

The social, economic, and legal aspects of Galápagos conservation

by Jorge ANHALZER¹

Galápagos is a place that is known and recognized the world over. When I visited Nepal and Bhutan in late February [1998] people from the national parks of those countries were as glad to see a representative of the Charles Darwin Foundation — which they had heard so much about — as I was to be welcomed in those faraway places.

During this symposium you will hear a variety of interesting and well researched scientific presentations and technical papers. And, of course, it was this kind of work which helped make Galápagos famous in the first place. Such scientific research is also the backbone of the management plan of the Galápagos National Park, which in turn has ensured that these islands are still one of the most outstanding national parks in the world.

On my visit to Asia, I travelled with some excellent naturalist guides, but I must admit that I felt very proud of the professional standards of our own Galápagos naturalist guides, and of the scope and depth of their knowledge. However, since 1972 when Galápagos became a Province of Ecuador, problems of different kinds have developed, sometimes in unpredictable ways. And it is these lesser known issues that I want to touch on today.

The hazards were of such a nature that the scientific community was reluctant to tackle them head on. Politics, demographics, and tourism came to the fore, creating new realities that neither the country nor the world were prepared for. No plans and no money were available to address these threats in a way that would prevent the archipelago from going the way of several other well known national parks.

The linkage between conservation and people is becoming more evident every day, and we have to deal with these changes if we want to be a significant force for conservation in the future. Our position of leadership in the community, and the high level of credibility that we enjoy, makes us increasingly obliged to assume such a role, making us partners in guiding the destiny of Galápagos.

Fortunately, we are in a good position to respond to the challenge. According to a study conducted by WWF and its Ecuadorean partner, Fundación Natura, the Charles

Darwin Research Station and the Galápagos National Park are the two institutions that enjoy the highest credibility of many private and public bodies in Galápagos. When I first took over as President of CDF, I felt that the station and the community were like Siamese twins joined in the back, each one looking in a different direction. Now I feel that the operation to separate the twins has been successful. We are both looking in almost the same direction, although we are seeing different things.

The work of Robert Bensted-Smith, Pippa Heylings, and Felipe Cruz with the Grupo Núcleo deserves special mention. The participatory involvement of this group can be considered a milestone. Their activity in the days of defining the Special Galápagos Law was crucial.

The involvement of the local community in moulding their own future is the best way to ensure that conservation can be sustainable, and defended from within. Those of you who were in Galápagos in November [1997] could hardly believe that fishermen were asking us to intervene on their behalf — the very same people who were throwing rocks at us a year before, and were threatening to burn down the station! Our challenge now is to prevent that happening again, by continuously keeping the community aware and informed and so pre-empting the appearance of populist politicians who can do an incredible amount of harm in a very short time.

Galápagos is undoubtedly a powerful magnet for immigration. Not only is it virtually a dollar economy, with high levels of employment at salaries well above those on the continent, but it also enjoys a higher level of welfare than the continent (according to WWF and Fundación Natura). And there are more schools and teachers, and more hospitals and doctors per capita. However, incredible as it might seem, the subjects that children study in elementary schools in the islands are exactly the same as you would find in any little village in the Andean highlands. Students are thus unaware of what makes the place where they live unique, and what needs to be done to conserve the habitats and ecosystems.

Education is probably the single most important part of our job. It becomes even more so following introduction

of the new law that makes it more difficult to bring in professionals from outside. People in Galápagos must learn to love their habitat. This understanding, more than any law, will facilitate our task as conservationists. But bringing it about requires a lot more than good intentions. It needs top-notch, motivated people — and, of course, a good deal of money.

What about the Special Galápagos Law? Some welcome it as a good law, while others are less sanguine. Personally, I would choose the first option, though some reservations and concerns do arise from an analysis of the legislation. One thing is certain: a great deal of hard work went into developing the new law. Endless meetings, frequent ego trips, lots of arm twisting, influence peddling, bargaining, and sometimes threats, gave us what we have today.

But what we have is not by any means a panacea. In a country where institutions are weak, corruption is high, and political clientelism is a permanent fact of life, the law has several fragile aspects. Tremendous power is given to the Director of the National Park; and if he is not a conscientious, well balanced professional, he is a virtual emperor. Something similar can be said of the council of INGALA (the Galápagos National Institute). It will take a great amount of common sense and high level negotiations to avert a collision course of unpredictable consequences.

Accountability, I think, is the key word, and the judges of these actions have to be the national and international conservation communities. Our power to influence events in this respect is limited. But working with people to

make them aware of the risks that negative political actions can have on the ecosystem is closer to our hearts. People who appreciate what they have will be the best defenders of their habitat.

Before I close I would like to mention Nepal and Bhutan once more. The larger cities of Nepal are surrounded by deforested desert. It is polluted and dusty in summer, with lots of water runoff and erosion in winter, despite extensive terracing and the fact that people are trying in vain to re-plant the forests. Bhutan, on the other hand, is 70 per cent covered with natural, managed forests, cared for by people whose wood for construction and cooking comes from these forests. They defend them bravely. Their livelihood depends on them.

I think you will agree that however complex the situation may seem to be in Galápagos, it does offer real avenues of opportunity for the conservation of the islands.

Note

¹ Former President, Charles Darwin Foundation, 1996-98. He died in an air crash on 20 April 1998 while returning from Belgium to Ecuador after participating in this Symposium.

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