

Divergent viewpoints on the role of the Galapagos giant tortoise on the conservation and development of the Galapagos Islands

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Biodiversity conservation and sustainable development have been established as policy priorities on the Galapagos Islands. However, the lack of knowledge regarding interactions between the social and ecological components of conservation, as well as divergent viewpoints, interests and perspectives over the conservation and development of the archipelago, have created controversy within national and local policies, conservation scientist and local communities. These complex decision-making dilemmas need urgent attention and require decision-makers to know the views and perspectives driving the debates. Focusing on the case of the iconic and umbrella Galapagos giant tortoise we used the Q-methodology to explore the diverse viewpoints on the conservation and development of the Galapagos Islands. The results indicate four prevailing viewpoints: (1) technocrats–government centered; (2) giant tortoise conservation centered; (3) community centered; and (4) utilitarian conservation centered. These findings allow us to identify foreseeable points of disagreement, areas of consensus and to discuss the implication of the findings to address socio–ecological conservation and sustainability challenges. Our research suggests that the conservation of the Galapagos giant tortoises, although quite successful in terms of captivity breeding, repatriation and fund raising, has failed to integrate local communities as part of its conservation processes, jeopardizing a long-term sustainability. The gap between the desired states of conservation and sustainable development in the archipelago seems to be increasing. Nevertheless, our results allow us to identify areas of overlap between the ‘giant tortoise conservation centered’–‘community centered’ viewpoints and ‘technocrats–government centered’–‘utilitarian conservation’ viewpoints. Fostering consensus discourses around these views can help managers, decision makers and local communities to understand this complex socio–ecological system more comprehensively, a crucial aspect for the design and applications of environmental evaluations that can contribute to the sustainable management of this unique world biosphere reserve.