



“Musings by Melissa”
From the Desk of the NCD President
June 2016



Last month, I had an amazing and privileged opportunity to be one of three faculty leaders on a 12-day trip to Quito, Ecuador, and the Galapagos Islands. Eighteen students, two of whom were graduate students, from all different backgrounds and majors came together to explore conservation and biodiversity in one of science’s most sacred locations. Before the trip, the students read and discussed four books, including *A Sand County Almanac* (Aldo Leopold), *The Future of Life* (E.O. Wilson), *The Beak of the Finch* (Jonathan Weiner), and *Galapagos at the Crossroads* (Carol Ann Bassett). Each book provided food for thought on environmental ethics, the value of the Galapagos, and the contemporary issues that these islands face. While in country, students and the instructors were led by naturalist guides as we hiked volcanoes, snorkeled with marine life, visited tortoise preserves and breeding centers, and had countless up-close encounters with all of the wildlife you see in the documentaries. It was truly an experience that is difficult to express in mere words and one that I’ll never forget!



But I think the most lasting core memory that I’ll carry with me from this trip was seeing how students began to think more about their role in conserving our future and our natural resource heritage. I witnessed how their thoughts and behaviors changed based on what they saw and learned. Many remarked that they now had a greater appreciation for the prairies or natural resources of their home states (typically, South Dakota, Minnesota, or Iowa) after seeing the Galapagos. They were actually keeping each other in check, saying things like “Did you turn off your air conditioner when you left your hotel room?”



So, this transformation has really gotten me to think: “How can we recreate this Galapagos spirit without leaving North America or even the boundaries of the North Central Division or our home states? How can we get the public to care and act in the same ways as my students?”

Interestingly, in the course of my own journey, I learned that the majority of Galapagueños (locals of the Galapagos) aren’t aware of the uniqueness of their islands. As one of our guides pointed out, the schools are largely brick and devoid of windows, which is odd when you consider these kids have one of the most remarkable outdoor classrooms at their fingertips. So, if these folks are indifferent to their natural resource heritage, is there any chance that we can get American and Canadian children to care about theirs?



I think (or at least hope) there is. We've made some strides, as evidence by the students on my trip. But we can't stop; we can't give up. Whether as individuals or professionals who care about our natural resources or as unit within a larger professional society, continual recommitment to quality education and outreach is essential to sustain our future and the future of those who follow.

Thank you for allowing me a little "soapbox" time. I know this blog has quite a different feel than my previous posts. As one of our guides said to my group, "You are all ambassadors of Ecuador now." So, in that vein, I highly recommend visiting the Galapagos Islands and mainland Ecuador at least once in your life. The people, food, history, biogeography, and scenery are second to none! And, who knows, maybe you'll learn more about how to share your passion for natural resources with others when you return. 😊 If you've been there before, feel free to send me your journey stories!

Until July....

Melissa

