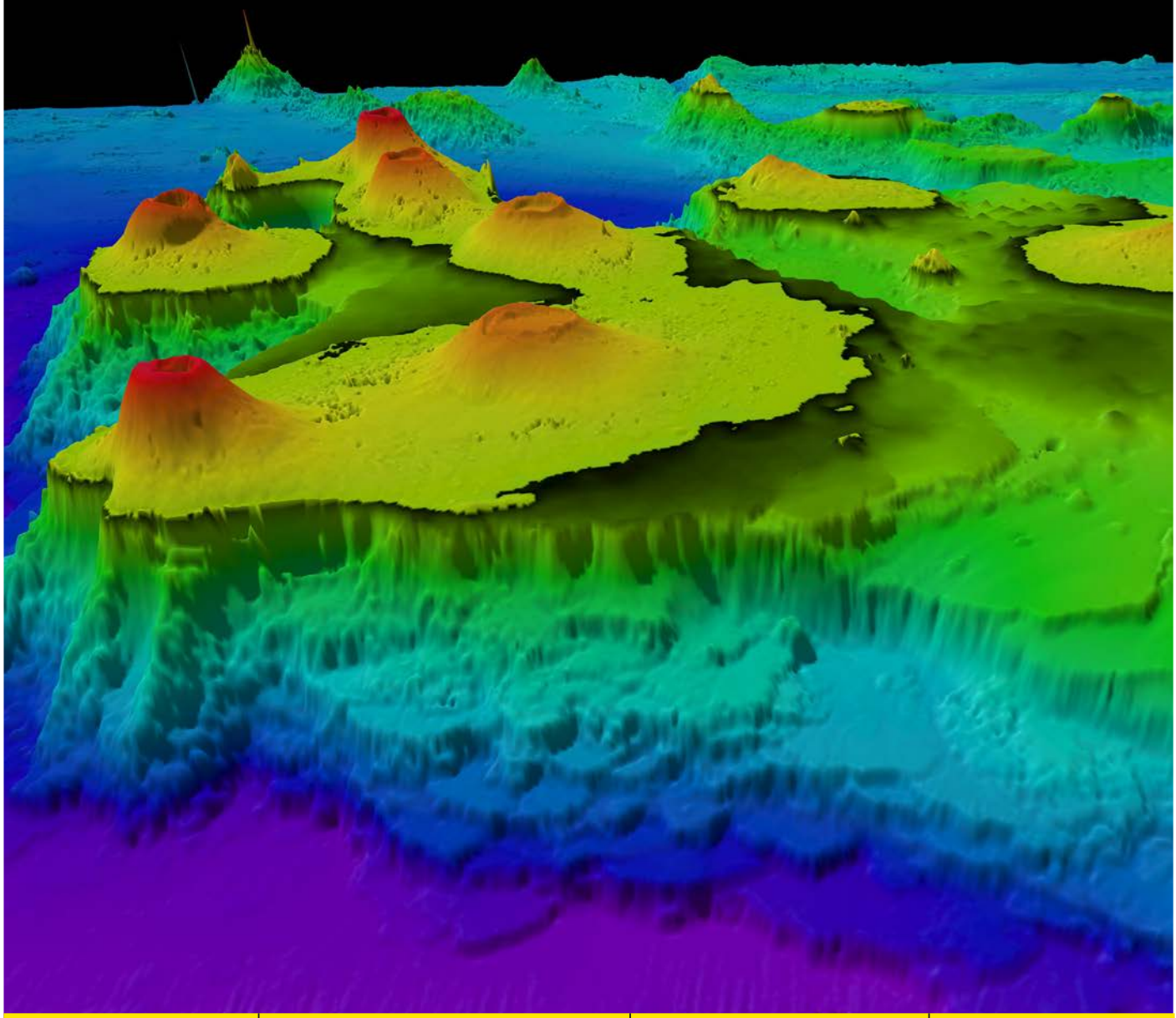
ENABLING EXPLORATION AND CONSERVATION AT SCALE

CDF also helped unlock future ocean exploration and conservation. By compiling the most comprehensive regional bathymetric dataset to date—integrating hundreds of seafloor surveys with global initiatives such as Seabed 2030—our team is guiding exploration into previously uncharted areas and informing conservation planning.

To support this work, we strengthened operational capacity by coordinating regional expeditions, negotiating vessel-sharing agreements, and deploying low-cost deep-sea technologies —making deep-ocean research more accessible and scalable across countries.

These advances are already informing marine protected area design and management across the ETP—including key sites in Colombia (Colinas y Lomas, Yuruparí–Malpelo, and the Malpelo Marine Sanctuary), Costa Rica's Bicentennial Marine Management Area, proposed extensions in Panama, and the Galápagos Hermandad Marine Reserve. Together, this work strengthens marine spatial planning and supports the long-term protection of the region's interconnected deep-ocean ecosystems.

Bathymetry profile of the Western Galápagos Islands and platform.
Image credits: CDF/ X.Boza based on GMRT grid v4.4.1 using QPS Fledermaus v.8.8.2 imaging software

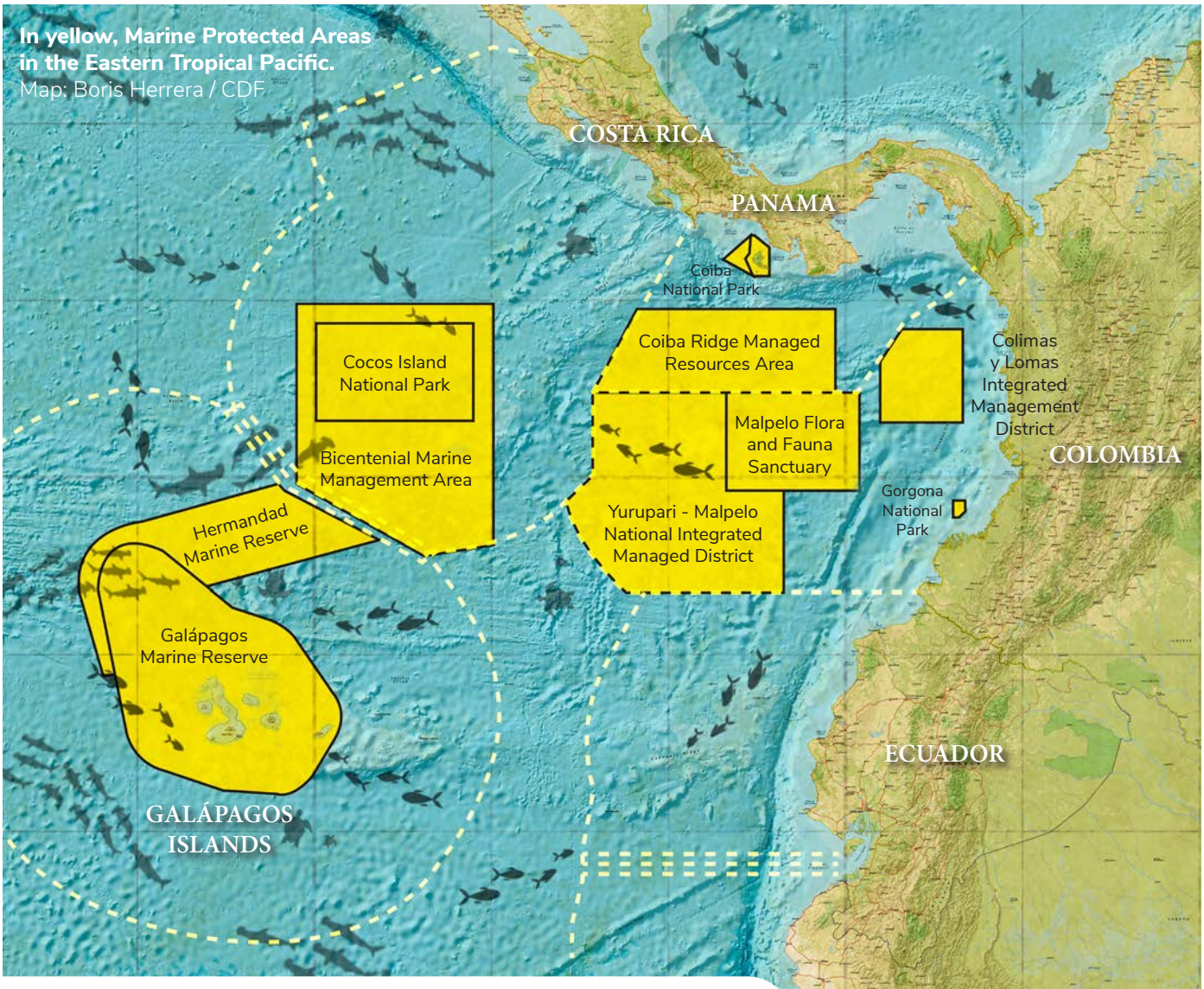


6+ MPAs
designs and management informed through our work

1,500+
biological samples processed to strengthen the region's deep-ocean biodiversity baseline

148
terabytes of deep-sea imagery curated from major international expeditions

1,250+
hours of ROV surveys documenting deep-sea biodiversity



In yellow, Marine Protected Areas in the Eastern Tropical Pacific.
Map: Boris Herrera / CDF

ANTICIPATING CHANGE IN GALÁPAGOS MARINE ECOSYSTEMS

In 2025, CDF scientists advanced marine conservation in both the Galápagos Marine Reserve (GMR) and across the Eastern Tropical Pacific (ETP) by combining long-term ecological monitoring, climate science, and predictive modelling. By integrating these data streams, our researchers are not only documenting ecological change but helping managers anticipate risks to marine ecosystems before they become irreversible. Key highlights this year included:

SUBTIDAL ECOLOGICAL MONITORING

Subtidal Ecological Monitoring is like an annual health check for the ocean—tracking underwater life over time to detect change and anticipate future risks in Galápagos' delicate marine ecosystems. In 2025, CDF researchers completed 503 monitoring along 50m long transects across representative habitats, documenting thousands of observations of fish, invertebrates, and reef communities, these totalled 6,981 fish observations representing 183 species, 1,036 macroinvertebrate observations across 66 species and 2,380 sessile organism observations spanning 181 species. Together, these data provide one of the most comprehensive baselines of marine biodiversity in the GMR and regionally, providing essential evidence to guide conservation and management decisions.

DETECTING OCEAN WARMING

CDF scientists have now linked this biological monitoring with one of the region's most robust underwater temperature records, revealing

473,500 m³
of water surveyed ≈ 175 Olympic swimming pools

17,100 m²
of seafloor surveyed ≈ 66 tennis courts

437.5 m²
of reef surface surveyed ≈ 40 parking spaces

Researchers conducting subtidal ecological monitoring
Photo: Billy Bensted-Smith / CDF

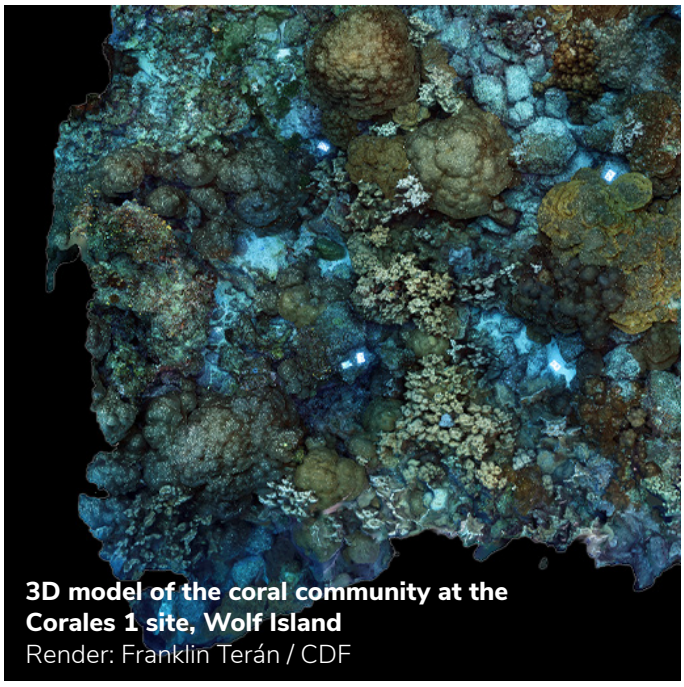
measurable warming trends. For example, at Wolf Island temperature trends showed an increase by +0.142°C per year, while at Fernandina warming reached +0.374°C per year. By connecting ocean warming with biological responses, we are turning a projected threat into a measurable management risk, enabling early identification before irreversible change occurs.

SEEING CORAL REEFS IN 3D

To better understand reef resilience, CDF scientists expanded a permanent network of coral reef photogrammetry plots across eight sites. Using high-resolution imagery, we can now track changes in the 3D structure of reefs—and not just coral cover—thereby enabling detection of early signs of habitat decline that traditional monitoring often misses. This work culminated in the release of "Galápagos_3D", an open-access dataset featuring high-resolution reef models alongside more than 17,000 annotated images, providing a powerful new resource for global research on coral reef health and climate impacts.

ANTICIPATING MARINE THREATS

To help strengthen marine biosecurity in the GMR, CDF scientists led the first comprehensive risk assessment of non-native species, identifying 17 high-risk species among the 43 already present and highlighting 25 additional species that are already in the ETP and could potentially be introduced to the archipelago. In parallel, our team analyzed 5,714 drifting Fish Aggregating Device (FAD) deployments—a recurring threat to the reserve despite being banned, as they contribute to bycatch, entangle marine species, and damage habitats—using oceanographic simulations to map seasonal "safe zones" that reduce ecological damage while maintaining fisheries viability.



3D model of the coral community at the Corales 1 site, Wolf Island
Render: Franklin Terán / CDF

STRENGTHENING MARINE CONSERVATION IN THE ETP

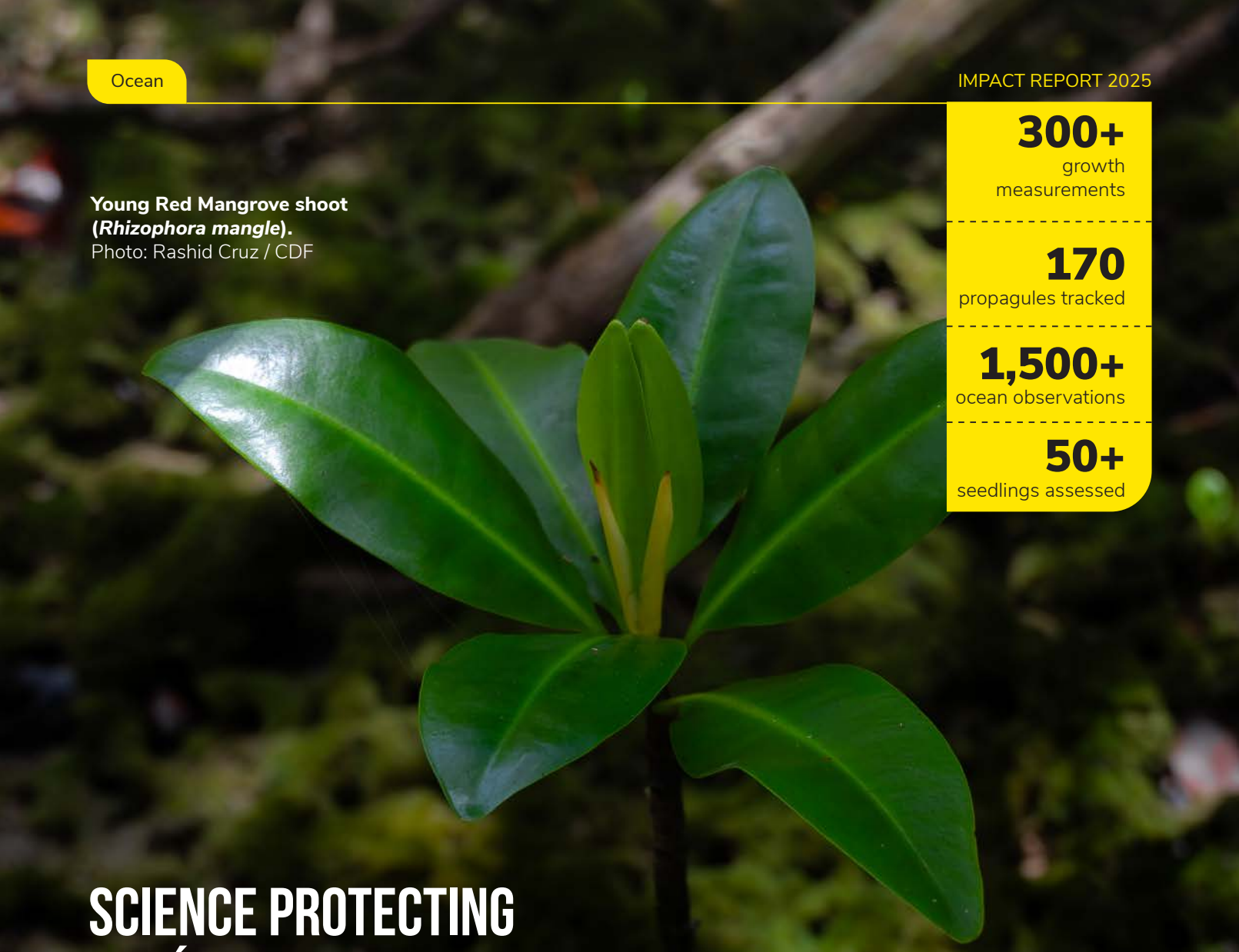
CDF's impact extends beyond the GMR. In 2025, our researchers worked with partners across the Eastern Tropical Pacific Marine Corridor (CMAR)—including Costa Rica, Panama, Colombia, and Ecuador—to strengthen regional capacity for marine monitoring and biosecurity. Through four regional workshops and the Coastal Ocean Marine Biosecurity International Network of the Americas (COMBINA) network, CDF scientists helped align monitoring methods to build a regional early-warning system for marine invasions; CDF also participated in several expeditions to replicate monitoring and detection across multiple MPAs.

300+
growth measurements

170
propagules tracked

1,500+
ocean observations

50+
seedlings assessed



Young Red Mangrove shoot (*Rhizophora mangle*).
Photo: Rashid Cruz / CDF

SCIENCE PROTECTING GALÁPAGOS MANGROVES

Mangrove forests are among the most powerful natural defenses against climate change and its impacts—protecting coastlines, storing vast amounts of carbon, and providing essential habitat for marine life. Yet in Galápagos, these ecosystems remain relatively understudied.

As the Charles Darwin Foundation's mangrove program continues to grow, our work in 2025 focused on building the scientific foundation needed to better understand how these ecosystems function, and how they may respond to environmental change. Key highlights this year included:

UNDERSTANDING HOW MANGROVES COLONIZE NEW SHORES

One of the most exciting discoveries this year comes from a simple but powerful question: how long can a mangrove travel afloat before it establishes as a seedling?

Mangroves disperse as floating seedlings called propagules, which drift with ocean currents before settling and taking root. In 2025, CDF researchers tracked 170 propagules in controlled lab settings, recording more than 1,500 observations on buoyancy and survival. Once the propagules eventually sank, the team assessed the growth and health of 50 newly established seedlings.

These experiments provide critical insight into how mangroves disperse and colonize new areas, helping us understand how these ecosystems might expand or shift as ocean conditions change under a warming climate scenario.

MANGROVES & CARBON STORAGE

To better understand how mangroves respond to environmental change, our researchers monitored the growth of more than 300 branches across three species using an innovative, non-invasive photogrammetry method. This approach allows precise measurement of growth over time based on photographs.

These data help estimate how much biomass—and therefore carbon—mangroves accumulate each year, and how this may vary under changing climate conditions such as El Niño and La Niña. By analyzing carbon capture and nitrogen fixation across plant tissues, the team is also uncovering how carbon is stored and transferred between mangroves and surrounding coastal ecosystems. Together, this work is helping quantify one of the most important—and least understood—ecosystem services in Galápagos: the role of mangroves in capturing and storing "blue carbon."

TRACKING CLIMATE RESILIENCE

Our scientists are also investigating what controls mangrove survival under the extreme environmental conditions of Galápagos, where there are no permanent freshwater rivers, an otherwise critical requirement for mangrove survival. A key question in Galápagos is whether mangroves here are instead dependent on hidden freshwater flows originating from the islands' volcanic highlands. To address this, the team has begun modelling how freshwater moves underground from volcanic watersheds to the coast, and how this matches up with mangrove distribution, health, and resilience.
Together, these discoveries strengthen the scientific foundation needed to protect mangrove ecosystems—and the biodiversity and climate resilience they sustain.

Floating propagules in controlled lab setting.
Photo: Mara Speece / CDF

PI Nicolás Moity studying Mangroves in Santa Cruz Island.
Photo: Carlos Espinosa / CDF

Life among the mangrove roots.
Photo: Carlos Espinosa / CDF

A VITAL SUPPORT FOR MARINE FOOD WEBS

CDF researchers also confirmed the critical role mangroves play as nurseries for marine life. Using stable isotope analysis in collaboration with Ghent University and ESPOL, the team traced how mangrove-derived food supports the early life stages of fish, crabs, and spiny lobsters.
Fallen leaves, microbes, and organisms living on mangrove roots fuel a rich food web that sustains juvenile marine species.
By recycling nutrients and producing abundant food, mangrove forests support marine biodiversity and help replenish nearby reefs and fisheries.

Read more about this study:

Marine bird conservation team and Galápagos National Park rangers conducting annual health checks and population census on Darwin Island, 2025.
Photo: Mara Speece / CDF

MONITORING GALÁPAGOS SEABIRDS IN THE FACE OF THREATS

The Charles Darwin Foundation maintains the longest-running population and health datasets for endangered marine and lagoon birds in Galápagos, allowing scientists and management authorities to track trends over decades, to understand responses to climate events, and anticipate emerging risks.

During 2024 and 2025, our researchers strengthened these records through monitoring expeditions across nine islands and islets, including the remote colonies of Genovesa, Darwin, and Wolf. From disease surveillance of seven marine birds species, to updated population estimates for species such as the Galápagos penguin and Flightless cormorant, this work provides critical evidence to guide conservation decisions.

EARLY DETECTION AND DISEASE PREVENTION

In 2025, our researchers conducted the first complete health assessments of seabirds around the archipelago, including Darwin and Wolf Islands, collecting 157 blood samples from seven marine bird species to continue strengthening the baseline data on pathogens and parasites that began more than two decades ago. This baseline helps detect emerging diseases before they spread in the breeding colonies. Our team also collected 1,870 feather samples to assess heavy metals presence and insights about feeding ecology, and 402 samples to analyze antimicrobial resistance—both potential threats to seabird health.

Waved albatross (*Phoebastria irrorata*).
Photo: Joshua Vela

TRACKING POPULATIONS OF ENDANGERED SPECIES

Annual population censuses help detect changes early and guide conservation action. In 2025, our researchers estimated populations of 1,154 Galápagos penguins and 1,835 Flightless cormorants according to the data collected in the annual census. Lower estimated numbers than previous years are likely linked to rising sea surface temperatures that reduce prey availability and breeding success.

The team also documented more than 8,400 waterbirds across 23 species, strengthening the baseline needed to track population trends and support timely conservation decisions.

Galápagos penguin (*Spheniscus mendiculus*). Photo: Joshua Vela

Penguins and marine iguanas at Punta Vicente Roca, Isabela Island. Photo: Joshua Vela

1,870 feathers to assess heavy metals and feeding ecology

402 samples to determine antimicrobial resistance analysis

157 blood samples to detect pathogens and parasites

224 choanal-tracheal swabs collected for Avian Influenza

PROTECTING SHARKS IN THE EASTERN TROPICAL PACIFIC

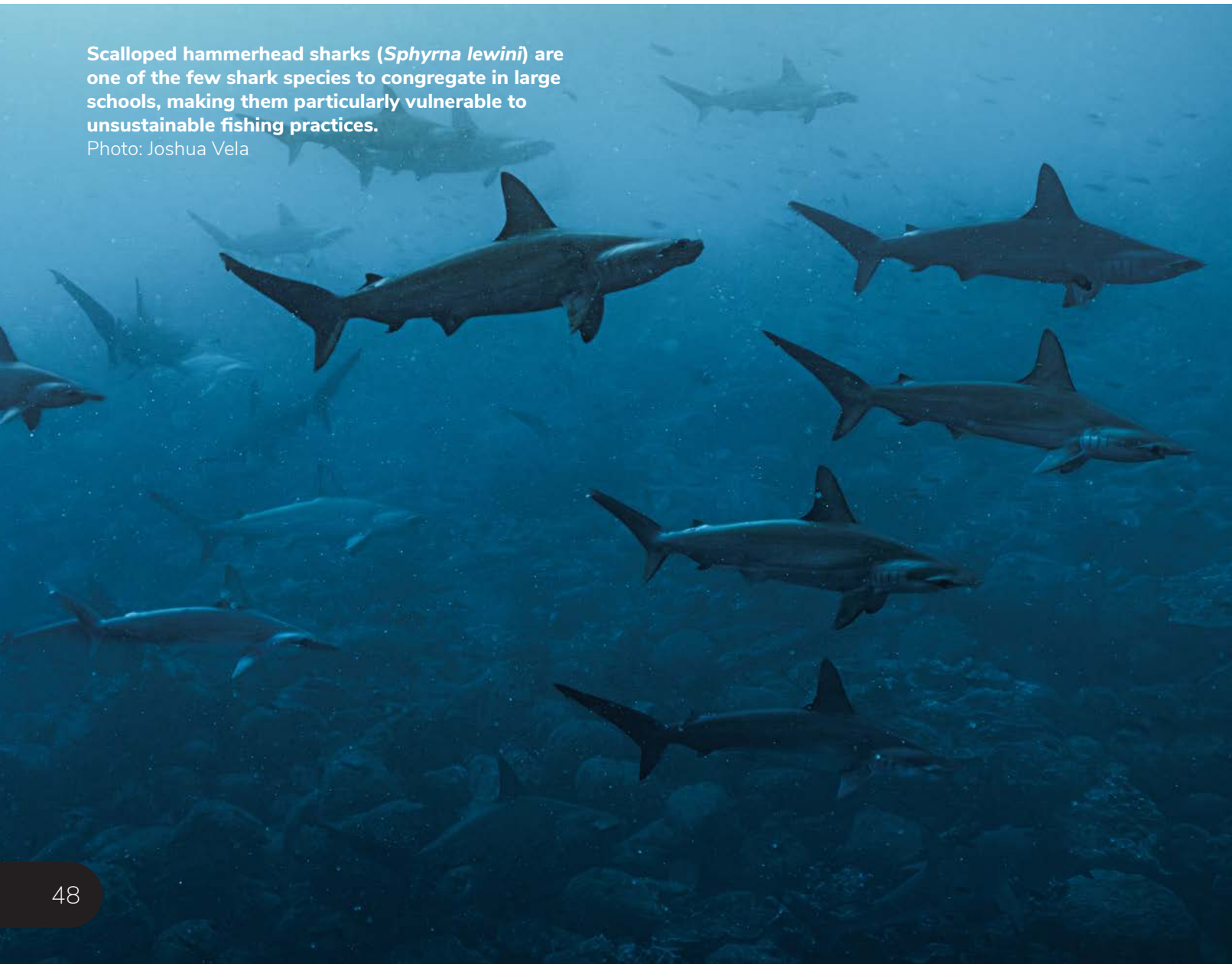
Sharks are essential to healthy ocean ecosystems, yet face growing fishing pressure across the Eastern Tropical Pacific (ETP) region. For highly migratory shark species such as silkies and hammerheads, conservation requires action not just within marine reserves, but also in national and international waters.

Since 2007, the Charles Darwin Foundation (CDF) has advanced evidence-based shark conservation in Galápagos and across the ETP through long-term population monitoring, research on shark movement and ecological connectivity, and policy engagement with governments and international partners. Our science helps inform stronger conservation policy for sharks across the region, including Ecuador's recent efforts to elevate key oceanic species such as manta and devil rays (*Mobula* spp.) to the highest protection status under the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) (2025) or the Critically Endangered scalloped hammerhead shark (*Sphyrna lewini*) under the Convention on Migratory Species (CMS) (2026)—a move that would strengthen international commitments, restrict exploitation, and improve protection across migratory routes beyond national waters.

In 2025, our researchers generated new insights into shark ecology, migration, and fisheries impacts—science that directly informs conservation and management across the region and globally. Key research highlights included:

MARINE RESERVES AS GLOBAL SHARK REFUGES

Two studies published in 2025 reinforced the global importance of the ETP as a refuge for sharks. The first study demonstrated that oceanic the ETP, including Galápagos, Malpelo, Clipperton, and Revillagigedo, harbor some of the highest abundances of sharks and large predatory fish recorded worldwide, while coastal MPAs exposed to fishing pressure support far smaller populations.



Scalloped hammerhead sharks (*Sphyrna lewini*) are one of the few shark species to congregate in large schools, making them particularly vulnerable to unsustainable fishing practices.
Photo: Joshua Vela

45
sharks tagged with satellite transmitters to track movement and migration

37
days of field research across the Galápagos Marine Reserve

17
years of fisheries data analyzed and optimized for national management

5
peer-review publications in international journals

Meanwhile, in a second study, scientists documented strong seasonal patterns within the Galápagos Marine Reserve: fish biomass (which includes sharks) at Darwin and Wolf was more than three times higher during the cold season, driven largely by aggregations of the scalloped hammerhead. These findings confirm Galápagos as one of the world's most important seasonal aggregation sites for hammerheads.

TRACKING SHARKS ACROSS INTERNATIONAL WATERS

Satellite tracking highlighted the conservation challenges facing migratory sharks beyond MPAs. One hammerhead tagged by the team in Galápagos, and that was likely pregnant, traveled more than 1,200 km to a birthing ground off Panama, before continuing 1,800 km into international waters where fishing regulation is deficient and where sharks are frequently caught. The study underscores the need for stronger regional cooperation to protect migratory shark species.

Similarly, in the most comprehensive study of silky shark (*Carcharhinus falciformis*) movements to date, CDF scientists and partners tracked 40 individuals over multiple years, revealing that this heavily fished, highly migratory species spends less than 50% of its time within MPAs of the ETP—highlighting the need for protection beyond existing reserves.

TURNING SCIENCE INTO FISHERIES MANAGEMENT AND GOVERNANCE IN ECUADOR

In Ecuador, shark fishing is illegal, but it is legal to land and sell sharks caught as bycatch — a clause that creates a legal loophole that weakens conservation efforts for these species in the region. Unregulated bycatch remains a major driver of shark population declines in the region.

Working with Ecuadorian government fisheries authorities, CDF scientists are helping strengthen the scientific foundations needed to reduce shark bycatch and improve fisheries management and governance. In 2025, the team compiled and optimized 17 years of national fisheries landing records, creating the most comprehensive database of large pelagic catches in Ecuador to support science-based decision-making. We also delivered technical guidance and capacity-building workshops for more than 40 government fisheries staff and shark specialists, covering topics from shark biology to fisheries impact assessment.

Together, these advances help extend shark conservation beyond the GMR, supporting more sustainable fisheries management across Ecuadorian waters and the wider ETP.

Galápagos shark (*Carcharhinus galapagensis*).
Photo: Billy Bensted-Smith / CDF

Sharks are a big driver of tourism in Galápagos.
Photo: Joshua Vela

Hammerhead shark caught in an artisanal longline near Darwin Island.
Photo: Gabriel Vianna / CDF

DOCUMENTING ILLEGAL LONGLINE FISHING IN GALÁPAGOS

Longline fishing is strictly illegal inside the Galápagos Marine Reserve, yet it remains a recurring issue. To better understand and reduce this threat, CDF researchers analyzed enforcement and monitoring data with the Galápagos National Park Directorate (GNPD), identifying illegal fishing, particularly around Darwin and Wolf Islands, which are critical shark habitats. This study provides important evidence that will help the GNPD strengthen targeted surveillance and enforcement.

Green sea turtle (*Chelonia mydas*). Photo: Joshua Vela

UNDERSTANDING CLIMATE IMPACTS ON GREEN TURTLES

The Galápagos Islands host one of the most important nesting populations of green turtles (*Chelonia mydas*) in the Eastern Tropical Pacific (ETP). Yet these iconic animals face growing pressure from fisheries, habitat destruction and climate change. Building on pilot studies launched in 2024 at one of the archipelago's busiest nesting beaches—Quinta Playa on Isabela Island—our team expanded research in 2025 alongside the Galápagos National Park Directorate to gain a deeper understanding of how climate change is affecting turtle reproduction at this site in order to inform actionable conservation strategies.

MONITORING EVERY NEST, EVERY NIGHT

To understand reproductive success under changing environmental conditions, our researchers maintained a five-month continuous presence at Quinta Playa, from December to May, conducting nightly patrols throughout the nesting season. The team installed 129 temperature sensors directly alongside eggs and excavated 126 nests to evaluate hatching success, emergence rates, and embryonic development.

Preliminary results show an average 71.3% hatching and 68.3% emergence success in nests with confirmed hatchling emergence. However, nests located in high-risk areas exposed to tidal overwash or disturbance showed significantly lower success, dropping to 38.3% hatching and 33.7% emergence success. These findings help identify vulnerable areas of the beach where conservation measures may be needed.

REAL-TIME CLIMATE DATA

Because sea turtles, as other reptiles alike, have temperature-dependent sex determination, even small changes in nest temperature can influence hatchling sex ratios. To better understand these dynamics, CDF researchers strengthened environmental monitoring at Quinta Playa by installing sensors to record rainfall, air temperature, and nearshore sea surface temperature.

During the reproductive season, researchers documented five extreme rainfall events, including one delivering 78 mm of rain in a single day. These storms caused abrupt nest temperature drops of up to 4°C, demonstrating how even strong short-term climatic events can directly affect incubation conditions.

MONITORING THE FUTURE OF NESTING HABITAT

Monthly drone surveys also tracked changes in beach width and dune structure at Quinta Playa. These high-resolution images allow researchers to identify areas vulnerable to erosion and flooding—critical information for predicting future nesting habitat availability as sea levels rise.

Together, these efforts provide the scientific foundation needed to safeguard one of the ETP's most important green turtle nesting populations under a changing climate scenario.

PI Macarena Parra and park rangers conducting annual monitoring of sea turtle nests at Quinta Playa, Isabela.
Photo: Carlos Espinosa / CDF

126
nests exhumed and evaluated

129
temperature sensors installed inside nests

5
drone flights / 10 hours flown


CLUB

PEOPLE

CDF'S 2026 SUMMER CLUB OUT IN THE FIELD.
0°38'37"S 90°21'29"O

© Mara Speece / CDF

SUSTAINABLE FISHERIES IN GALÁPAGOS

CDF's interdisciplinary fisheries team provides scientific-based information and technical advice to help Ecuador achieve sustainable artisanal fisheries in the Galápagos Marine Reserve (GMR). In 2025, our scientists worked closely with the Galápagos National Park Directorate (GNPD), the fishing community, as well as government partners to generate evidence that strengthens fisheries management and governance, supports sustainable seafood businesses, and trains the next generation of ocean conservation leaders. Key highlights included:

HEALTHY FISHERIES, PROVEN MANAGEMENT

As the principal scientific advisor to the GNPD on artisanal fisheries, CDF helps design and evaluate the management models that regulate harvest of key commercial species, thereby ensuring that marine resources remain healthy and productive for future generations.

Monitoring results in 2025 confirmed that red and green spiny lobster and brown sea cucumber populations remain healthy in the GMR, demonstrating that science-based management is working (see table below). Galápagos is now the only place in the world where the brown sea cucumber is harvested after successful recovery, generating nearly USD $3 million annually for local fishers, while maintaining sustainable population levels.

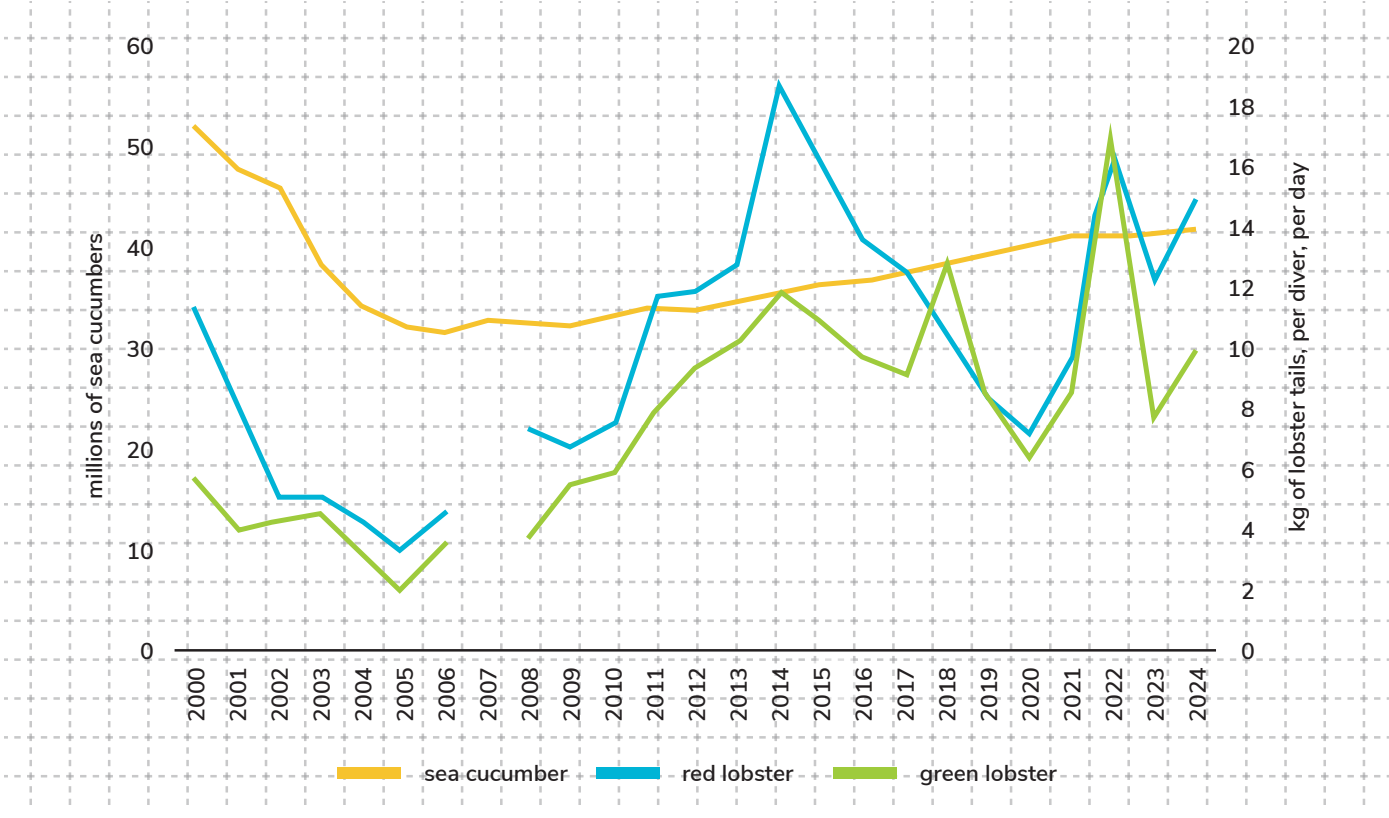
OCEAN SCIENCE INFORMING NATIONAL POLICY

The Ocean Account for Ecuador's Insular Exclusive Economic Zone, a study developed through an inter-institutional initiative led by CDF, gained strong recognition from the Government of Ecuador in 2025 and was highlighted at the plenary of the United Nations Ocean Conference (UNOC3) in Nice. This pioneering study quantifies the economic and ecological value of marine ecosystem services, strengthening decision-making that is aligned with SDG14. It also sets a national precedent, encouraging the development of ocean accounts across Ecuador's entire Exclusive Economic Zone.

EMPOWERING SUSTAINABLE SEAFOOD LEADERS

Last year, CDF's EmprendeMar program supported 50 seafood entrepreneurs through business exchanges. Five ventures also received seed funding totaling USD $5,500 to scale environmentally and socially responsible seafood enterprises. Meanwhile, seven Blue Pioneers fellowships totaling USD $54,000 funded graduate research on sustainable fisheries in the Eastern Tropical Pacific.

25 YEARS OF GALÁPAGOS FISHERIES DATA



Caption: *CDF started monitoring fisheries data in 2000. In 2006 monitoring was transferred to the GNPD–this represents one of the longest running commercial fish abundance data trends in the world.*

Clockwise: Sea food entrepreneurs of CDF's EmprendeMar program from Isabela and Santa Cruz. Bottom right: Fisherman testing Shellcatch tracking camera on board his fishing boat.
Photo: Carlos Espinosa / CDF

Green lobster (*Panulirus gracilis*).
Photo: Billy Bensted-Smith / CDF

Workshop with women agroproducers and local tourism authorities in Bellavista, Santa Cruz Island, 2025.
Photo: Mara Speece / CDF

CONNECTING CONSERVATION WITH COMMUNITIES AND LIVELIHOODS

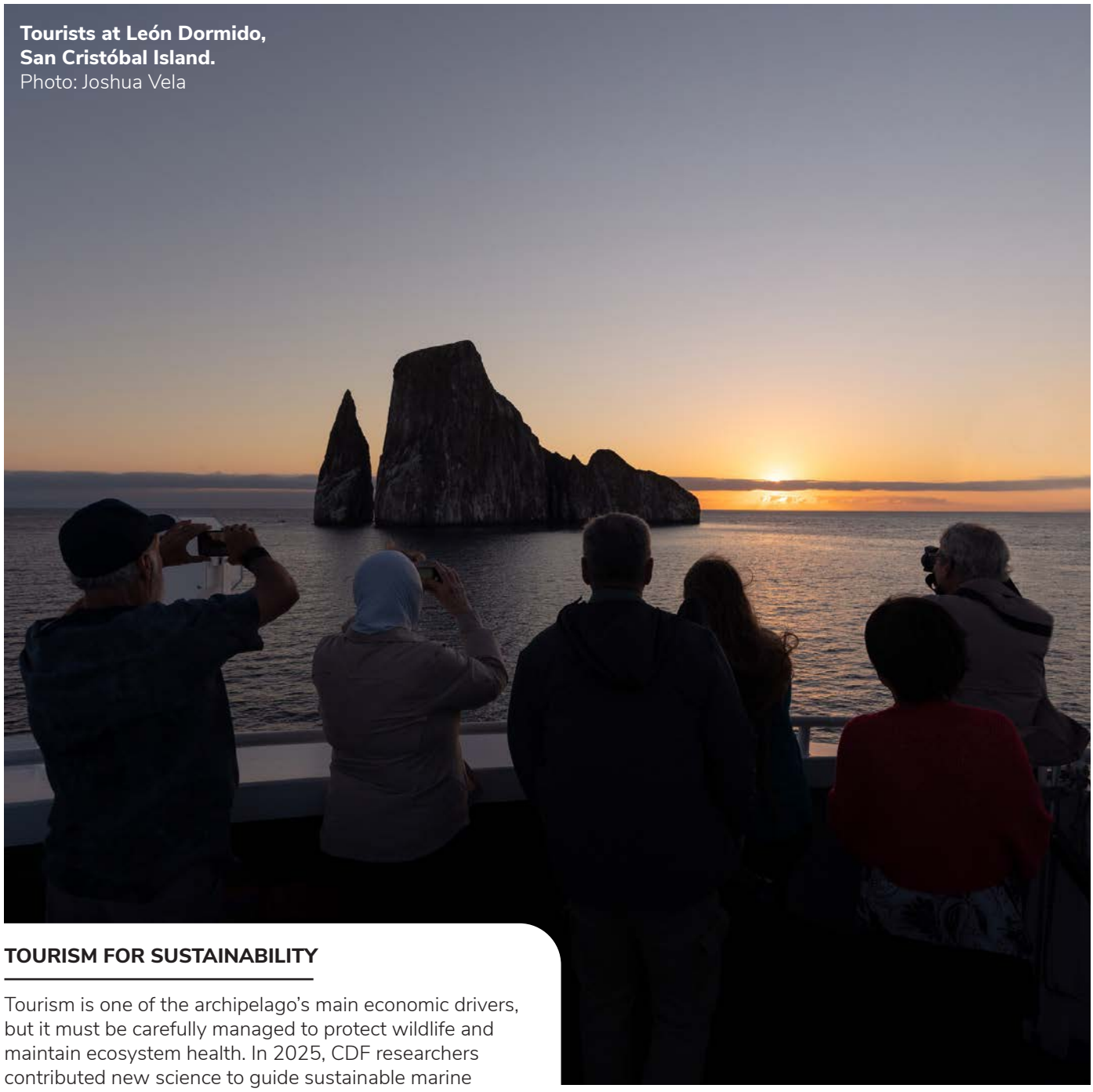
Effective conservation in Galápagos depends not only on protecting ecosystems, but also on understanding the social and economic systems that are dependent on them. In 2025, CDF researchers continued expanding work that links natural sciences with livelihoods, tourism, and local economies—generating evidence to help balance conservation goals with sustainable development throughout the archipelago.

AGROFORESTRY AND SUSTAINABLE AGRICULTURE

Working with partners including Wageningen University and Penn State University, our scientists studied the challenges and opportunities facing small-scale agriculture in the highlands of Santa Cruz. A workshop with women farmers explored barriers to agribusiness development, highlighting gaps in training, regulation, and institutional coordination while identifying opportunities to strengthen agritourism as a livelihood that benefits both rural communities and biodiversity.

Researchers also analyzed 17 coffee farms to understand the spread of coffee rust (*Hemileia vastatrix*), which represents a major threat to local production. The study revealed that disease dynamics are shaped not only by environmental conditions but also by farm management practices and abandoned agricultural lands. These findings provide practical guidance for improving crop resilience and strengthening sustainable coffee production in Galápagos.

Teresa Gaona at La Viña farm, El Cascajo, Santa Cruz Island—one of many female farmers working with her family to produce coffee and cacao, and with CDF to demonstrate the benefits of agrotourism.
Photo: Mara Speece / CDF



Tourists at León Dormido, San Cristóbal Island.
Photo: Joshua Vela

TOURISM FOR SUSTAINABILITY

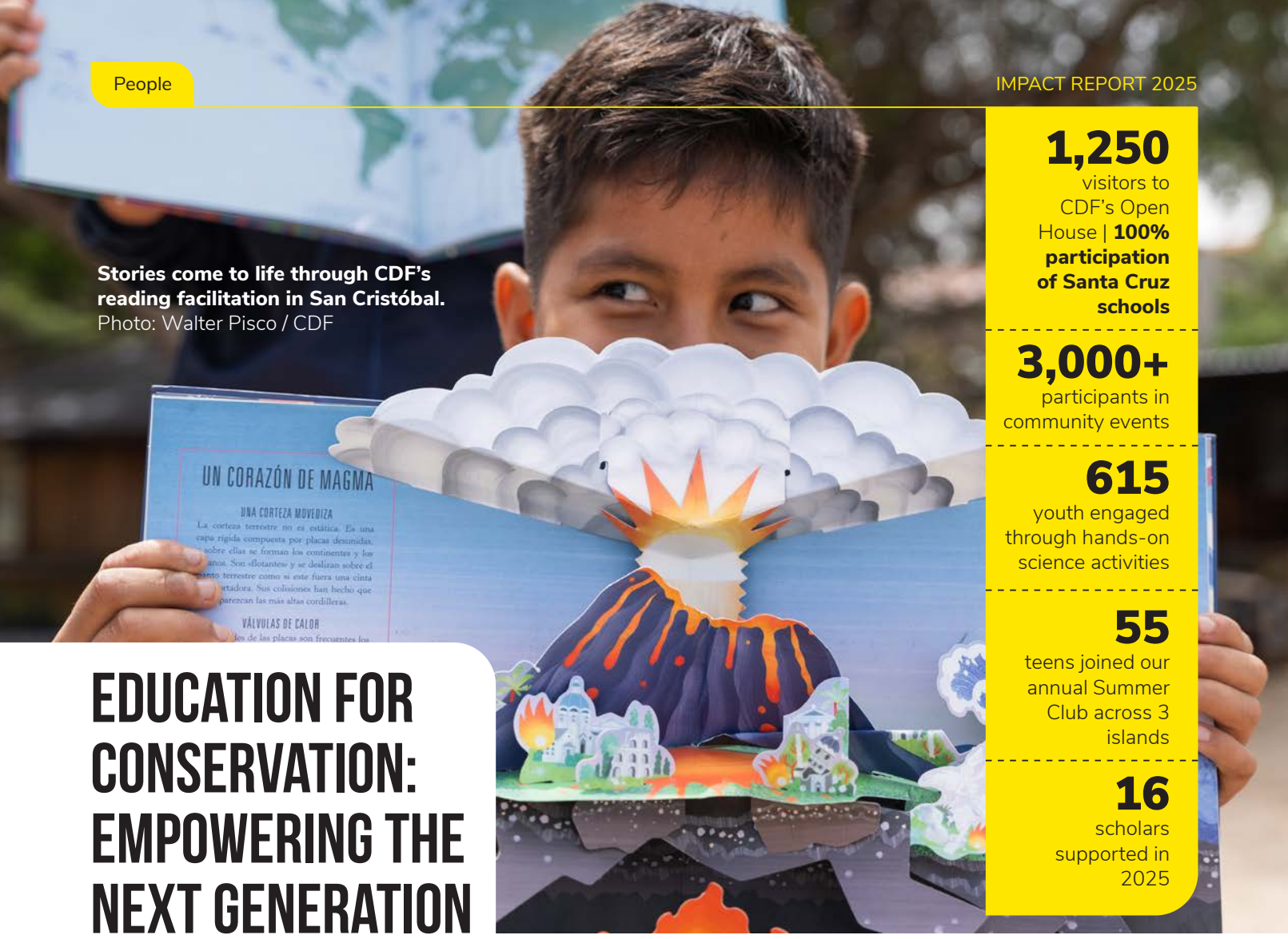
Tourism is one of the archipelago's main economic drivers, but it must be carefully managed to protect wildlife and maintain ecosystem health. In 2025, CDF researchers contributed new science to guide sustainable marine tourism with two initiatives. First, a doctoral study conducted with the University of La Laguna in the Canary Islands, Spain, analyzed marine mammal-watching practices in the Galápagos Marine Reserve using 425 visitor surveys, 106 company questionnaires, and 17 boat surveys, generating knowledge about how this activity and recommendations to minimize disturbance to marine mammals.

Second, using the Photovoice method—where participants use photos and discussions to share their perspectives—CDF researchers worked with 20 naturalist guides in Galápagos, with support from Leuphana University in Germany, to better understand the role of guides in strengthening environmental education and the cultural value of conservation with visitors. Core findings showed three main relational values: stewardship and meaningful experiences; relaxation and recreation; and educational, cultural heritage and identity.

UNDERSTANDING THE VALUE OF GALÁPAGOS FOR NATIONAL VISITORS

In 2025, CDF researchers studied how Ecuadorian visitors—an understudied demographic—value access to the islands following the increase in the Galápagos National Park entrance fee in 2024 (from USD 6 to 30).

Based on 1,002 surveys, the study found that national visitors would be willing to pay an average of USD 79.5—more than double the current USD 30 entrance fee to come to Galápagos. These surprising findings provide important evidence for policy discussions on sustainable financing, helping decision-makers balance tourism access with the resources needed to protect the archipelago and maintain the health of its unique ecosystems.



Stories come to life through CDF's reading facilitation in San Cristóbal.
Photo: Walter Pisco / CDF

1,250 visitors to CDF's Open House | **100% participation of Santa Cruz schools**

3,000+ participants in community events

615 youth engaged through hands-on science activities

55 teens joined our annual Summer Club across 3 islands

16 scholars supported in 2025

EDUCATION FOR CONSERVATION: EMPOWERING THE NEXT GENERATION

Education turns science into action by connecting communities and global collaboration to protect fragile ecosystems like Galápagos. In 2025, the Charles Darwin Foundation (CDF) strengthened education as a core pillar of its mission with the arrival of a new Director of Education, marking a step change in how education contributes to conservation impact.

Building on CDF's longstanding Education and Community Outreach Program, which has pioneered community engagement and environmental education in Galápagos, this next phase expands CDF's vision through stronger partnerships with national and international universities to create opportunities for visiting courses at the Charles Darwin Research Station (CDRS). These programs establish CDF as a laboratory for global learning, connecting international and national students with Galápagos science and local communities while building meaningful partnerships.

By bringing together local education, global academic programs, and hands-on conservation, CDF is shaping a comprehensive education platform—one that strengthens community engagement while training the next generation of conservation leaders.

SCIENCE AND EDUCATION WITH THE COMMUNITY

In 2025, CDF deepened its connection with Galápagos communities, engaging thousands of participants across all four inhabited islands through hands-on science, education, and citizen engagement.

Through science clubs in Santa Cruz and Isabela, and the new Endemic Art Club in San Cristóbal, teenagers explored conservation through science, creativity, and critical thinking. A total of 70 sessions reached an average of 36 participants each, while the Leaders Club trained 6 new youth—expanding a growing network of 21 young conservation leaders, most now pursuing university studies. For the first time this year, the clubs of San Cristóbal and Isabela did an exchange with Santa Cruz to foster inter-island learning and connection.

CDF also brought science directly into communities. Through Traveling Libraries and Collections, more than 300 members of the community accessed 400 educational resources, while public events—including our annual Open House and Christmas Bird Count—engaged over 3,000 participants, fostering curiosity and active participation in conservation.

Hands-on learning remained central. Across three islands, 615 participants took part in experiential science activities, complemented by citizen science initiatives such as bird counts and microplastic monitoring—connecting local communities directly to ongoing research.

SCHOLARSHIPS: STRENGTHENING EDUCATIONAL PATHWAYS

CDF continues to invest in the next generation of conservation leaders, and especially locally. The Fernando Ortiz Scholarship, active since 1971, supported nine Galápagos students in 2025, creating pathways for young island residents to pursue higher education and return as future conservation professionals.

At the graduate level, CDF awarded seven Blue Pioneers Scholarships to support research on fisheries, governance, and marine ecosystems—while also building a new generation of skilled professionals in marine conservation. Closely linked to CDF's work with the Galápagos National Park Directorate, this program strengthens the scientific, academic and human capacity needed to inform fisheries management and decision-making in Galápagos and the Eastern Tropical Pacific. Now entering its third year, the program launched a new call in late 2025, with a focus on supporting women pursuing master's and PhD degrees in seafood systems.

Learn more about our Scholarships

CDF also launched the Sustainability Fellowship for a second time in 2025, which will bring interdisciplinary researchers to Galápagos to develop solutions that tackle social and environmental challenges.

HIGHER EDUCATION: GALÁPAGOS AS A LIVING CLASSROOM

In 2025, CDF launched a structured Higher Education platform, in order to establish itself as a long-term academic partner for universities interested in connecting academic learning with real world conservation in Galápagos.

Early collaborations with universities in the United States and Latin America mark the beginning of a program designed to grow in scale and impact in the coming years. Colgate University focused on STEM education and place-based teaching innovation; Universidad del Rosario on field exploration of geological origins, biodiversity, and evolution through direct engagement with CDF's research. With the University of Hawai'i, CDF delivered a visiting immersive research program focused on invasion biology in Galápagos where students engaged directly with the ecological and management challenges of invasive species in tropical island systems. These partnerships will continue into 2026, with a focus on refining and strengthening program quality with additional partnerships expected to join.

Anchored in Galápagos as a living laboratory, this platform aims to build enduring academic partnerships while advancing Galápagos as a global reference for place based learning, where diverse learning communities from Ecuador and the rest of the world engage directly with science, local communities, and real conservation challenges to drive meaningful change.

University of Hawai'i student in the field during an immersive invasion biology study program in Galápagos.
Photo: Mara Speece / CDF

CDF's 2025 Open House.
Photo: Rashid Cruz / CDF

WHERE STORIES COME TO LIFE

In 2025, we brought stories to life through "Galápagos Sounds Like a Story", a new participatory project developed with the Ecuadorian Zoological Foundation. Together with 15 children from a rural school in Santa Cruz, we co-created an audio story through 14 hands-on sessions filled with reading, games, art, and nature-based experiences. Now in its final editing stage, this project amplifies children's voices while strengthening their creativity and connection to conservation. It will be published in 2026.

OUR LIBRARY, ARCHIVE AND MUSEUM

The Charles Darwin Foundation's campus on Santa Cruz Island hosts one of only three libraries in Galápagos and serves as the custodian of multimedia archives, historical objects, and the world's largest bibliographic collection dedicated to the archipelago.

In 2025, the Library, Archives, and Museum team led a major effort to organize, assess, and consolidate this documentary and scientific heritage. These actions improved information management while ensuring that decades of knowledge about Galápagos remain accessible to support research, education, and conservation decision-making.

PRESERVING SCIENTIFIC AND CULTURAL LEGACIES

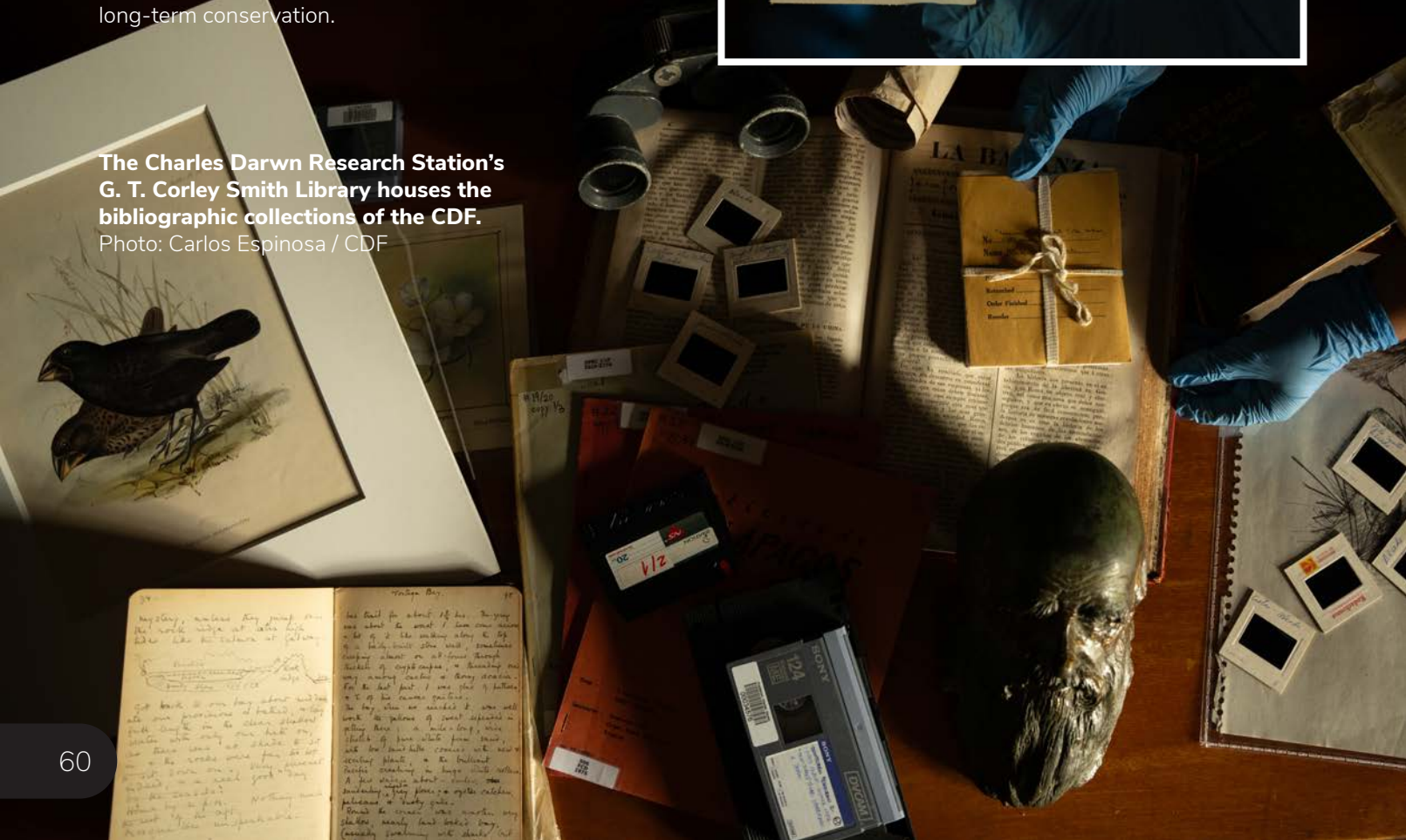
In 2025, our team preserved key knowledge collections that strengthen the Foundation's documentary heritage. A major milestone was the preliminary classification of the Ermanno Zechettin Fund – Marita Velarde Collection, a donation from residents of Isabela Island. The team inventoried 750 books, which will be integrated into the library system in 2026, expanding resources for researchers and the community.

A second important collection, the Cristóbal Bonifaz Fund was also incorporated into the Historical Archive. Donated by Bonifaz's family in honor of the Foundation's former Vice President and one of its co-founders, the collection includes 2,700 documents and nine digital photographs, now preserved following archival standards to ensure their long-term conservation.

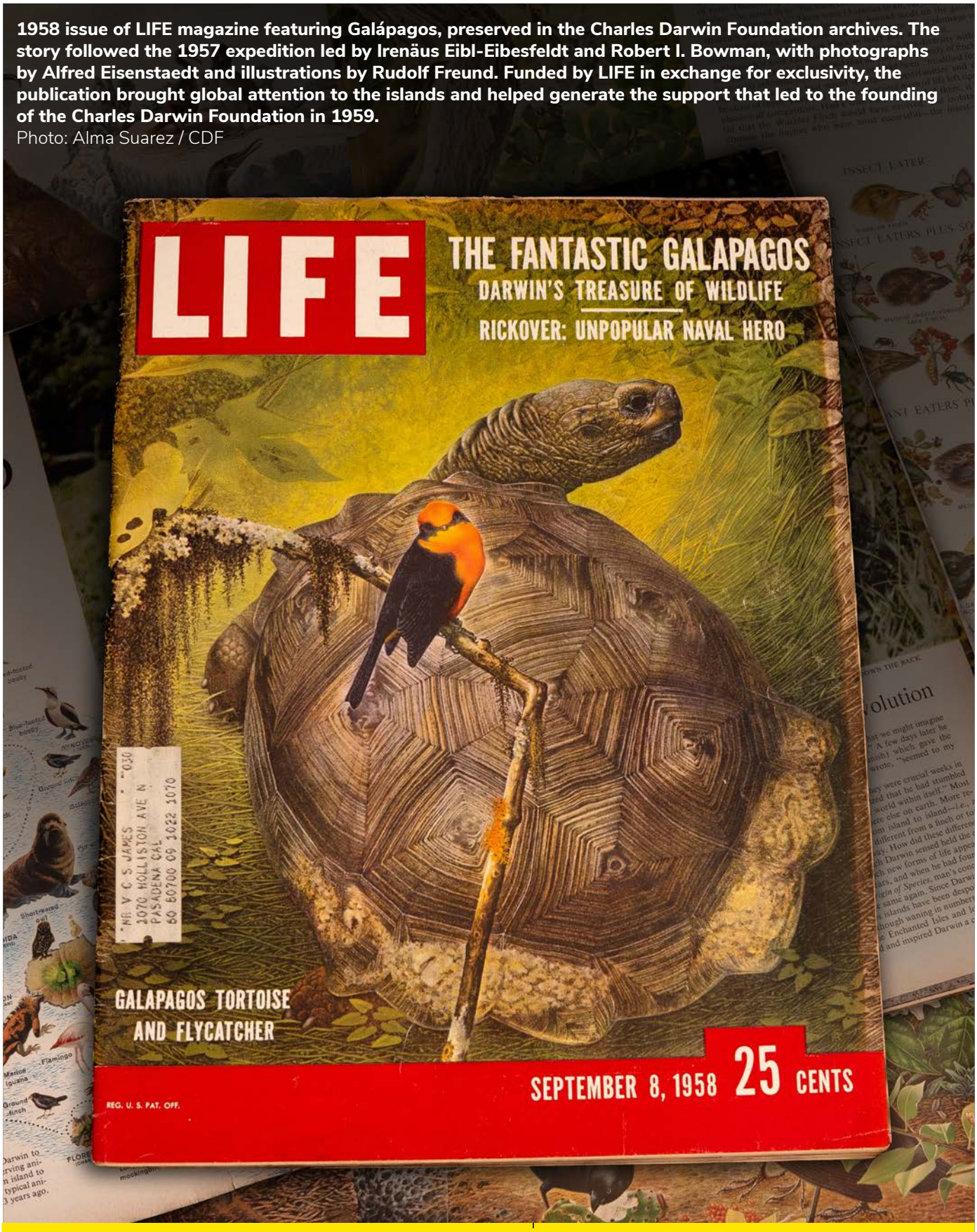
STRENGTHENING THE HISTORICAL ARCHIVE

Our team advanced the organization and preservation of documents essential to the institution's scientific legacy. During the year, 167.63 linear meters of archival documentation were identified providing for a clearer sense of the archive's scale and supporting improved planning for its long-term management and preservation.

Thanks to these efforts, the library currently manages 14,456 cataloged records, including 4,058 scientific articles, 1,910 digital documents, 1,932 publications on Galápagos, and more than 3,100 general reference titles. Together, these resources strengthen the library's role as a key hub for scientific information about Galápagos, supporting research and education.



The Charles Darwn Research Station's G. T. Corley Smith Library houses the bibliographic collections of the CDF.
Photo: Carlos Espinosa / CDF



1958 issue of LIFE magazine featuring Galápagos, preserved in the Charles Darwin Foundation archives. The story followed the 1957 expedition led by Irenäus Eibl-Eibesfeldt and Robert I. Bowman, with photographs by Alfred Eisenstaedt and illustrations by Rudolf Freund. Funded by LIFE in exchange for exclusivity, the publication brought global attention to the islands and helped generate the support that led to the founding of the Charles Darwin Foundation in 1959.
Photo: Alma Suarez / CDF

Galapagueana: CDF's Galapagueana is a digital and bilingual platform dedicated to the recovery, management, and dissemination of the archipelago's cultural heritage, and its social and scientific memory.

Visit our library
Located in the heart of the Charles Darwin Research Station's campus, our library is open to the public Monday through Friday from 8:00-12:30 and 14:00-17:00, excluding public holidays. Entrance is free of charge.

The Charles Darwin Research Station team, 2025.
Photo: Carlos Espinosa / CDF

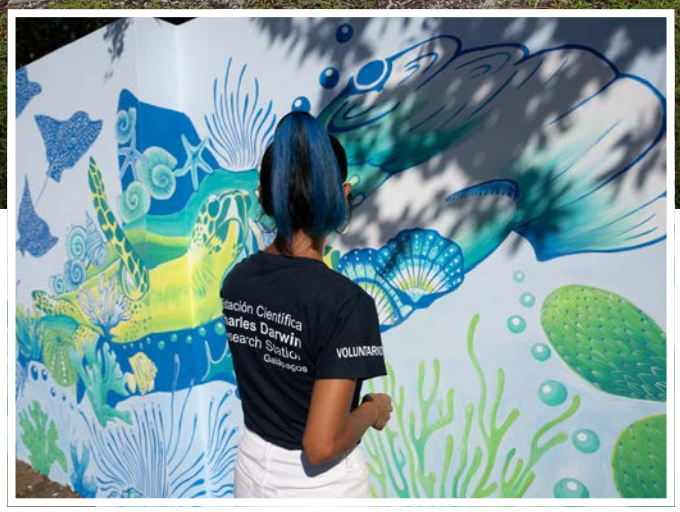
OUR TEAM

CDF STAFF

Behind every scientific insight and conservation milestone is a team of people committed to safeguarding Galápagos.

In 2025, the Charles Darwin Foundation employed 135 full-time staff, combining scientific expertise with the operational capacity needed to deliver complex conservation work in one of the most remote environments in the world. Nearly half of our team (48%) work directly in science, supported by colleagues across operations, finance, HR, communications, fundraising, and IT—ensuring that research translates into real-world impact.

Strengthening local talent and gender equity remains central to how we grow. Women represented 53% of our science staff and 51% of the organization overall, with gender parity in leadership positions. At the same time, CDF continues to deepen its roots in the archipelago: 65% of staff are Galápagos residents, reflecting our commitment to building long-term local capacity. The remainder of our team brings national and international expertise, with 22% from mainland Ecuador and 13% from abroad. Within science teams, 40% are Galápagos residents, ensuring that local knowledge and global expertise work hand in hand.



VOLUNTEERS

Volunteers remain an essential part of CDF's work, contributing energy, skills, and fresh perspectives to our research and conservation programs. In 2025, we welcomed 99 volunteers, with 94% supporting scientific teams. This group reflects the growing reach of our programs: 34% were Galápagos residents, 19% from mainland Ecuador, and 47% from other countries—creating a diverse learning environment that strengthens both science and community engagement.

53% of our staff are women

135 full time employees, 65% from Galápagos

99 volunteers in 2025

SENIOR STAFF

OUR MANAGEMENT TEAM

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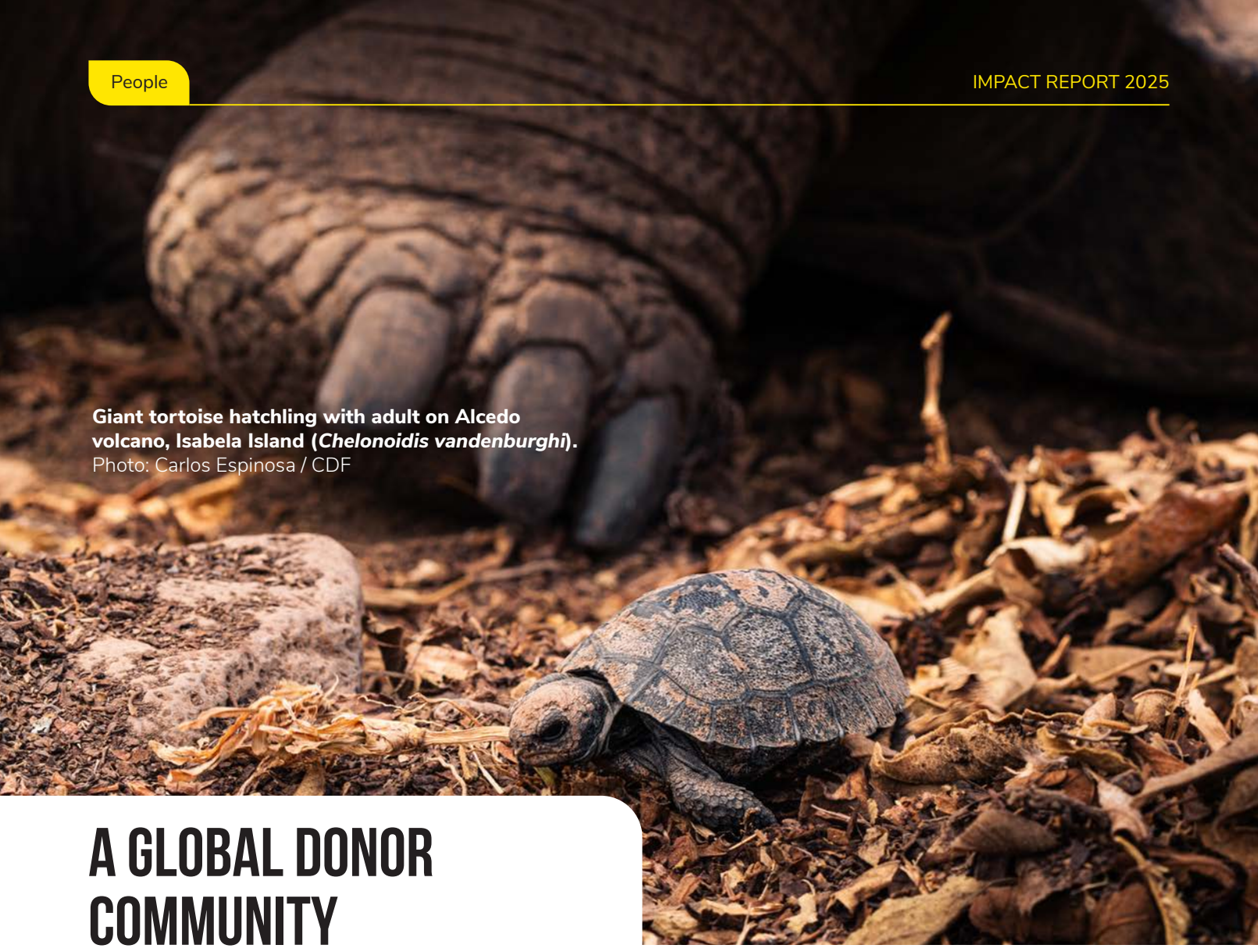
Fernando Araújo | Finance Director
María José Barragán Paladines | Science Director
María Auxiliadora Farías | Deputy Director of Science
Jim Boyle | Chief Development Officer
María Cristina Guerra R. | Human Resources Director
Ambre Tanty-Lamothe | Communications and Strategic Affairs Director
Pablo Kerblat-Bonnet | Education Director

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATORS

Stuart Banks | Deep-ocean exploration & conservation
Charlotte Causton | Invasive invertebrates
Birgit Fessl | Landbird conservation
María Igual | Mangrove Finch conservation
Heinke Jäger | Ecological restoration & terrestrial invasive species
Patricia Jaramillo Díaz | Ecological restoration & conservation (Galápagos Verde 2050)
Gustavo Jiménez | Marine & lagoon bird conservation
Inti Keith | Marine biodiversity research
Nicolás Moity | Mangrove ecology and climate change
Andrea Muñoz | Sustainability for conservation
Macarena Parra | Sea turtle conservation
Courtney Pike | Giant Tortoise Ecology Program
Miguel Pinto | Natural History Collections
Jorge Ramírez | Sustainable fisheries
Pelayo Salinas de León | Shark ecology & conservation
Miriam San José | Santa Fe island recovery
Gabriel Vianna | Shark ecology & conservation
César Viteri | Sustainable fisheries



Giant tortoise hatchling with adult on Alcedo volcano, Isabela Island (*Chelonoidis vandenburghi*).
Photo: Carlos Espinosa / CDF

A GLOBAL DONOR COMMUNITY

Conservation in Galápagos is only possible because of a global community that believes in it.

In 2025, 1,085 donors—including 699 new supporters—came together to support the Charles Darwin Foundation's (CDF) mission. Their collective generosity resulted in more than $13.5 million raised and committed, providing the foundation for the science, conservation, and education work that protects this extraordinary archipelago.

Behind these numbers is something more powerful: a growing community of individuals, families, foundations, and partners choosing to invest in the long-term future of Galápagos, a unique place with an immense potential to impact our world by leading by example.

A GROWING COMMUNITY OF SUPPORT

This year, our donor community grew significantly—not just in size, but in engagement. Supporters joined us from around the world, bringing new energy, perspectives, and commitment to our work.

From global gatherings to small, intimate moments of connection, donors engaged directly with the science that they make possible. From the Global Gathering for Galápagos—which brought together more than 60 groups simultaneously across multiple countries online, with an anchor event at the Houston Zoo Galápagos exhibit hosting more than 100 guests—to immersive, specialized expeditions in the archipelago, these efforts brought supporters closer to the realities—and urgency—of science-led conservation.

These experiences are more than moments of connection. They build a shared understanding of what is at stake, and a collective responsibility to act.

PARTNERSHIPS THAT SUSTAIN LONG-TERM IMPACT

At the heart of our work are long-term partners whose sustained support allows us to think beyond annual cycles and invest in lasting solutions.

In 2025, continued commitments from strategic partners such as the COmON Foundation, alongside significant contributions from philanthropic families and institutions, provided the stability needed to advance both core operations and ambitious new initiatives. These partnerships enable us to not only respond to immediate challenges, but also plan for the future with confidence.

At the same time, new partners stepped forward at critical moments. Following the unexpected loss of USAID funding, a group of committed donors—including Rolex, MAC3 Impact Philanthropies, Re:wild, the Wanderlust Fund and others—mobilized quickly to ensure the continuity of key conservation programs, particularly in shark and fisheries research.

This kind of responsiveness reflects the strength of a donor community that is not only generous, but deeply engaged with the work that we do at CDF.

ENABLING THE NEXT CHAPTER

As we look ahead, this growing community of support will play a critical role in enabling the next phase of conservation in Galápagos—from scaling restoration efforts on Floreana to advancing new initiatives that strengthen our scientific capacity at sea. A key priority will be securing support for a dedicated research vessel, allowing us to expand our marine science and better understand—and protect—the vast ocean ecosystems that define the archipelago.

At the same time, we are continuing to grow and deepen our global donor community, with a particular focus on strengthening engagement in Europe—ensuring that support for Galápagos conservation reflects the truly international importance of this unique ecosystem.

From the development of a new Museum Experience at the Charles Darwin Research Station to expanded investments in education and community engagement, these efforts reflect a shared ambition: to build the long-term foundations needed to protect Galápagos for generations to come.

WITH GRATITUDE

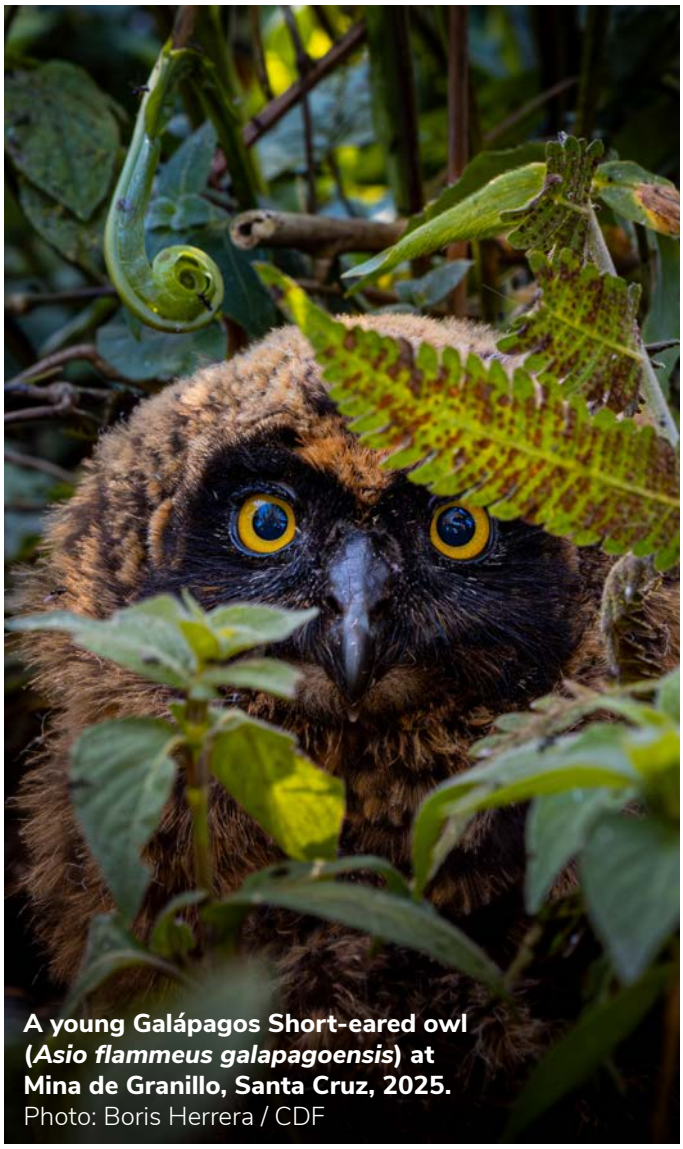
To our donors, partners, and supporters around the world—**thank you**.

Your generosity does more than fund projects. It sustains a vision: that science, collaboration, and long-term commitment can protect one of the most extraordinary places on Earth.

In a year that brought both challenges and opportunities, your support made it possible for us to move forward with confidence, ambition, and purpose.

Together, we are shaping the future of Galápagos, and impacting the world.

CDF's travelling libraries in San Cristóbal Island.
Photo: Walter Pisco / CDF



A young Galápagos Short-eared owl (*Asio flammeus galapagoensis*) at Mina de Granillo, Santa Cruz, 2025.
Photo: Boris Herrera / CDF

JOIN OUR COMMUNITY OF SUPPORTERS

Around the world, a growing community of donors is investing in science-led conservation to protect Galápagos—making possible the science, partnerships, and long-term conservation this unique archipelago depends on. Their support is more than financial. It reflects a shared commitment to safeguarding one of the most extraordinary places on Earth.

We invite you to be part of this community.

DONATE

to support science led conservation

LEARN

how you can help us make a difference at **www.darwinfoundation.org**

Your support helps ensure that Galápagos remains protected for generations to come.

OUR DONORS

The Charles Darwin Foundation Board of Directors, thank the following for their generous support of our vital work in the financial year 2025, including those who have chosen to remain anonymous.

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Galápagos penguin (*Spheniscus mendiculus*).
Photo: Rashid Cruz

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See our full list of General Assembly members here

Photo: Alma Suarez / CDF

AUDITED FINANCIALS

	2025	2024
INCOME		
Applied restricted income	**7,457,042**	5,861,215
Unrestricted pledged income	**2,559,483**	2,674,450
Unrestricted other income	**1,417,778**	614,895
Institutional promotions	**463.144**	463,144
Other income	**219,256**	269,645
TOTAL	**9.883.350**	9,883,350
EXPENDITURE		
Science, conservation and education*	**8,645,158**	7,189,008
Fundraising	**552,159**	393,367
Other expenditure	**2,872,863**	2,200,500
Extraordinary	-	-
TOTAL	**12,070,180**	9,782,875
***Science, conservation and education**		
Cost of scientific projects	**3,910,639**	4,893,429
Cost of other projects	**3,546,403**	967,787
Services to scientists	**83,151**	344,617
Laboratory and collections	**1,104,964**	983,176
TOTAL	**8,645,158**	7,189,008

STATEMENT OF FINANCIAL POSITION

ASSETS		
Cash/cash equivalents	**10,553,826**	9,405,810
Other current assets	**888,736**	1,449,310
Non-current assets	**6,130,059**	3,938,029
TOTAL	**17,572,622**	14,793,148

LIABILITIES AND EQUITY		
Deferred income	**7,629,879**	8,561,799
Other current liabilities	**3,246,509**	3,240,629
Employee benefits	**961,442**	786,592
Equity	**5,734,792**	2,204,128
TOTAL	**17,572,622**	14,793,148

Nazca Boobies (*Sula granti*).
Photo: Mara Speece / CDF

PROTECT GALÁPAGOS, IMPACT THE WORLD

Thank you for your interest in our work—and for caring about the future of Galápagos.

Everything we do is made possible by a global community donors, partners, collaborators, and individuals who choose to stand with us. People who believe that science, commitment, and collaboration can protect one of the most extraordinary places on Earth.

If this resonates with you, we invite you to be part of it.

DONATE
to support science led conservation in Galápagos

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Discover how you can get involved at www.darwinfoundation.org

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Thank you for helping protect Galápagos—for today and for the future.

Galápagos giant tortoise *(C. vandenburghi)*, Isabela island
Photo: Rashid Cruz

Swallow-tailed Gull (*Creagrus furcatus*), Genovesa island.
Photo: Mara Speece / CDF

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Rakan Zahawi
Ambre Tanty-Lamothe

EDITOR
Ambre Tanty-Lamothe
Daniela Ibarra

GRAPHIC DESIGN AND MAPS
Boris Herrera

FRONT COVER IMAGE (FLIGHTLESS CORMORANT)
Joshua Vela

BACK COVER IMAGE (FLAMINGO)
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PHOTOGRAPHY CREDITS
Alexandra Negoita / CDF
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www.darwinfoundation.org
cdrs@fcdarwin.org.ec

Puerto Ayora, Galápagos, Ecuador
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