



Promoting biodiversity conservation among children

Environmental Education in the Galápagos*



Returned Peace Corps Volunteers Ryan & Michelle Finchum



Sealion in Galápagos during visits that the environmental education Clubs did.

Former Volunteer couple Michelle and Ryan Finchum worked in the early 2000s. They created environmental education clubs on San Cristobal Island in the Galapagos.

The Finchums worked through the island's Center for Environmental Education (CEA), which helped bridge the gap between the Charles Darwin Research Station and the community by informing the public about the station's work and promoting conservation.

Many of the children on the island took for granted the beautiful environment in which they lived and had not visited the different places of interest that tourists

usually visit, such as the beaches or the Interpretation Center built in 1998 which cost 3 million dollars.

When Michelle Finchum took members of her environmental education clubs to the sandy white beaches of San Cristobal Island, she imagined what would happen. When the children played in the water, an inevitable visitor would appear: a baby sea lion. Like a shy child, feeling cut off from the fun, the pup would stick his head out of the water and stare at the children. A moment later the children just began to notice.

Their eyes connected with the pup and they screamed excitedly. Satisfied by the recognition, the pup swam away happily. "This is the interaction between species that you just don't find anywhere in the world, it is amazing," said Ryan Finchum, Michelle's husband. This was one of many experiences for the children in the environmental education clubs where the Volunteer couple taught the girls and boys in an experiential way, bringing the classroom into nature.

The Finchums spearheaded the campaign. They worked with local schools to reinforce the education students received about the Galapagos environment.

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The blue-footed booby (*Sula nebouxii*) is an endemic species of the Galapagos Islands

When the school day was over, the center became the meeting place for various clubs created by the couple that developed activities to educate about the marine reserve, the effect of species introductions on the environment, and the influence of humans on the islands.

In this spirit, Ryan and Michelle created the "Young Scientists on Board" program for students in the club. They made an agreement with the travel agencies so that the students, by participating as tourists on the tours and listening to the guides, would feel like they were living in a special place.

"We can teach everything we want about environmental education, but if they can't appreciate the natural beauty that tourists actually see, how can they really want to protect it?" Michelle said.

** Taken and adapted from the Magazine "40 years of Peace Corps Ecuador" of John Zorovich.*