

The geographical imaginaries of Galapagos: Scientific laboratory, tourist paradise, bureaucratic prison, or lifeworld?

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Abstract

Drawing on a year of ethnographic fieldwork on the Galapagos Islands, conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic (2020-2021), this article argues that the multiple geographical imaginaries of the archipelago as a 'laboratory' or 'pristine nature' that are imposed on inhabitants by external institutions and powerful elites have a twofold impact on farmers, fishers, and those who do not benefit from these top-down conceptualizations. First, Galapagueños view their life in the archipelago as that of a prison because of the bureaucratic restrictions placed on them as part of a broader ideology of *fortress conservation*. Second, despite the pernicious impacts that external geographical imaginaries have on the politics and economics of the islands, farmers yearn for a deeper sense of coexistence with the community and the environment. Accordingly, Ingold's concept of a *lifeworld* can be used to describe the everyday dwelling of the archipelago's inhabitants and their complex social and environmental relations.

Keywords: Galapagos Islands, neoliberal respatialization, conservationist paradigm, political ecology, bureaucracy, fortress conservation, lifeworld

Résumé

S'appuyant sur une année de travail ethnographique sur le terrain aux îles Galápagos, mené pendant la pandémie de COVID-19 (2020-2021), cet article soutient que les multiples imaginaires géographiques de l'archipel, présentés comme un « laboratoire » ou une « nature vierge », imposés aux habitants par des institutions externes et des élites puissantes, ont un double impact sur les agriculteurs, les pêcheurs et ceux qui ne bénéficient pas de ces conceptualisations descendantes. Premièrement, les Galapagueños considèrent leur vie dans l'archipel comme une prison en raison des restrictions bureaucratiques qui leur sont imposées dans le cadre d'une idéologie plus large de conservation « forteresse ». Deuxièmement, malgré les effets néfastes que les imaginaires géographiques externes ont sur la politique et l'économie des îles, les agriculteurs aspirent à un sentiment plus profond de coexistence avec la communauté et l'environnement. En conséquence, le concept de « monde de la vie » d'Ingold peut être utilisé pour décrire le quotidien des habitants de l'archipel et leurs relations sociales et environnementales complexes.

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Mots-clés: îles Galápagos, re-spatialisation néolibérale, paradigme conservacionniste, écologie politique, bureaucratie, conservation de type « forteresse », monde de la vie

Resumen

A partir de un año de trabajo de campo etnográfico realizado en las islas Galápagos durante la pandemia de COVID-19 (2020-2021), este artículo sostiene que los múltiples imaginarios geográficos del archipiélago como "laboratorio" o como "naturaleza prístina", impuestos a sus habitantes por instituciones externas y élites poderosas, tienen un impacto doble sobre agricultores, pescadores y otras personas que no se benefician de estas conceptualizaciones de arriba hacia abajo. En primer lugar, los galapagueños perciben su vida en el archipiélago como una prisión debido a las restricciones burocráticas que se les aplican como parte de una ideología más amplia de *conservación fortaleza*. En segundo lugar, a pesar de los efectos negativos que estos imaginarios geográficos externos tienen sobre la política y la economía de las islas, los agricultores anhelan una forma más profunda de convivencia con la comunidad y con el medio ambiente. En consecuencia, el concepto de *lifeworld* de Ingold puede utilizarse para describir el habitar cotidiano de los habitantes del archipiélago y sus complejas relaciones sociales y ambientales.

Palabras clave: Islas Galapagos, reespacialización neoliberal, paradigma conservacionista, ecología política, conservación fortaleza, *lifeworld*

1. Galapagos imaginaries

The Galapagos Islands usually evoke images of pristine wilderness, exotic animals, and Darwin's theory of evolution. For tourists and natural scientists, the archipelago has become a "secular pilgrimage site" (Quiroga, 2009, p. 125) where they can walk in the footsteps of Charles Darwin, swim with sea lions, or pose with ancient giant tortoises. Galapagos is usually thought of as uninhabited, because the media perpetuates the myth that the islands are an empty and pristine location to attract tourists (Grenier & de Miras, 1994). Those who have lived in the archipelago or have investigated its complex social fabric will also be aware that it is home to over 30,000 inhabitants who live within a national park.

As in other parts of the globe, a dominant ecocentric exclusionary *fortress conservation* worldview (Brockington, 2002) has privileged the protection of wildlife over the rights and priorities of the humans living in Galapagos. Galapagueños are increasingly subject to highly bureaucratic systems and commonly think of their islands as a "beautiful jail" (Santa Cruz farmer) where jobs are scarce and the Galapagos National Park Directorate (GNPD) limits population growth, regulates fishing and other economic activities, and restricts access to protected areas. The invisibility of the archipelago's inhabitants, to attract tourists to 'pristine wilderness' and the restrictions imposed on Galapagueños that privilege tourism and conservation over other economic sectors, are part of a broader *conservationist paradigm* (Salcedo, 2007) that is externally imposed on the archipelago by NGOs, tourism companies, and powerful international elites.

While multiple geographical imaginaries related to the archipelago have previously been examined (Astudillo-Cueva *et al.*, 2026; Grenier, 2007 [2000]; Quiroga, 2009; Ospina & Falconí, 2007), comparatively little attention has been paid to the pernicious impacts of externally produced imaginaries on everyday lives. In particular, scholarship focused on external depictions overlooks the internal geographical imaginaries of the archipelago as a metaphorical prison and a place of

increasing bureaucracy.² This article addresses this gap by examining how external imaginaries that depict the archipelago as a scientific laboratory and tourist paradise intersect with and shape *internal* imaginaries of the Galapagos as a lifeworld (Ingold, 1993), in which farmers and fishers must cope with bureaucratic constraints and a pervasive feeling of imprisonment associated with fortress conservation.

My understanding of Galapagos as a 'bureaucratic prison' emerged from ethnographic fieldwork for my PhD (Stimson, 2023a) conducted with 219 Galapagueño interlocutors in 2020–2021, the majority (150) of whom were farmers and ranchers who supply food to the islands and the cruise ship sector, because high production costs drive up prices and prevent agricultural exports. Additionally, I conducted participant observation during three farm stays across the four inhabited islands. Semi-structured interviews focused on agricultural livelihoods, environmental and climatic change, COVID-19 impacts, conservation, and everyday concerns. Ethical approval for the study was granted by the University of Oxford's Central Research Ethics Committee (CUREC). This work was the first comprehensive ethnographic study of the Galapagos' farming sector and its everyday challenges. As an Ecuadorian citizen who lived in the archipelago for 2.5 years prior to my fieldwork, working for a conservation organization and a cruise ship company, I have knowledge of the islands, while also recognizing that, as an outsider, I have not attained a fully emic understanding of the agricultural sector.

In a recent publication (Astudillo-Cueva *et al.*, 2026, p. 44), eight imaginaries for the archipelago have been proposed over time.

- (1) The Enchanted Islands
- (2) A Sea of Resources
- (3) The Promised Land
- (4) An Idyllic Escape
- (5) A Strategic Stronghold
- (6) The Living Laboratory
- (7) A Tourist Treasure, and
- (8) Human Galapagos

While this shows the transition from a mysterious inhospitable landscape that inspired Herman Melville's *The Enchanted Isles* (1854) to a highly coveted 'living laboratory' and tourism destination, in reality multiple external and internal geographical imaginaries coexist and interact with one another. Scholars have argued that Galapagueño cultural identity is shaped in opposition to outsiders and recent migrants (Ospina, 2001), a distinction often expressed colloquially through the divide between long-term resident *carapachudos* (shellbacks) and recent arrivals who are labeled as *afuereños* (outsiders), *introducidos* (introduced), or *plagas* (pests).

Additionally, it has previously been argued that Galapagueño cultural identity is "emptied out each time scientists...demand that populations should be more concerned about protecting this territory" (Ahassi, 2007, pp. 173–174). In sum, the link between the laboratory and pristine imaginaries of the Galapagos and its bureaucratic and prison imaginaries merits further exploration.

² The historical accounts by Galapagueños on how the islands were inhospitable when they first arrived (Ospina, 2005; Villarreal, 2010) are a notable exception. Current imaginaries do not usually focus on the 'hellish' imaginaries of the past.

2. Landscapes of fortress conservation

Beginning in the 1970s, cultural geographers understood the concept of *landscape* as something historically and culturally situated (Bluwstein, 2021). Critical landscape studies and post- and decolonial approaches to landscapes highlight the inherent alienation and separation implicit in the conceptualization of the term (Mitchell, 2001), when it is used to describe a nature-culture dualism. Furthermore, landscapes may also perpetuate *fortress conservation* (Brockington, 2002) because they are often defined from an ecocentric viewpoint as pristine and empty spaces of nature (Plumwood, 2003). Eventually, scholars began to see power, (in)justice, and politics embedded in landscapes:

The landscape is not simply the visible forms of the land, it is the social, material and economic processes that produce what we have called the political landscape. It is the relations of power that ultimately shape this landscape, though this shaping might apparently be counter to material and social sustainability. (Olwig & Mitchell, 2007, p. 530)

Across the world, it has been shown that national parks are not actually originally 'pristine' landscapes and that imaginaries are often created to exclude the original inhabitants of a protected area (Brockington, 2002; Brockington *et al.*, 2008; Hennessy & McCleary, 2011; Li, 2007; Neumann, 2004; West, 2016; West *et al.*, 2006). On the other hand, urban areas are conceptualized as places where nature is managed and which are assumed to be devoid of more-than-human networks of species. The Western 'cult of wilderness' (Martinez-Alier, 2002) remains central to conservationist thought, reproducing imaginaries of pristine and people-free nature.

Despite attempts to integrate humans into the understanding of landscapes under *landscape approaches* adopted by conservationists and scientists (Arts *et al.*, 2017), positivist methods (Geographic Information Systems, remote sensing, population modeling, etc.) are used to control the allegedly damaging effects of humans on nature rather than to address the complex interrelationships of humans and their environments (Bluwstein, 2021). Socio-ecological relationships are interpreted as something that must be managed, and this is problematic because it depoliticizes nature-culture relations, simplifies challenges as technical problems, and promotes "*exclusion through representation*" (Bluwstein, 2021, p. 906). This means that scientists and conservationists use their epistemic power and authority to define how people should relate to their environment. Imposed imaginaries are neocolonial and violent where there is resistance by inhabitants who struggle to control the narrative and assert their own bottom-up conceptualization of how they inhabit the land.

In the Galapagos context, an ex-director of the Charles Darwin Foundation (CDF) proposed in a conservation plan that the only way to save Galapagos' wildlife was to reduce and relocate the inhabitants of the archipelago; the first chapter is aptly titled 'Back to Eden – one last chance' (Bensted-Smith, 2002, p. 1). Throughout the 1990s and 2000s the Galapagos Islands witnessed many violent conflicts between fishers and scientists due to disagreements about restrictions imposed by the latter (Ospina, 2006). While these have now lessened, relations are still tense between Galapagueños and a small group of elite scientists, politicians, and tourism companies. Hence, it is extremely important to rethink the multiple geographical imaginaries that are imposed on Galapagueños who are often left out of the capital flows resulting from tourism and conservation (Taylor *et al.*, 2007).

In this article I elucidate the many ways in which the Galapagos landscape has been conceptualized, the implications of this, and possible alternatives. Within the major thematic clusters of political ecology (Desvallées *et al.*, 2022), I discuss the relationship between neoliberalism and perceptions of nature, recognising its analytical utility while also noting that it has become an overused discursive term. In particular, the specific power structures that perpetuate geographic imaginaries of Galapagos should be considered as a network of powerful individuals who choose to portray the islands in a specific way for their personal gain. Finally, the very knowledge produced in conserving Galapagos for future generations of tourists perpetuates an exclusionary *conservationist paradigm* that privileges *fortress conservation* and provides little benefit to the marginalized peoples of Galapagos (Salcedo, 2008). This has been verified: despite a 78 % increase in the archipelago's total revenue between 1995 and 2005, average per capita income only increased 1.8 % (Taylor *et al.*, 2007, p. 128). As a rancher from San Cristobal Island puts it, "...currently conservation is green. Green not because of the color of nature, but due to the color of the dollar."

3. Neoliberal respatialization

The world is continuously reshaped by the forces of capitalism, cultural imaginaries, technological change, environmental processes, and political struggles (Harvey, 2001; Massey, 2005). The Caribbean, Antarctica, the Arctic, and the Galapagos Islands have become playgrounds for wealthy cruise ship tourists. Some of these same locations are visited by droves of scientists seeking to conduct research. Mediterranean countries are coveted by retirees but have also witnessed many young people leaving due to high unemployment rates. Following the logic of NIMBY (Not In My Back Yard), resource extraction wastelands are concentrated away from privileged places. There are multiple overlapping forces that are shaping space, and the way space is imagined.

Despite the quantitative turn with its origins in the 1960s, space has long been conceptualized through its uses, social relations, and entanglements with capitalism (Harvey, 2001; Lefebvre, 1991; Marx, 1973 [1939]; Massey, 2005; Smith, 2008 [1984]; Swyngedouw, 1992). As Smith explains, "the production of space also implies the production of the meaning, concepts, and consciousness of space which are inseparably linked to its physical production" (2008, p. 107). While geographers have studied how space is transformed and interpreted over time, especially in regard to capitalism (Smith, 2008 [1984]), the processes that reshape the globe cannot be captured by a single conceptual framework. Perhaps Appadurai's (1996) five 'scapes' (ethnoscapes, ideoscapes, technoscapes, mediascapes and financescapes) can help us conceptualize the global flows that influence how spaces change over time, even though they only partially explain how space is imagined.

Earlier approaches to understanding capitalism and space, such as dependency theory (Prebisch, 1950) and world-systems theory (Wallerstein, 1974), highlighted global inequalities but have been critiqued for their imprecise spatial categories of 'core' and 'periphery' or for overemphasizing an unequal flow of resources from the Global South to the Global North. Capitalism leads to uneven development (Harvey, 2001; Smith, 2008 [1984]) because it depends upon expanding into new frontier zones to exploit land and labor, generating unequal patterns of growth, marginalization, and exclusion (Storper & Walker, 1989; Swyngedouw, 1992).

To understand respatialization more precisely, it must be situated within the context of neoliberalism as a political and ideological project that reorganizes space through privatization and processes of accumulation by dispossession (Harvey, 2003). While ethnographies like Tania Li's

Land's End (2014), based in rural Indonesia, build on Harvey's concept of *accumulation by dispossession*, they also show how people internalize the logic of boom-and-bust cycles and neoliberalism, often becoming indebted or even gambling away their land. Ultimately, Mimi Sheller's (2009) concept of *neoliberal respatialization* is one of the most compelling ways of understanding how spaces are categorized, imagined and utilized, although any allusion solely to neoliberalism risks being oversimplistic and reductionist. It is also important to highlight that ultimately it is the powerful elites and politicians who determine how space is imagined and is used.

In Galapagos, neoliberal logic is evident through *accumulation by conservation* (Büscher & Fletcher, 2015), whereby environmental protection is motivated by market imperatives. Building on this, I propose the term *accumulation by restriction* to emphasize that prohibitions ultimately determine who benefits from the archipelago's economy. In other words, the public sphere uses scientific knowledge to conserve the environment, which ultimately protects the interests of large cruise ship companies and does not prioritize the economic interests of other sectors of the economy, such as agriculture and fishing. The everyday lives of fishers and farmers are further constrained by regulations governing access to the marketplace, permits for establishing chicken coops or pigsties, bureaucratic requirements for seed importation, and restrictions on designated fishing zones. Environmental governance systems like this produce public forms of enclosure because the internal logic of neoliberalization does not operate solely through private land accumulation (Heynen & Robbins, 2005). Rather than a golden goose, in Galapagos it is the "myth of the tortoise that lays golden eggs" (Ramírez, 2004, p. 55) because ultimately conservation work attracts money both through nonprofit donations and through its support of the ever-expanding tourism industry. The scientists and conservationists that benefit from this financial relationship with tourism providers continue to propagate a neocolonial imaginary that the Galapagos islands are a laboratory.

4. The Neocolonial Laboratory metaphor

The *laboratory* concept has a long history, as the Latin word *laboratorium* (from the Latin *labor*, which means exertion or work), has existed since medieval times (Hannaway, 1986; Schmidgen, 2021). The meaning of the word evolved in the 16th century to describe a space where alchemists, apothecaries, and metallurgists used tools to explore natural processes. While originally depicted as a disorderly workspace, over the centuries, the laboratory became associated with organized, standardized, and replicable experiments in the pursuit of scientific knowledge. In the late 19th century, the founder of Johns Hopkins University, Daniel Coit Gilman, was inspired by German research laboratories and believed that the university should be like a laboratory, where "everyone is busy, and where enthusiasm in study is the predominant characteristic," further arguing that the whole world "is a great laboratory, in which human society is busy experimenting." (Gilman, as cited in Owens, 1985, p. 184). The transformation of the globe into a space for study and experimentation has bolstered the 'paternalistic protectionist' (Pálsson, 1996) stance held by conservationists, which in turn reinforces nature-culture dualism and doesn't leave room for alternative (emic) ways of thinking about space.

The idea that any space can be thought of as a laboratory is rooted in colonialism, as demonstrated by numerous scholars (Anderson, 2006; Kohler, 2002; Livingstone, 2003; Tilley, 2011). The conservationist movement, which established Yosemite National Park in 1890 and continued to designate national parks worldwide well into the mid-twentieth century, has been shaped by the colonial and exclusionary principles of *fortress conservation* (Brockington, 2002). Furthermore, the concept of the 'field' emerged in opposition to the concept of the 'laboratory' in

the late nineteenth century, even as the boundaries between the two increasingly blurred to give epistemic legitimacy to science conducted through fieldwork (De Bont, 2017; Kohler, 2002).

The Galapagos Islands have played a unique role in the history of conservation in at least three ways: (1) the archipelago has often been referred to as a natural 'laboratory' of evolution, conservation, sustainability, and coexistence (Boersma *et al.*, 2005; Harpp *et al.*, 2014; Insua *et al.*, 2026; Kvan & Karakiewicz, 2019; Percy *et al.*, 2016; Satre, 2015; Tapia *et al.*, 2009); (2) there is a spurious symbolic association between Charles Darwin and Galapagos (Hennessy, 2017; Hennessy & McCleary, 2011; Sulloway, 1982); and (3) central conservationists were indispensable for the creation of African national parks and also the Galapagos National Park (Bocci, 2017a). In this section, I explore these three connections between conservation and colonialism, demonstrating that the frequent and uncritical use of the laboratory metaphor perpetuates externally imposed conceptions of how the archipelago should be managed, rather than considering how local communities envision their own inhabitation.

The *laboratory* metaphor is frequently used by Galapagos' prominent conservationists without considering that an archipelago is not just a scientific playground and space for generating knowledge, no matter how well-intentioned the sentiment:

Currently, Galapagos is still a natural laboratory of evolution, but it could also principally become a world laboratory of sustainability: a region where it is possible to experiment, study, register and eventually achieve in practice a more harmonious coexistence between human beings and fragile ecosystems. (Tapia *et al.*, 2009, p. 178)

As stated previously, to refer to Galapagos as a place primarily to be studied and researched implies that other forms of using the archipelago are not suitable; fishing, farming, private enterprise, and tourism are clearly not activities that occur inside a lab. Additionally, tracing the historical origins of the *laboratory* metaphor in the Galapagos shows that colonial figures were not only central to early conservation efforts, but that the enduring association with Charles Darwin and his theory of evolution has been used to legitimize a *conservationist paradigm* that concentrates power in a scientific–tourist elite and channels some of the tourism revenue toward the science conducted on the archipelago. To understand this, it is vital to outline elements of the archipelago's history.

In 1535, Fray Tomás de Berlanga's ship drifted off course and randomly encountered the archipelago, which he described as a 'worthless' and inhospitable hellish lava landscape (Latorre, 1999). Over the next centuries, the islands were visited by whalers and pirates until Ecuador annexed the archipelago in 1832 and established a penal colony on Floreana Island. To assert its sovereignty over the archipelago, the Ecuadorian government encouraged settlers to move to Galapagos over the next century, leading to the establishment of small farming and fishing communities in addition to penal colonies on Isabela Island and San Cristobal Island. There were also attempts to develop the island's agriculture, and Manuel J. Cobos was quite successful with a sugar plantation until he was murdered by his workers in retaliation for harsh and exploitative treatment. In summary, Galapagos has a long history of human occupation prior to the arrival of scientists.

In 1891 paleontologist Georg Baur visited the archipelago and sounded the alarm about the urgent need for scientific research before the archipelago's natural history "may be lost, lost forever, irreparably!" (Baur, 1891, p. 318). This was followed by William Beebe's 1924 book *Galapagos: World's End*, which sparked the idea that Galapagos was a pristine place removed from human influence. Subsequently, in the 1930s the California Academy of Sciences and patrons such as

Walter Rothschild launched Galapagos expeditions to accumulate species for museum collections. In 1933, ornithologist Harry S. Swarth advised the Ecuadorian government to protect the Galapagos Islands, claiming that the archipelago was "one of the most amazing natural laboratories of evolutionary processes on earth" (Barrow, 2009, p. 176). This may be one of the earliest examples of the symbolic association between Galapagos and *laboratory* metaphors.

The conservationist movement grew in the 1950s after Irenäus Eibl-Eibesfeldt and Robert Bowman's scientific expeditions brought public awareness to the need to conserve the archipelago. Eibl-Eibesfeldt wrote a letter to the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) which caught the attention of Julian Huxley, first director of UNESCO, one of the founders of the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) and a creator of various East African national parks as part of the British Colonial Office. Huxley believed that the Galapagos Islands should become "a living memorial of Darwin – not only a museum of evolution in action, but an important laboratory for the furtherance of...a truly Darwinian biology" (Huxley, as cited in Hennessy, 2018, p. 6). One hundred years after the publication of *On the Origin of Species* (1859), in 1959, the Galapagos National Park (GNP) and the Charles Darwin Foundation (CDF) were established to support the conservation of the archipelago.

It is crucial to note the colonial conservationist background of the first president of the CDF, Victor Van Straelen. He had previously founded the Albert National Park in the Belgian Congo, a place that was designated as a "world laboratory" (De Bont, 2017, p. 412) and "allegedly the first park uniquely devoted to science" (Bocci, 2017a, p. 97), but also an inhabited space. Setting up the park involved the eviction of Hutus and Tutsis, leaving only a small group of 'pygmies' (Batwa) to be 'preserved' on the land. While 'field researchers' may have invoked the laboratory metaphor to legitimize the scientific merit of their work, this does not invalidate the link to colonialism. Even though the laboratory metaphor in Galapagos was not operationalized under a colonial regime, central colonial individuals like Van Straelen and Huxley were key to "the initial wave of a neocolonial conservation land grab orchestrated through international nongovernmental organizations." (Hennessy, 2018, p. 3). Building on Foucault's (2007) concept of biopolitics, political ecologists have demonstrated that conservationists also regulate nonhuman life (Biermann & Anderson, 2017), determining which species deserve to live and die.

In addition to the links between colonialism and the laboratory metaphor, it has been argued that Charles Darwin was responsible for the islands becoming "large-scale laboratories for the investigation of biological processes." (Cliff & Haggett, 1984, p. 138). Unfortunately, these allegations are spurious, since Darwin never used the word 'laboratory' in relation to Galapagos. When Darwin arrived in the archipelago in 1835, the islands already had a human presence for centuries (mainly pirates, whalers, convicts, and farmers) and the archipelago had belonged to Ecuador for three years. Sulloway (1982) argues that the notion that Darwin had a 'eureka moment' in the Galapagos Islands has no factual basis, which Hennessy (2017) claims was historically mobilized by scientists as a way of rallying support for conservation. The Darwin myth continues to attract tourists to the archipelago and provides an intellectual link to research institutions such as the Charles Darwin Foundation.

The history of Galapagos indicates the origins of the *conservationist paradigm*, or the global ecocentric logic that prioritizes the needs of species over humans. During my ethnographic fieldwork, one example of this neglect for human inhabitants was an alleged incident where a girl needing medical treatment died due to lack of transportation off the archipelago, while a tortoise was transported to Miami for medical attention (also cited in Grenier, 2007 [2000], p. 341). Fishers and farmers were also critical of the tourism industry, which they blamed for reaping the benefits

of a pristine imaginary while simultaneously consuming diesel, polluting waters, and dumping garbage, thereby exposing Galapagueños to compounding risks.

Another example of how conservation work does not benefit or consider the perspectives of the archipelago's inhabitants was Project Isabela (1997-2006). Led by the CDF and GNPD, this attempt to eradicate goats on various islands of the archipelago to restore giant tortoise habitat was criticized by inhabitants for its exclusionary and draconian methods. The GNPD brought in a hundred specially trained dogs from New Zealand at a cost of US\$10.5 million, helicopters with specialized pilots, and hunters with semi-automatic weapons, in addition to some land-based local hunters. They used so-called 'Judas goats' to locate and slaughter the remnant herds of goats (Carrión *et al.*, 2011). Although the project succeeded in eliminating a large proportion of the invasive goat population, it also led to the expansion of blackberry (*Rubus niveus*). Many Galapagueños expressed their indignation, claiming that they hadn't been consulted by authorities; goats are a source of food, and goat hunting is a Galapagueño tradition. In one of Bocci's (2017b) interviews, a participant understood that they were trying to conserve Galapagos, but said "it looked like someone bombed the islands!" (Bocci, 2017b, p. 425), and during the years of eradication work on the inhabited Isabela Island it was "like a war" (Bocci, 2017b, p. 431) since helicopters would swoop over, gunning down the goats.

Far from being an isolated and exceptional incident of neocolonial conservation (Ramírez, 2004), current conservation initiatives continue to govern inhabited spaces like the Galapagos, and advance their projects despite local criticism. During my fieldwork on the Island of Floreana, Leonardo Di Caprio visited and pledged US\$43 million to restore the pink land iguana (*Conolophus marthae*) and the Floreana Mockingbird (*Mimus trifasciatus*). This is part of a broader entanglement between celebrities, conservation, and capitalism (Brockington, 2009) which can often uncritically prioritize conservation over the needs of local communities. Furthermore, these actions can be understood as *accumulation by repair* (Huff & Brock, 2023), where ecosystems are framed as endlessly damaged, attracting global capital, depoliticizing interventions, legitimizing the capitalist logic of environmental destruction and externalities, and silencing criticism by invoking the urgency of the moment.

While the project has support from some Floreana residents, many complained that the nonprofit sector didn't do enough for society. The project did build stables and pigsties to contain farm animals when hydrophobic poison is eventually dumped all over the island to kill the rats that threaten the survival of the mockingbird. Nevertheless, some people on Floreana claimed that the social surveys were insincere and worried that poisoning rats would have negative repercussions: "Don't give us an island stinking of putrid rats! Because nobody will want to come eat at the restaurants or stay at the hotels." Another participant explained that Floreana is treated "as a guinea pig" for experimentation because it is so small. Evidently, the pristine imaginary has tangible consequences for capital flows and for top-down decisions that determine how an entire island is to be 'conserved.'

In summary, to uncritically label Galapagos as a laboratory has become a trope, and this continues to benefit the partnership between tourism and conservation, but money doesn't reach the most marginalized in society. Additionally, the myth that Darwin had a revelation on the archipelago only serves the interests of scientists. Depictions of the archipelago as pristine and as a laboratory (to make it more pristine) go hand in hand. In the next section we will explore the ways in which the spectacle of nature presented in the media perpetuates this relationship.

5. Tourism: The spectacle of nature

When you think of Galapagos, what comes to mind? Most commonly, people think about giant tortoises, blue-footed boobies, and other charismatic fauna. Videos and photos of the Galapagos Islands depict a 'pristine nature' that is instrumental in attracting tourists to the archipelago, yet this geographical imaginary simultaneously obscures the very "web of life" (Moore, 2015) of complex social and environmental relations within the national park.

The French Marxist theorist Guy Debord (1992 [1967]) argued that experiences can be fetishized to the point where images are alienated from their production, and life becomes the accumulation of spectacles. He defines a spectacle as "a social relation between people that is mediated by images" (Debord, 1992, p. 7), suggesting that people become passive spectators of their lives and use fragmented and abstract images to understand reality. Jim Igoe (2010) claimed that the spectacle not only reshapes social relationships, but also our perception of the environment, policy decisions, funding flows, and conservation practices.

As in many other parts of the world, conservation work in Galapagos is well aligned with neoliberalism. 'Hybrid governance' systems are created to ensure profitable 'ecotourism', unlimited growth, and re-territorialization that usually involves 'fence and fine' strategies for locals living inside national parks (Igoe & Brockington, 2007). National parks are actually a form of 'primitive accumulation' (Marx, 1990 [1867]) because, even though the intention may be to protect the environment, nature has been commodified for the financial benefit of NGOs and tourism companies (Kelly, 2011). Within neoliberal conservation, the spectacle of nature (Igoe, 2010) masks the internal contradictions of a system that 'protects' the environment so that it can be consumed by tourists who inevitably alter the archipelago. In other words, the imposition of a *conservationist paradigm* commodifies nature, changes human relations, and restricts the market because a new set of rules is established regarding appropriate ways of making money from the environment (West *et al.*, 2006; Wolford *et al.*, 2012). To paraphrase Grenier (2007 [2000]), Galapagos went from being a 'closed system' to an archipelago that is open to globalized threats.

This process of marketing the archipelago as pristine nature, which benefits tourism and conservation NGOs while contributing to environmental degradation, has been described as the 'Galapagos paradox':

The connections between conservation and tourism has created the Galapagos Paradox, by which the appeal of the Galapagos is based on its marketing as a pristine, people-free 'natural laboratory', but at the same time the success of tourism is creating unpredictable flows of people and other organisms that undermine the unique terrestrial and coastal environments. (Quiroga, 2009, p. 129)

It is important to acknowledge that this paradox is not unique to the archipelago, because national parks worldwide are marketed as pristine to attract both tourism and conservation money, while obscuring issues of ecological integrity and social equity (Brockington, 2009; Igoe, 2010; Büscher *et al.*, 2012). Additionally, the 'paradox' essentially originates from the fact that conservation also follows a neoliberal capitalist logic where ever-increasing numbers of tourists who consume the spectacle of nature are required to continue funding conservation work. Meanwhile, a complex series of rules and regulations are imposed on the population (together with an enormous amount of bureaucracy), restricting access to lucrative jobs in tourism and making it hard for people to become Galapagos residents, but paradoxically opening up the island to a constant flow of goods, finance, information, etc.

The geographer Christophe Grenier succinctly states that "[t]he history of Galapagos is one of the spatial transformation of its nature due to the networks of capitalism" (2007 [2000], p. 24). In his scathing critique of tourism and conservation in the archipelago, he highlights the inherent contradiction of tourism: its growth leads to the expansion of transnational networks, greater migration, and development, but environmental conservation NGOs also rely on the tourism sector's donations in order to operate. He suggests that this 'Galapagos System' is a form of 'classic imperialism' (Grenier & de Miras, 1994, p. 665) that intentionally leads to economic expansion for international tourism companies but also historically provided greater Ecuadorian sovereignty over the islands.

This system depends on the portrayal of the Galapagos through a dual myth: as a pristine 'last paradise' for tourists and biologists and as an 'El Dorado' for Ecuadorian migrants who seek tranquility and higher paid work. Grenier further argues that the geographical 'opening' of the archipelago to a globalized capitalist world has made the islands increasingly dependent on ever-increasing flows (migrants, finance, media, and commodities such as sea cucumber demand from Asian markets), and he suggests that the main way to protect Galapagos would be to reduce its exposure to external flows. To implement a "true ecotourism" (Grenier, 2007 [2000], p. 437), the authorities should reduce the number of tourists that visit the islands, lengthen their average stay, reduce the number of cruise operators, and increase the amount of land-based tourism to benefit the local economy. Although his advice could have positive consequences, under the current neoliberal logic of constant growth, these recommendations are unlikely to be implemented. On the contrary, flows seem to be accelerating (Eriksen, 2016).

Today, NGOs like the Charles Darwin Foundation, World Wildlife Fund, and Conservation International are all vying for international funding to help 'conserve' the archipelago with outdated assumptions stemming from a philosophy of *fortress conservation* (Brockington, 2002). It is still common to hear the archipelago being referred to as a 'laboratory' of evolution, sustainability, climate change, and so on (Hennessy, 2018; Tapia *et al.*, 2009). The laboratory metaphor continues to perpetuate the idea that Galapagos is primarily a place where research is conducted and which tourists support with their donations, but not a place that people inhabit. Ultimately, the central question is who benefits economically from both the *laboratory* and the *pristine nature* imaginaries. In the words of a Santa Cruz rancher:

People always say 'who am I conserving for?' It's other people who take the money out and become millionaires based on what I conserve. It's a very important question. Because people say, 'If I don't benefit directly from conservation, then why do I do it?' They sell you the idea that the main predators on the islands are the Galapagueños. The fisherman says, 'who are you conserving for? So that the Chinese can come and take the fish out of the reserve? I won't conserve for that.' And these thoughts are reasonable! Who am I conserving for if [a tourism ship] takes all the passengers and here they just leave us garbage?

Garbage is a word frequently used by my participants, but I have also personally photographed bags of cruise ship trash, conveniently labeled with the names of the companies, at the Santa Cruz Island landfill. Fishers, who have historically been portrayed as villains by conservation organizations, are quick to point out that cruise ships have to dump their sewage offshore and they are hypocritically conducting 'ecotourism' but still cause damage by dropping anchors repeatedly in the same areas. And yet, the tourism industry continues to benefit from selling

the Galapagos as a pristine place where science is conducted – in other words, the two visions are mutually beneficial. As a participant concisely concluded: "If you're a tourist, I'll take you to the touristy spots and you'll see paradise, but you won't find out about the social problems here."

6. A bureaucratic prison

The final economic sector to benefit indirectly from the archipelago's framing as a space for tourism and conservation is the bureaucratic sphere, since state institutions are needed to control the management of space. In fact, 13.4 % of the Galapagos workforce is employed in the public sector, making it the second largest economic sector in the archipelago, leading to a "bureaucracy of disproportionate size for such a small population" (Zalles *et al.*, 2025, p. 15), reinforced by regulations that disincentivize investment and privilege public administration. While Max Weber anticipated that the future would be dominated by bureaucratic rationality, Anthony Giddens expressed the opposite view that society would face an uncertain world that was spinning out of control (Giddens, 1996). This framing of the future as a choice between bureaucratic order and chaos, however, is overly simplistic. My ethnographic work in Galapagos highlighted that peoples' lives can become simultaneously more chaotic and more bureaucratized. Indeed, across the world, we seem to be entering an "age of 'total bureaucratization'" (Graeber, 2015, p. 18). In the Galapagos context, the rise of bureaucracy stems from the *conservationist paradigm*.

The original demarcation of the agricultural frontier occurred at the end of the 1960s (Rodríguez, 1989) and in 1974, the Galapagos National Park devised the first management plan for the archipelago, which implemented a zoning system that would ensure that 97% of it became a protected area. However, it wasn't until 1998 that the archipelago became a 'Special Regime' under the constitution of Ecuador and special laws (Ley Orgánica de Régimen Especial de la Provincia de Galápagos) were passed to operationalize a unique form of governance with greater autonomy and differentiated rights. It was from this point forward that migrating legally to the archipelago became more challenging. Additionally, the law tightly regulates how people work, build, trade, farm, fish, and import goods, embedding bureaucracy at the heart of everyday life. As a farmer concisely put it, it's "injustice turned into law."

While President Rafael Correa expanded the public sector (2007-2017), Galapagueños still faced compounding risks and uncertainties that in many cases were amplified by the amount of work they faced. *Oficios* (formal letters) are needed whenever NGOs want something approved by the GNPD, *cupos* (permits) are required by tourism companies which cannot operate a ship without one, and *parmas* (fishing permits) are limited to a small number of fishing families who are allowed to operate. Furthermore, farmers described the difficulties they face in obtaining permits to sell produce at local markets, to legally build and operate chicken coops or pigsties, or to import seeds. In frustration, many claimed to prefer bringing seeds illegally or abandoning their chicken coops, because of the bureaucracy required. One farmer from Isabela Island elaborated:

Here they tell us to leave some documents and after 15 days you have to return because something was missing, but finally they'll say, 'you won't be approved'... So I have thought of migrating, but nobody wants to buy my land. Many doors in Galapagos are closing... We've been pushed into a corner... There are certain people in tourism who are doing well, but the rest has collapsed.

Due to limited employment opportunities, pervasive bureaucracy, unequal opportunities linked to nepotism, and administrative structures that leave people's rights unaddressed across overlapping government jurisdictions, many of the young Galapagueños I spoke with were considering relocation. Even though bureaucracy harms the marginalized the most, it isn't well received by the tourism sector either. The owner of a hotel and fishing boat on Santa Cruz Island said:

If the farmers are complaining, you have no idea how bad [the bureaucracy] is in tourism. Here the National Park is universally despised by all operators...as an institution it's this rigid pile of paperwork...To get my boat operation I'm treated like an ex-con on probation...It takes so much paperwork to have a boat. It's not like you just register it and you're done. Every time you want to move your boat and go fishing, there's a stack of documents just to leave the dock. You can't do it. It's a full-time job. If you want to take a walk along the coast – 'No, that's illegal'... [Under Correa's government] we went from about 11 ministries to around 36 or 38 ministries...All of our legal structures that control what we do and how we live are from the Sierra (Ecuadorian Andes), and the town is full of people who have zero awareness. They are city people in Galapagos....The most likely future is more of the same, due to the cultural rigidity of bureaucracy...The bureaucrats are a big voting block and they have worked a great deal on laws and regulations.

In summary, one aspect of life in Galapagos that is scarcely mentioned in accounts of geographic imaginaries is the increase in bureaucracy, even though this is major point of frustration for the local population. Furthermore, it is directly connected to external imaginaries, such as the 'laboratory' and 'pristine nature' myths. As Graeber (2015) poignantly explained, bureaucratic systems function to the benefit of those employed to maintain them. In Galapagos, the ideology behind the bureaucratic requirements is *fortress conservation*. When people complain about bureaucracy, they really are frustrated about the control that government institutions have over their lives in order to 'protect' the environment.

Additionally, some of the frustration with bureaucracy comes with the recognition that, as with the Galapagos laws, without family connections or network ties with the elite, it will be more difficult and costly to get things done. A former director of the GNPD explained that originally he devised the *cupo* system as a way of limiting the number of people in tourism and retaining Galapagueño ownership over the sector. However, even though the *cupos* are supposedly non-transferable, he explained that people have sold them for tens of thousands of dollars to large international cruise companies who use Galapagueños as 'figureheads' for their ownership.

Although some of the directors of government agencies who I interviewed claimed that they were simplifying bureaucracy, this assertion contradicts my participants' perception of everyday life in Galapagos. According to the 'iron law of liberalism,' "... any market reform, any government initiative intended to reduce red tape and promote market forces will have the ultimate effect of increasing the total number of regulations, the total amount of paperwork, and the total number of bureaucrats the government employs." (Graeber, 2015, p. 9). Additionally, neoliberalism often expands bureaucracy, producing more rules and regulations that discipline specific groups while enabling capital accumulation elsewhere (Brenner & Theodore, 2002).

One notorious attempt to simplify bureaucracy during my fieldwork in Galapagos involved the mayor of Santa Cruz Island changing the way garbage and electricity were being billed so that big businesses that weren't producing much trash during the pandemic could pay less. The central

idea was to charge more for special municipal garbage bags for that cost to be incurred by those producing the most waste. Tremendous controversy ensued from this decision. I attended a town hall meeting at which Galapagueños were shouting at authority figures and one explained that his mother could hardly sleep at night when she got fined US\$150 for leaving a regular garbage bag outside her house instead of using a municipal garbage bag. When I spoke to the mayor in person, he said there was no going back to the old ways and that people would have to adapt, like they did when recycling was first implemented. Sadly, garbage started appearing in gutters, was being burnt or thrown away in the highlands; on this matter the mayor said that the municipality would have to "increase personnel to control people so they dispose of their garbage properly." In response, my interlocutors concluded that these are the actions that make "people angry at conservation." As a long-time scientist observed, some degree of bureaucracy and restrictions is necessary, but it should be innovative and not just about filling in boxes, accumulating stacks of regulations, and making people's lives harder.

Beyond bureaucracy, Galapagueños frequently speak of an isolation intrinsic to island living, also influenced by government restrictions as part of the ideology of *fortress conservation*. A farmer and eco-cabin owner from Santa Cruz Island explained:

When you talk to people about leaving, you ask, 'when do you get out?' as if you were a prisoner...From my point of view, the problem with putting a fence around [Galapagos] is that it's like living inside a beautiful jail (laughs)...Government restrictions radicalize people even more because you don't allow them to spend time in nature.

As explained previously, when the Galapagos National Park was established, it limited the amount of land that could be used for farming and created a zoning system. The Galapagos archipelago is spatially classified into zones ranging from strictly protected areas to those designated for controlled tourism, research, and limited resource use. Agricultural lands fall outside the zoning rules of the national park but geographically lie within the park.

Effectively, this means that Galapagos residents often feel confined or imprisoned, especially because they cannot go freely into the protected areas without a permit – although some break the rules when hunting goats. Furthermore, even though some people go kayaking, paddle boarding, and surfing, these activities technically require permits. This privileges tourism companies that rent out this equipment, while reducing everyone else's freedom. In the words of a rancher from Santa Cruz Island:

Right now it's prohibited to go to all kinds of places. When I was a kid we were very close to nature because we went more places, exploring the shorelines. Now it's prohibited to go kayaking. There was a park director who prohibited it. Before children would fish at the dock at night. Now it's not allowed. I'm sure 80 % of the population here doesn't know how to fish...this is the only damn island [in the world] where you can't have a sailboat to go to the inhabited islands. In other words, you're a prisoner! You have no freedom.

The bureaucratization of the archipelago and numerous restrictions means Galapagueños see it as a 'prison.' The 'bureaucratic prison' emerges from within the islands, and is a direct response

to the tourism and conservation imaginaries that are externally imposed. This is the most experientially salient of the different imaginaries affecting the islands, because it is how people perceive their lives. Beyond the everyday hardships of restricted access and pervasive bureaucracy, conservation has become a negative force that restricts rights and exacerbates inequality, ultimately obscuring the very reasons the environment of the Galapagos should be protected. As a young Santa Cruz farmer said, "Many people in Galapagos don't know where they are standing...They don't know how special Galapagos is. And I don't blame them, because access is restricted and it's expensive." Although some tour operators have offered travel initiatives for school children, most people who do not have sufficient funds to tour the archipelago are mere spectators who understand the uniqueness of Galapagos through photographs and nature documentaries rather than from lived experience. As a farmer from San Cristobal explained, the biggest problem is that "you don't take care of what you don't know." Hence, even from the perspective of conservationism, it would be beneficial to reconsider the ways in which the archipelago is imagined.

Thinking of the archipelago as a 'tourism paradise' or as a 'scientific laboratory' directly feeds into the local imaginary of the 'bureaucratic prison.' While external imaginaries do attract tourists and money to conservation initiatives (often donated by the tourists or tourism operators), overall, the imaginaries lead to the environmental degradation of the archipelago (Grenier, 2007 [2000]) and to the growing opposition to conservation by people who do not benefit financially from these imaginaries. For decades, agriculture and fishing have been portrayed as the extractivist sectors of the economy, but those communities' own vision of the islands is one of coexistence. If the concept of 'convivial conservation' (Büscher & Fletcher, 2019) is to be operationalized in Galapagos to allow a more harmonious relationship between humans and the environment, we must also understand the ways in which farmers understand their lives within the archipelago.

7. Conclusion: Dwelling in a lifeworld

As we know from Latour & Woolgar's *Laboratory Life* (1979), scientific facts are socially constructed through rhetorical, technical, and social processes. The laboratory metaphor can also be used in a dehumanizing neocolonial manner, because inhabitants become objects to be studied. To rethink the way Galapagos is defined, Laso (2020) believes we should think of the islands as a garden. While this is somewhat better than the laboratory analogy, it still implies a place that is managed by humans. I suggest that we abandon branding the archipelago altogether, because each geographical imaginary carries intellectual baggage.

Galapagos may be many things at once, but we should let those definitions emerge bottom-up by talking with our participants. Clearly, if they live there, they should choose how to conceptualize their surroundings. However, if as academics, we must use a metaphor for this space, I propose labeling Galapagos as a *lifeworld*. Ingold uses this term to describe humans inhabiting the world "in a way that does not...reduce them to mere objects of nature" (2000, p. 90) and which emphasizes a "dwelt-in world" (Ingold, 1993, p. 40) in addition to entangled relationships between living and non-living entities.

My fieldwork (2020-2021) documented how farmers endured compounding risks, including agricultural pests, irregular seasons due to climate change, and the negative economic effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, leading many into a state of anxiety, alienation, and debt (Stimson, 2023a, 2023b). Some would end up selling their land and leaving the archipelago because working in agriculture was just too difficult. I concluded that 'manufactured risks' entrench people in a vicious cycle of market dependence, alienation, anxiety, and debt. Because my participants also spoke of a deep nostalgia for a time when they coexisted with the community and the environment, I coined

the term '*coexistential rift*' to help systemically explain the rupture between their idealized life and the vicious cycle of indebtedness (Stimson, 2023a, 2023b). It also became apparent from my participants' accounts that there was a significant disparity between how external media portray the Galapagos for the benefit of the tourism industry and conservationist elites, and how participants themselves understood their everyday experience of dwelling in the archipelago.

The marginalized farmers that I lived with in the archipelago, like smallholders worldwide, are feeling greater livelihood insecurity due to the policies that are imposed upon them, but also because of the ways that spaces are imagined. Many admitted that they did not want their children to grow up to become farmers because it wasn't profitable. On the other hand, they also spoke with great nostalgia of a time when they farmed the land and coexisted with the giant tortoises, used the blue footed boobies and petrels as bioindicators of rain, and had time to get to know their neighbors.

Paolo Bocci (2022) has argued that Galapagueño farmers have a deep sense of belonging (*arraigo*) to the archipelago, a view that was clearly reflected by many of the farmers who I spoke to. Belonging is greatly threatened by the compounding risks they face. One farmer described the yellow warbler birds in her greenhouse as 'little helpers' for weeding and eating insects, while calling Darwin's finches 'naughty' and distracting them with manioc as she planted, since they often uprooted seedlings. Furthermore, she claimed that other farmers poisoned the finches or used dangerous levels of prohibited pesticides to cope with different invasive species entering the islands – ultimately, everyday survival trumps a 'harmonious' relationship to the environment. Smallholder farmers in Galapagos inhabit this lifeworld and are faced with continuous challenges on how to make their farms economically viable while also attempting to coexist with other species.

Admittedly, the COVID-19 pandemic was the greatest crisis that the archipelago had faced, wiping out the tourism industry and leaving everyone in a state of uncertainty and precarity. Since then, the numbers of tourists have returned. However, one aspect that has not changed is the continuation of external and internal imaginaries, including the 'scientific laboratory' and 'tourism paradise' which reinforce the feeling of inhabiting a 'bureaucratic prison'. Recent scholarship is hopeful that a new imaginary that incorporates humans into the environment is emerging:

We believe that the Human Galapagos imaginary acknowledges the consolidation of a distinct local society in the Galapagos, where concepts of identity, tradition, economy, food security, arts, and cultural heritage play vital roles, challenging and disregarding the idealistic and romantic imaginaries historically associated with the islands. (Astudillo-Cueva *et al.*, 2026)

For this to occur, the marketing of the archipelago, the concentration of capital in limited economic sectors, and the political inclusion and representation of farmers and fishers all require fundamental change. While listening to how Galapagueños imagine their own lives within the archipelago is a necessary starting point, whether such perspectives are allowed to influence those in power remains uncertain.

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