

## FARMING PARADISE: COVID-19 AND THE COEXISTENTIAL RIFT

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In global discourses, the Galapagos Islands have been described as a ‘laboratory of evolution’ and as the Earth’s last paradise. These discourses have shaped the archipelago, attracting migrants and tourists. While scholars and inhabitants claim that residents have no culture, many farmers have a deep sense of belonging. My ethnographic fieldwork during the pandemic (2020-2021) suggested that this sense of belonging – a key to coexistence – is being weakened by the numerous overlapping risks currently facing Galapagueño farmers, including pests, climate change, and COVID-19. These challenges have aggravated existing problems in the agricultural sector, leading to a *coexistential rift*, a vicious cycle where farmers become more alienated from the earth they cultivate and from one another, due to their greater market dependence and the desperate need to make money. The risk this paper focuses on, COVID-19, acted like a ‘time machine’, bringing back aspects of what life had been like before the tourism boom and reviving a deep sense of nostalgia for a utopian past where people knew and cared for one another in the community and had a deep connection to the soil. Paradoxically, it has revealed utopian desires for the future which cannot materialize due to uncertainty, indebtedness, and the current political and economic system. By fostering a stronger sense of coexistence and supporting the agricultural sector, we have the potential to address social and environmental challenges.

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### Galapagos: paradise, laboratory, or lifeworld?

Two of the most prevalent concepts in the public imagination relating to the Galapagos Islands are ‘paradise’ and ‘tranquillity’. As geographer Christophe Grenier (2007 [2002]) explains, the

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archipelago is linked to a dual myth: as a pristine ‘last paradise’ for tourists and as an ‘El Dorado’ for Ecuadorian migrants who seek tranquillity and higher paid work. Originally viewed as a worthless landscape (Latorre 1999) that was associated with pirates, whalers, and small settler communities populated by convicts, the external perception of the archipelago has dramatically shifted over the last few decades. While early 20<sup>th</sup>-century scientists labelled the Galapagos as a ‘laboratory of evolution’ to incentivize the conservation of the archipelago (Hennessy 2017), the burgeoning tourism industry in the 1970s promoted the imaginary idea of pristine nature, adding Galapagos to global fantasies of the ‘spectacle of nature’ (Brockington et al. 2008; Igoe 2010).<sup>2</sup> In turn, these mediascapes (Appadurai 1996) have led tourism to grow exponentially, with over 270,000 people visiting the archipelago in 2018 and 2019, and the local inhabitants have increased from approximately 1,300 in 1950 to over 25,000 today (INEC, 2015).

Based on a year of ethnographic fieldwork, I argue that ever since the creation of the Galapagos National Park Directorate (GNPD) and the Charles Darwin Foundation<sup>3</sup> (CDF) in 1959, Galapagos’ inhabitants have been living under a nearly hegemonic *conservationist paradigm*, an overarching ideology that is based on a few foundational presuppositions: (1) that the conservation of the archipelago is more important than all other forms of interaction with the environment, which are considered extractivist; (2) that locals are destroying nature and there is a certain ‘carrying capacity’ for the archipelago, based on a predominantly Neo-Malthusian argument (Eibl-Eibesfeldt 1960; De Groot 1983; Bensted-Smith 2002); (3) that a strict set of rules and regulations must exist, in addition to migratory restrictions, to prevent the environment from being destroyed. For instance, Quiroga (2009) compellingly explains how global flows of imagery about Galapagos’ pristine nature contributed to increased flows of humans and, therefore, threatened the environment and the isolation that led to the archipelago’s uniqueness. This ‘Galapagos paradox’ is premised upon the idea that humans *cannot coexist* with their environment.

Under the current neoliberal capitalist system, these assumptions of human destructiveness may be partly true, as people focus on short-term profit over sustainability in an archipelago where little money reaches local inhabitants.<sup>4</sup> Salcedo has argued that economic inequality is at the root of conflict among Galapagueño social sectors (2008: 33). 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: 128). The tourism industry and the political and economic structures that allow it to operate are mainly responsible for this inequality, which aggravate existing problems in Galapagos. As Burke (2021: 13-14) has pointed out, the current tourism model

<sup>2</sup> This term is used to describe images of nature used by conservationists, in cooperation with the capitalist system, to justify actions taken to protect the environment, attract funding and foster an environmental ethic (Brockington et al. 2008: 175-200).

<sup>3</sup> As the archipelago’s first scientific organization, CDF provides research for the GNPD’s conservation efforts.

<sup>4</sup> Neoliberalism is ‘a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade. The role of the state is to create and preserve an institutional framework appropriate to such practices’ (Harvey 2005: 2).

‘accelerates food insecurity’ and does not address the ‘externalities and risks’ that the industry poses to the inhabitants of the archipelago.

The world has been divided into ‘risk winners and risk losers’ (Beck 1999: 64). In the case of Galapagos, the people who were not responsible for producing risks (such as rubbish or pollution) must suffer the consequences of the tourism operators who make the money and later donate relatively small percentages of their accumulated wealth towards ‘conservation’. In fact, these economic sectors tend to ‘blame the victim’ by claiming that the local population is responsible for degradation and should be better educated or informed. Furthermore, globalization has led to the expansion of ‘dreamscapes’ (Appadurai 2015), leading participants to desire new technology and intensifying the flow of commodities to the archipelago. For most people worldwide, as Achille Mbembe highlighted, globalization has simply been ‘licking at the shop-window’ (*lécher la vitrine*, quoted in Meyer and Geschiere 1999: 5). Dreams and desires increase but livelihoods do not, leaving people frustrated with the newfound inadequacy of their lives in relation to globalized utopias.

In addition to inequality under the ethos of neoliberal capitalism, in Galapagos the ‘fortress conservation model’ (Brockington 2002) is still the *status quo* and laws prevent locals from going kayaking or camping without permits. Most inhabitants are simply unable to afford going to see the uninhabited islands because they can only be visited by cruise ships, so they often feel like they are ‘living inside a beautiful jail’.<sup>5</sup> On the other hand, tourists who visit the archipelago are often surprised to discover that four of the islands are inhabited by human populations. As Brockington et al. (2008) point out, Marx’s idea of commodity fetishism is a useful way of understanding the way in which Nature is consumed with social and historical contexts obscured. Debord (1995 [1967]) elaborated on the role of the media in fetishizing experiences to the extent that people’s lives become the accumulation of spectacles and certain parts of the world are designated as ‘tourist playgrounds’ (Brockington et al. 2008). Furthermore, the alliance between tourism and conservationist sectors is apparent, with organizations like the CDF depending upon donations from cruise ship companies in order to operate. As in other parts of the world, conservation work is well aligned with neoliberalism in the sense that ‘hybrid governance’ systems are created to ensure profitable ‘ecotourism’, unlimited growth, and re-territorialization that usually involves controlling ‘fence and fine’ strategies for locals living inside national parks (Igoe and Brockington 2007).

In summary, as part of the Western ‘cult of wilderness’ (Martinez-Alier 2002), there is currently an overarching *conservationist paradigm* focused on taking the archipelago ‘back to Eden’ (Bensted-Smith 2002: 1), unrealistically attempting to undo the damage committed by humans since the islands were discovered in 1535. The scientific and conservationist project to conserve Galapagos for humanity has been deemed an example of ‘classic imperialism’ (Grenier and de Miras 1994: 665), or what Ramírez refers to as ‘neocolonial conservationism’ (2004: 237), allowing for both the expansion of international tourism companies and greater Ecuadorian

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<sup>5</sup>All participant conversations from my ethnographic fieldwork in Galapagos were translated from Spanish.

sovereignty over the archipelago. This *conservationist paradigm* has led to a combination of strict laws that alienate people from their environment, prioritize transforming Nature into a commodity for wealthy tourists to consume, and accelerate the flows of people, invasive species, finance, objects, media, etc. 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 [2002]: 24). Hence, despite his scathing criticisms of natural scientists due to their relationship to the tourism industry, he agrees with them that sustainability can only be achieved by reducing these flows. Grenier argued that to have a 'true ecotourism' (2007: 437) the archipelago should lessen its exposure to external flows by reducing the numbers of tourists that visit the islands, lengthening their average stay, cutting the number of cruise operators, and increasing the amount of land-based tourism. Under the current neoliberal logic of constant growth, none of these actions have been implemented and it seems unlikely that the politicians and tourism sector would be interested in doing so.

In an attempt to reconcile human and non-human actors of Galapagos and to rebrand Galapagos as a refuge, Laso (2020) suggests that we think of Galapagos as a garden. Although this is better than the paradise or laboratory analogies, because it incorporates the idea of growing food, a garden still implies a place that is managed by humans. I suggest that we abandon branding the archipelago altogether because each metaphor carries intellectual baggage. However, if we must use a metaphor, I propose labelling Galapagos as a *lifeworld*. Ingold uses this inclusive concept to describe humans inhabiting the world 'in a way that does not...reduce them to mere objects of nature' (2000: 90) and which emphasizes a 'dwelt-in world' (Ingold 1993: 40) in addition to entangled relationships between living and non-living entities. In other words, Galapagos is a place like other locations on Earth, filled with a rich environmental and human history, and which cannot be reduced to being a 'tourist playground' paradise or a laboratory to be studied.

Rather than focus on Neo-Malthusian arguments about the ecosystemic threat posed by Galapagos' human population, we should be thinking about the quality of relationships, and whether *coexistence* between humans and the environment can be achieved. In accordance with Burke's (2021) observation that the existing tourism model fails to enhance the archipelago's food security, Viteri (2017) contends that strengthening the agricultural sector can lead to a reduction in imported goods and invasive species. By strengthening the agricultural sector and lessening inequality, social and environmental problems in the archipelago could be improved. (Andrada et al. 2010: 126). Additionally, a sense of belonging is socially beneficial, because with a greater sense of solidarity there would be fewer conflicts and a deeper connection with the environment. The remainder of this paper will explore how a Galapagueño sense of belonging and coexistence has been threatened by compounding risks, including the COVID-19 pandemic, which will be described ethnographically, and propose a theoretical framework for understanding the ways in which risks can alter people's lives.

## **‘To belong, or not to belong’**

Galapagueños often say that ‘there is no culture in Galapagos.’ Such arguments are based on the fact that there has been an exponential population increase in the last few decades from the Ecuadorian mainland and internationally. Hunt et al. (2022) claim there is a *cultural identity crisis* because inhabitants ‘do not yet have a cohesive culture’ (Hunt et al. 2022: 12); since Galapagos has no Indigenous people, it is the longest standing colonists who are able to assert the greatest claim over sovereignty. Unlike other locations where Indigenous people must be ‘ecologically noble’ in order to receive support (Brockington et al. 2008: 125), in Galapagos it has been possible to retain the ‘pristine myth’ (Denevan 1992) and under the *conservationist paradigm* that considers all humans introduced species, its inhabitants must constantly prove their legitimacy. Contrary to Hunt et al. (2022), who fail to acknowledge that all cultures worldwide are dynamic and fragmented, understanding Galapagueño identity requires directing attention to the (mostly economic) tensions between social groups and the obstacles to a stronger sense of belonging to the archipelago.

Ospina (2003: 116-19) argued that the defining factor of Galapagueño identity is people’s individual use of nature, whether it be fishing, farming, or tourism; in turn, debates over the ‘correct’ relationship to the environment have led to social conflict over resources. Despite conflicts still occurring and criticisms of conservationists by other sectors, environmental viewpoints nowadays are taken for granted. According to Foucault (1976), one of the essential aspects of governmentality and biopolitics is that people unwittingly impose the government’s rules upon themselves. Agrawal (2005) proposed the term ‘environmentality’ to explain how governments can instil an environmental ethic and a particular view of ‘the environment’ in its citizens. Therefore, in Galapagos the *conservationist paradigm* is a form of successful environmentality espoused by the GNPD and CDF ever since their institutions became operational in 1964. These days, most people refrain from eating giant tortoises, are hyperaware about recycling and appropriate rubbish disposal, and ensure they keep at least six feet away from wildlife.

Andrada et al. (2010: 69-70) observed that the predominance of scientific terminology, such as ‘endemic’ and ‘introduced’, has created a hierarchy of living things, and makes it difficult for inhabitants to ever develop a deep sense of belonging:

All living things in Galapagos are subject to a purity test (...) All are classified according to their ‘origin’. Introduced? Endemic? Native? These variables create a hierarchy of living organisms that stigmatizes introduced species, especially ‘plagas’ (pests) (...) humans are always a potential ‘plaga’ (...) it is very difficult for humans to find their place on the islands; they will always be precarious, like uneasy and uncomfortable visitors who cannot find their place because they harm everything they touch.

Alternatively, Bocci (2022) contests the idea that Galapagos inhabitants lack a sense of belonging and ‘are only a place to visit’ (Ibid: 104), explaining that farmers have ‘long-term ties with the islands’ (Ibid: 109), a cultural sense of belonging he refers to as *arraigo* (rootedness). The author, who conducted extensive ethnographic research with farmers prior to the pandemic, explains this rootedness as stemming from: (1) farmers dwelling on the islands for much longer than the existence of the tourism industry; (2) their feelings of pride and responsibility for feeding the local community; (3) their ability to survive global crises; (4) their active role in managing their land; (5) their resistance to marginalization through peer networks and cooperatives. He argues that policymakers should rethink resilience and adaptation because *arraigo* could have enormous potential for ‘convivial conservation’,<sup>6</sup> where humans are actively involved in environmental conservation, and that ‘agriculture can be a vehicle for culture’ (2022: 110).

While I generally agree with Bocci’s assessment of farmers’ deeper sense of dwelling and am convinced that the issue of belonging is at the heart of understanding human-environment relations, I reiterate that in the Galapagos context smallholder farmers are among the most economically marginalized groups and, based on my in-depth interviews, it is evident that they are tired of inhabitants being considered ‘introduced species’ under the *conservationist paradigm*. Additionally, despite farmers’ strong desire for belonging and coexistence, ‘convivial conservation’ cannot be achieved unless: (a) farmers are supported economically, since most are struggling with indebtedness; (b) there is a huge political shift, because farmers believe current policies are only making their lives more difficult. The networks of peer support and cooperatives that Bocci describes were actually criticized as being non-functional by the frustrated farmers I spoke to. While conducting ethnographic fieldwork research with farmers during the pandemic (September 2020-August 2021) for my DPhil thesis (Stimson 2023), I perceived a different reality: one of great nostalgia for a utopian past, complaints about indebtedness, a growing sense of alienation from the community and in relation to the soil, and a sense that even though belonging (*arraigo*) may still be the ultimate goal, a widening *coexistential rift* is preventing it from happening.

## COVID-19: survivance, coexistence, and risk

The COVID-19 pandemic was a unique time to be conducting ethnographic research in Galapagos. Documenting its effects in the archipelago not only has unique historical value, but also revealed the ways in which residents cope with livelihood challenges and was insightful for understanding the relationship between capitalism, risk, and anxiety. When COVID-19 emerged worldwide, the Galapagos Islands closed itself off to tourists from mid-March 2020 to June 2020. Puerto Ayora, the largest town in the archipelago, was once filled with boisterous tourists shopping for t-shirts and going to bars, but in September 2020 it was eerily deserted and shops

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<sup>6</sup> Convivial conservation is defined by Büscher and Fletcher as ‘a vision, a politics, and a set of governance principles for the future of conservation’; it has the goal of undoing the dichotomy of humans and nature by conceptualizing inhabitants of protected areas as ‘dwellers’ rather than ‘aliens’, amongst other objectives (2020: 284).

were closed. It felt like a ghost town. Numerous disinfection systems were installed at the ports, airports, and hotels in the hopes of making tourists feel Galapagos was safe to visit. Since news had travelled that COVID-19 can survive on the soles of shoes, the firefighters sprayed the streets and disinfection mats were placed outside of the few businesses that were still open. People wore hazmat suits, gloves, masks, and other gear that are all too familiar around the globe. As isolated as Galapagos seems when it is depicted in the media, it is actually remarkably well connected to flows of tourists, viruses, invasive species, and commodities.

It is difficult to grasp the magnitude of the COVID-19 crisis in Galapagos because by the time I arrived in September 2020, many people had already left the archipelago on humanitarian flights and so the worst affected people could not be interviewed for my qualitative doctoral research. Emotionally, the COVID-19 pandemic has been traumatic: 'The virus really terrifies us and we have no idea when tourism will normalize.' One participant recounted that it was 'like Armageddon' and the 'cyber-driven panic' led to chaos and confusion as tourists tried to leave the archipelago and some got stranded during lockdown.

Although some farmers assured me that the situation in Galapagos was less dire than in mainland Ecuador because of community solidarity, food baskets, and the generally bountiful agriculture of the highlands, other participants, especially those living in urban areas, described a different reality: one of hunger, desperation and even some merchants committing suicide because they had accrued enormous debts that they couldn't pay back. Farmers suffered too, because people no longer bought as much produce and began growing their own food. Since the pandemic had caught everyone off guard, even more wealthy farmers and ranchers had recently accrued debts that they could no longer repay. For instance, one of the farm stays that I had planned for my fieldwork had to be cancelled because the farmer sold the land to pay back his debts. Hence, in most cases people were more distraught by their economic woes than by the fear of getting infected by the virus. Galapagueños explained that this was the biggest crisis of their lives, even worse than the 2016 drought, the dollarization crisis in 1999, and the devastating 1982 El Niño (ENSO).

During my research, I conducted semi-structured interviews with 219 people (150 farmers and 69 individuals from other professions), all of whom had anxious stories relating to the impact of COVID-19. By January 1<sup>st</sup>, 2022, 2,321 people in Galapagos had gotten infected and 25 had died, out of a population of roughly 30,000. Two of my participants' elderly parents passed away due to COVID-19. One of the families visited their father at his deathbed and all 15 siblings contracted COVID-19 in the process, which they admit was careless, the result of losing their fear of the virus. Since children were not allowed to attend a funeral and the body was buried in an area far from the cemetery, they were distraught because they could not even give a final farewell. COVID-19 obliterated all other fears and worries to the point that multiple people commented that they had never had any worries before the pandemic. A health professional at the Puerto Ayora hospital explained what she was witnessing:

It really worries me how it is impacting the youth. Galapagos doesn't have many options for adolescents. They have limited options and now they're locked in. (...) My son is that age and he rarely goes out (...) There's more depression and particularly more interfamily violence. In fact, we even had a murder during the pandemic. It was a femicide and is the first known case in Galapagos (...) At the hospital there have been some attempted suicides (...) What's really weird is that people seem to have decided not to get sick. Before the hospital was full and now it's empty.

In addition to violence, suicides, and mental health issues, many people's problems were financial, because in the hopes of improving farms or expanding businesses they accrued debts which they thought they could pay back. Galapagueños felt desperate, because 'nobody thought this would happen' and although banks were refinancing loans, they still expected people to pay. Since Galapagos is the most affluent region of Ecuador, people were used to a strong economy based on the certainty that tourists would always come. As a survival strategy and emotional escape valve, some naturalist guides I used to work with ended up cultivating food on plots of land they owned in the highlands but had never had the time to work on. One guide explained:

If we weren't doing this, we would be watching TV for six hours and would be screwed (...) One has to accept that things have changed and we have to manage things differently now (...) I think having goats is therapeutic. They're curing us emotionally. We also have meat and maybe even milk (...) My son surfs and that helps psychologically with the pandemic.

Some farmers expressed religious interpretations of the pandemic, claiming that 'the world was out of control and God needed to "reset" things,' while others took the opportunity to make dire eschatological predictions, stating that God is tired and we are approaching 'the end of time (...) we are all sinners'.

Galapagueños dealt with the crisis in a number of innovative ways, including the creation of Facebook barter pages.<sup>7</sup> Agricultural produce was sold via WhatsApp, small entrepreneurship projects sprouted, owners of abandoned plots of land started cultivating, urban gardening became popular, and despite feeling trapped people had more time for family and friends. Additionally, during lockdown there were acts of solidarity with the community. As one farmer explained to me:

Before, here in Galapagos being a farmer was to be the 'last wheel of the cart' (...) The pandemic came and so I say we're heroes without a cape. My wife and children and I one day said, 'money doesn't matter. Let's give food away to people', without thinking about money and instead thinking that tomorrow the

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<sup>7</sup> The reappearance of barter differed from past practices, since participants would mentally calculate the precise monetary value of commodities before exchanging. This shift indicates the influence of the neoliberal ethos of individualism, rather than exchange driven solely by necessity.



same thing could happen to us. So, the people in the *campo* had a banana, a chicken, and were able to survive well, but people in lockdown didn't have income or as much food as us. So when we had an overproduction of pineapples we went down to town to give them away, obviously to those who don't have enough.

Some people spoke of having the opportunity to reflect upon their lives, spend time with family, get 'closer to God', or find alternative income sources. As a naturalist guide explained, the crisis had brought her closer to her network of family and friends because people had more free time and due to having less money people depended on one another. However, the majority of my participants, and particularly the most economically disadvantaged, painted the opposite picture. In some cases farmers didn't even harvest their crops and would either donate or let produce rot, because it is also too expensive to pay for transportation from the rural highlands to the port towns.

A female farmer from Santa Cruz Island explained that her husband had lost his job and since they still had debts to pay, they were unable to pay for basic services, such as water and electricity. Because their children's classes went online, they had to install Internet at home, which costs \$85 per month. 'Every day is worse because there's nowhere to get money from. Nothing is sold', she explained. Even if she manages to earn \$26 from sales in the market, the taxi that takes the produce down to market charges her \$13, so she hardly makes any money. Luckily, her family was receiving food baskets ('kits alimenticios') from a nonprofit called 'Frente Insular' and they also ate some of the food they produce. When asked if the government<sup>8</sup> or the community were helping her, she said that before people were supportive, but now 'people don't share and everyone works for themselves.' Another smallholder from Santa Cruz Island elaborated on the economic and psychological impacts of the pandemic:

It has been tough. I owe the banks, because I bought my lands bit by bit and I still owe them for that. There's no work. I have animals, but we can't sell them (...) I went to the bank and they said I could refinance my debt, but it's so much interest! It's almost double (...) Nobody can deal with so much debt and no work and the fear of going out and getting sick. It has affected people economically and mentally too! (...) Some people are just thinking and thinking of where to find the money and they're going crazy.

Throughout my year in the Galapagos Islands farmers expressed different views of the future, but they all recognized that life would be more difficult now and there was no easy way out of the pandemic because tourists would return little by little. I witnessed a more relaxed attitude towards the pandemic around Halloween and an increase in travellers during the 2020 Christmas holidays, but there was still less tourism than there used to be and so the entire society continued to struggle. People seemed more hopeful around the time when I left, in August 2021, because

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<sup>8</sup> The government also provided food baskets, but farmers complained about political abandonment and claimed that churches were more supportive.

the vaccination campaign had been a success. Some seemed pessimistic about the global repercussions: ‘Maybe by 2025 the economy will have recovered. Until then poor people [worldwide] will continue to die of hunger.’ Luckily, as one participant highlighted, the very name ‘Galapagos’ attracts tourists from around the world; one hotel owner asserted that he was booked out for all of 2022 and cruise ships also rebooked passengers for the next couple of years. However, due to the fact that land operations involving towns had been cancelled, it is questionable whether this kind of ship tourism will actually benefit farmers and the general population. In spite of all the pessimism surrounding this, some farmers tried to remain hopeful and light-hearted:

Since I’m smart, I’m going to make a money printing machine, but I forgot the screws so I won’t be able to finish it! (laughs) (...) One shouldn’t get bitter. We need to be positive, no matter what happens! You have to stand up for yourself. Life goes on! (...) That’s the problem. Lots of people just give up, but I’m going to continue moving forward.

The majority of Galapagueños survived the pandemic, but everyone lost something, whether it be a family member, personal finances, employment, a farm, or mental health. On the other hand, it is worth highlighting people’s agency in not merely becoming tragic victims of the pandemic, but actively reshaping their lives. The concept of ‘survivance’ from Native American studies underscores that survival is ongoing, since the third syllable ‘ance’ refers to ‘endurance’ and a ‘repudiation of dominance, tragedy, and victimry’ (Vizenor 1998: 15). Survivance has been defined as ‘the action, condition, quality, and sentiments of the verb survive, “to remain alive or in existence,” to outlive, persevere’ (Vizenor 2008: 19). As useful as this concept is in emphasizing human agency and the active process of surviving, it is only somewhat helpful in the context of dealing with COVID-19 and an uncertain future. On the other hand, the concept of ‘coexistence’ focuses on human relationships and therefore turns the question of survival into a communal act – surviving with people and with the environment.

When trying to understand how Galapagueño farmers coped with the pandemic, it is important to think about the ways in which risks can alter human behaviour and values, ultimately impacting relationships between each other and the environment – their *coexistence*. Even ‘uncertainty’<sup>9</sup> is an insufficient explanatory concept because it relates to something being unknown or ‘not certain’, rather than the idea of threats and challenges, which are more closely linked to ‘risk’. Coexistence implies the idea of living in relation to other humans and other species, therefore becoming the foundation for thinking about sustainability. In the remainder of this paper, I will explain how the pandemic brought back elements of a nostalgic past and how the concepts of ‘coexistence’ and ‘risk’ are essential to understanding how people were affected by COVID-19. Finally, I will explain my concept of the *coexistential rift*, which explains the negative

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<sup>9</sup> When uncertainty ‘has a positive flavour we speak of “luck” or good “fortune” and when uncertainty is tainted by dismal or catastrophic expectations we speak of “risk”’ (Dein 2016: 1).

cycle of alienation and market dependence that is created when farmers are confronted by an onslaught of threats.

## **Liminality, nostalgia, and the time machine**

Uncertainty prevailed throughout my year of fieldwork, especially when no vaccine was available. Stunningly, due to efforts from the local government and the support of tourism companies, by June 2021 the entire adult population of Galapagos had been vaccinated. In the interim, however, my participants experienced a chronic sense of *liminality*. According to *The rites of passage* (van Gennep 1960 [1909]: 18), *liminality* involves wavering ‘between two worlds’, to be suspended in a different sort of time. Inhabitants remarked that the pandemic had brought back some aspects of a nostalgic utopian past that was calmer, more communal, and with bountiful agriculture. Stories of wildlife showing up in unexpected places, like a whale in Academy Bay, were part of global discourses of nature recovering during lockdown. Even construction projects to install storm drainage and sewage in Puerto Ayora were interpreted by residents in a nostalgic way, since the dirt roads reminded them of what the town used to look like. Although nostalgic narratives have been documented by other anthropologists prior to the pandemic (Ospina 2005; 2006), the difference with COVID-19 is that people felt they were actually reliving the past:

COVID is like having a time machine, which is really cool because you can access the Galapagos of the past, where you lived more calmly with the community, had a slower routine, gave importance to very basic things – but with technology and Internet! It’s like having technology and going to the past, but the problem is that you travelled back in time and took your debts with you!

This COVID-19 ‘time machine’ revealed the kind of tranquil and harmonious coexistence that people desire for the future, while paradoxically making it more difficult to achieve, due to greater indebtedness. In other words, the lack of money is an obstacle to coexistence. During one of my farm visits, I sat on the porch and had coffee with a farmer while it rained. He reminisced nostalgically about the past:

Here in Galapagos there’s a harmony that doesn’t exist elsewhere in the world, a harmony with people and animals. There was more harmony before (...) The iguana and the sea lion share the same territory. That doesn’t happen in the African Savannah (...) Here you have the iguana next to a sea lion and a Sally Lightfoot is eating bugs off of them. There’s a symbiotic relationship between all the animals and nobody fights over food or territory (...) [Before people] didn’t fight either. Before I remember fishers going to the highlands with half a bag of *lisas* (mullet fish) to give away in Bellavista and they would get manioc in exchange. Or if my father needed something and we’d go by motorcycle to visit a family, they’d bring out a coffee, some cheese, and so forth. We would take something

to their house, and they would give us something to take to ours. There was an exchange and also we would sit and talk like you and I are talking now for hours, drinking coffee (...) Nowadays there's no time to talk, no time to socialize. It has been lost (...) I have a friend who said he would come by for a coffee and it's been seven months and he hasn't come (...) We no longer have time for friends, to chat and relive old times.

In this excerpt, the farmer's desire for coexistence is evident. Afterwards, he explained that the reason his life had become so busy was that he needed to make more money to provide his children with some of the foods and commodities that they saw on TV and the Internet. Other farmers were more blunt about the change in times, stating that 'everything runs on gasoline and without cash you can't do anything (...) Right now, women are saying, "if you have money, speak. If not, go away". Now there's no love. There's only money.' Along this same vein, a frustrated rancher explained that he was considering leaving the archipelago because 'the heart of human beings is damaged. [Politicians'] hearts go to stealing the money from the people (...) They just want to get rich, like [President] Correa did (...) Here there is no incentive to stay.'

These excerpts demonstrate that global flows have led to increasing alienation and that money has become of central importance. When the pandemic struck, it merely amplified the existing problems that the agricultural sector already had. For instance, farmers had been complaining for a long time about not being able to compete with imported goods, but during the pandemic sales plummeted. Particularly in the case of beef, farmers found themselves exploited by merchants who would pay them less, but sell at the same price to consumers. In my DPhil thesis (Stimson 2023), I go into more detail about the challenges farmers face, including lack of credit, political abandonment, an unstable climate, increasing amounts of pests, the inability to compete with cheaper imported goods, and expensive labour costs. In this paper I have mainly focused on COVID-19 and the ways in which it helps us understand a *coexistential rift*, a process that explains how compounding risks make farmers' lives more difficult.

## What is the coexistential rift?

Throughout my fieldwork, participants spoke of wanting to coexist (*convivir*) as part of a small caring community that had a close relationship to the soil. They were unable to achieve this goal due to economic hardship and the pressing need to make money. Hence, I coined the *coexistential rift* as a way of describing how unequal flows of capital combined with cumulative risks have *transformative agency* and can alter human values and behaviour. It is therefore a novel way of studying risk using a causal framework.

Previous theories on the subject have been too deterministic and essentializing. For instance, Douglas and Wildavsky (1983) developed a grid-group typology to explain how *a priori* 'ways of life' relate to risk perception, while Beck (1992) developed a theory of a global 'risk society' composed of contemporary abstract and 'invisible' risks that are capable of reaching

everyone in new and unexpected ways. While the former answers questions regarding why people consider some things riskier than others, and the latter distinguishes contemporary *manufactured risks*<sup>10</sup> (Giddens 1999) from risks of the past, neither approach offers much insight into how risk permeates everyday life. Geographers Müller-Mahn and Everts (2013) introduced the concept of ‘riskscapes’ to integrate both temporal and spatial elements into the study of risk, but in practice this approach towards risk remains understudied. Even the concept of ‘riskscapes’, which bridges the constructivist/materialist divide in the discussion of risk, does not explain how risks are part of broader natural and social processes.

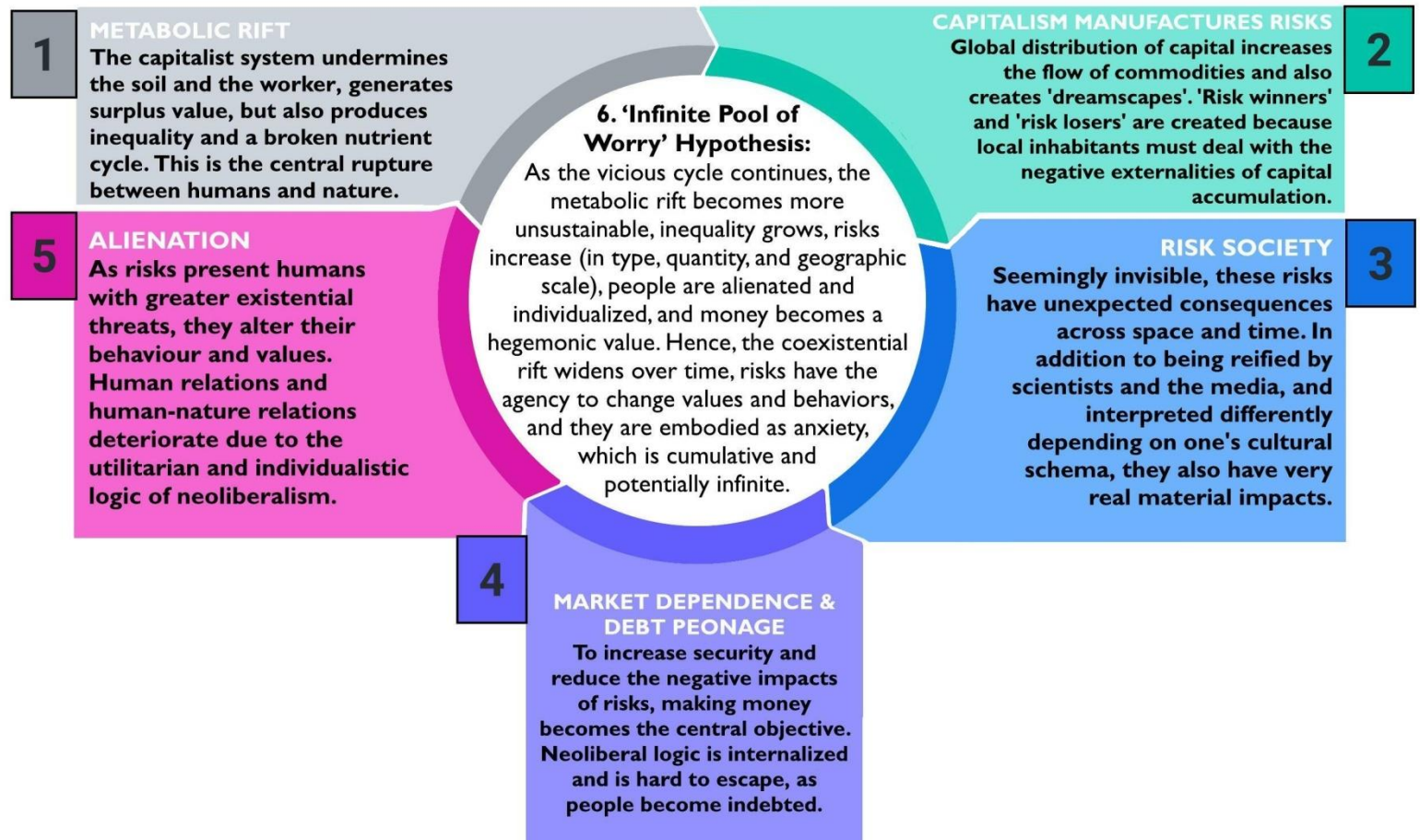
The *coexistential rift* is a vicious cycle in which neoliberal capitalism creates risks that are embodied as anxieties, thus leading to increased market dependence and to human alienation from the community and the soil. More specifically, the cycle begins with the globalization of neoliberal capitalism, the amplification of an unsustainable *metabolic rift* (Marx 1990 [1867]; Foster 1997; 1999; Foster et al. 2010) that exploits ‘free nature’, the unequal distribution of capital, and the creation of *manufactured risks*. The combination of inequality and *manufactured risks* (which are a by-product of capitalism itself) transforms the world into a *risk society* (Beck 1992 [1986]). As a result, farmers are forced into debt peonage (Harvey 2018) and are increasingly becoming market dependent (Chibber 2022). Money becomes not simply a tool, but also ‘the very embodiment of value, the ultimate object of desire’ (Graeber 2001: 66), intensifying people’s dependence on the capitalist system (see Diagram 1).

My ethnographic fieldwork in Galapagos clearly showed that many risks faced by farmers are a product of the capitalist system and are embodied as anxieties, altering their behaviour and leading to alienation from the community and the soil. Furthermore, I argue that psychological theories that hypothesize that there is a ‘finite pool of worry’ (Weber 2006) are actually discussing a finite attention span (Sisco et al. 2020: 2). Instead, I propose that anxiety is cumulative and that the resulting potentially infinite pool of worry contributes to mental health problems, which are ultimately symptomatic of a society suffering from the *coexistential rift*.

It is important to understand the nomenclature of the *coexistential rift*: the prefix ‘co-’ implies that we live with other beings in our surroundings, ‘existential’ is in reference to feelings of ‘existential crisis’ rather than mainstream philosophy on existentialism (Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Sartre), and *rift* should be thought of as a verb (as in rifting), rather than a noun, because the concept describes a process of cyclically tearing apart, rather than a final state of being.

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<sup>10</sup>*Manufactured risks* (Giddens 1999) are unforeseen risks created by humans in the process of development. Examples include nuclear disasters, climate change, and pollution. Even though COVID-19 is not ‘manufactured’ by humans, its invisibility and rapid expansion have unpredictable consequences.

**Diagram I: The Coexistential Rift**

The elements in Diagram I are explained in more detail as follows:

1. **Metabolic rift (Marx 1990 [1867]; Foster 1997, 1999; Foster et al. 2010):** In *Capital* (1867), Marx explains that 'all progress in capitalist agriculture is a progress in the art, not only of robbing the worker, but of robbing the soil (...) [and therefore] undermining the original sources of all wealth' (Marx 1976: 638). Moore argued that the *metabolic rift* 'stands out as one of critical political ecology's most powerful ideas' (2011: 39) when applied to world-ecology<sup>11</sup>. My participants commented on how bountiful the soil used to be decades ago (both on the mainland<sup>12</sup> and on the archipelago) when their avocados and watermelons were huge, but currently they depend on artificial fertilizers<sup>13</sup>. Even though this is a large-scale process that explains the origin of capitalism's unsustainable relationship with Nature,

<sup>11</sup> 'World-ecology' is a global interdisciplinary conversation about capitalism as an 'ecological regime' (Moore 2011: 2). In other words, capitalism is a product of the 'web of life' (Moore 2015) and is not just acting upon nature.

<sup>12</sup> The depletion of the soil, lack of well-paid job opportunities, and natural disasters on the mainland are linked to migration to Galapagos.

<sup>13</sup> Essentially, '[m]odern agriculture has become the art of turning oil into food' (Foster 2010: 81).

in the context of Galapagos the idea that human depletion of the soil is the source of socio-ecological problems is only partially true. In the archipelago, since it is cheaper to produce food in mainland Ecuador, the soil and the worker from the mainland are being 'robbed' and exploited when food is imported. Hence, when thinking systemically about the *metabolic rift* in Galapagos, it is important to note that the *metabolic rift* lacks the explanatory power for why farmers are becoming alienated, and instead is part of the vicious cycle of the *coexistential rift*.

2. **Capitalism manufactures risks (Wetherly 1999):** Although it was argued that *manufactured risks* are created by the 'very progression of human development' (Giddens 1999: 4), as Wetherly suggests, the 'deeper connection is to capitalism' (1999: 223). In other words, when a factory produces a commodity at the expense of 'free nature', which it pollutes, the contamination becomes a risk that local communities must deal with, while the companies responsible can extract profit and leave. In Appel's ethnography of an oil rig off the coast of Equatorial Guinea, she introduces the term 'modularity' to describe the ways in which companies seek frictionless profit and disentanglement, even though they are 'deeply implicated' (Appel 2012: 706) and rely upon local conditions to run their businesses. Marx would have considered this as an example of how the essence of money is to erase the ways in which both labour and land are implicated in the creation of its abstract value and how the system itself leads to expanding towards new frontiers of exploitation. In the case of Galapagos, large tourism companies seek to expand profits, but little money reaches the inhabitants. Instead, as Galapagueños like to highlight, the tourism ships just leave the rubbish behind. This is part of neoliberalism's logic of 'internalizing profits and externalizing risks' (Nixon 2011: 35) both spatially and temporally. The money that does reach the community ends up enticing farmers to leave their farms in search of more profitable work. Furthermore, more imported goods to feed tourists lead to the unintended arrival of introduced species. Beck explains that often '[s]ectors that had nothing or very little causally to do with the production of the threat (...) are also among the most affected (...) [and the world is split] into risk winners and risk losers' (1999: 64).
3. **Risk society (Beck 1992 [1986]):** According to this 'world-systems' approach, modernity has *manufactured risks* (Giddens 1999) that 'complement and accentuate one another...[and] where hard-to-manage dangers prevail instead of quantifiable risks' (Beck 1999: 36). Beck explains that three elements of global risks are: delocalization, uncalculability, and non-compensatability (Beck 2008: 1). Under contemporary 'reflexive modernity' people feel 'bouts of existential anxiety' (Beck 1994: 46), are 'obsessively preoccupied with apprehension of possible risks' (Giddens 1991: 53), and are unable to act upon pervasive anxieties (Lupton 2013: 89). Although Beck's 'grand theories' have been critiqued as Eurocentric, not based on empirical evidence, or overly simplistic when dealing with cultural complexity (Dickens 1992; Irwin et al. 1999; Mythen 2004; Voorst 2015), from

my ethnographic evidence it was clear that Galapagos farmers are increasingly worried about abstract *manufactured risks* that are made visible to us by the media, such as COVID-19 and climate change.

4. **Market dependence and debt peonage (Chibber 2022; Harvey 2018):** Prior to the pandemic, smallholder farmers were already affected by numerous challenges to their everyday lives, so they resorted to high interest loans. Despite practicing some degree of subsistence farming, they became increasingly market dependent (Chibber 2022). As Harvey (2018) points out, global financial mechanisms have made sure that '[w]e are all locked into a system of debt peonage' (2018: 437). Furthermore, as neoliberal capitalism is practically ubiquitous, even in remote places like Galapagos people are highly concerned about making money. Even though farmers on Galapagos are perhaps less market-dependent than other sectors of society, new *manufactured risks* like COVID-19 lead people to focus on making money to survive. Arguably, this situation leads farmers to become members of the *precariat*. As Standing (2011) explains, the *precariat* is a new social class where people must think short term because of the four A's (anger, anomie, anxiety, and alienation), and live in 'chronic insecurity' (2011: 20). In other words, as neoliberalism focuses on 'transferring risks and insecurity onto workers' (2011: 1), it alters human values and behaviours – colleagues become competitors and gardens (*chakras*) are reconceptualized as businesses.
  
5. **Alienation (Marx 1990 [1867]):** Marx's concept of alienation evolved throughout his writings. Musto (2010: 82) summarizes the four ways in which alienation is defined: '(1) from the product of his labour, which becomes "an alien object that has power over him"; (2) in his working activity, which he perceives as "directed against himself", as if it "does not belong to him"; (3) from "man's species-being", which is transformed into "a being alien to him"; and (4) from other human beings.' While all are relevant for capitalist critique, in this paper I focus on the latter two forms: human alienation from the environment and from each other. Evidently, these forms of alienation are also interrelated with human alienation from labour and the product itself, but my ethnographic evidence suggests that the consequences of the ongoing crisis are making Galapagos farmers less communal and more likely to treat the soil as a business. Since alienation is closely linked to anxiety (the embodiment of risk), it is important to note that risks have amplified existing structural inequalities, thus acting as a form of 'slow violence' (Nixon 2011). Another way of understanding this form of alienation is to consider Graeber's concept of 'baseline communism' (2011: 98) as the foundation of human sociability and interpret the *coexistential rift* as an attack on this, replacing it with selfishness and individualism. In other words, both alienation and anxiety are the visible symptoms of the damage done when people are confronted by risks and have become both indebted and market dependent.



6. **Infinite pool of worry hypothesis:** Psychologists Linville and Fischer (1991) suggested that people have finite emotional resources for coping with worry because they prefer experiencing negative events separated in time, an idea which Weber (2006) turned into the ‘finite pool of worry’ hypothesis. Nevertheless, a recent publication (which Weber also co-authored) explains that there is ‘no conclusive evidence’ (Sisco et al. 2020: 2) for this hypothesis and that instead people have finite attention spans, meaning that there’s ‘a limit to how many threats we can dwell on or address at a time. However, this does not mean that unattended worries have reduced intensity if they are brought to our attention again’ (Ibid: 17).

The *coexistential rift* is a process that explains the unique connection between neoliberal capitalism, the creation and distribution of *manufactured risks*, market dependence, debt peonage, cumulative anxiety, and alienation. Contrary to terms like *survivance* and *belonging (arraigo)*, my concept helps explain the ways in which risks like COVID-19 are inserted in people’s lives and alter human behaviour and values. Farmers are confronted with a *treadmill syndrome* (Eriksen 2016), where they must struggle harder just to survive. Furthermore, Eriksen (2016) also reminds us that Gregory Bateson’s (1972) *schismogenesis*, or what he calls ‘runaway processes’, are ‘mutually reinforcing growth processes which eventually lead to collapse unless, as Bateson points out, a “third instance” enters into the process and changes the relationship’ (Eriksen 2016: 21). Hence, it is important to note that unless something changes in the vicious cycle of the *coexistential rift*, this may lead to a gradual collapse of the archipelago’s agricultural sector, which is a trend already predicted by Sampedro et al. (2020), who estimated that 75% of the food supply was transported from the mainland in 2017 and by 2037 that number may increase to 95%.

Although it seems obvious that the metabolic rift and capitalism itself create risks that increase alienation and anxiety, I have not encountered this argument articulated in this way before, potentially because there are ‘scholars who assert that Marx is really passé, especially after the dismantling of the Soviet Union’ (Patterson 2009: ix) and so it is unusual to combine Marxist concepts with risk theories. For instance, Giddens claimed that ‘Marxism, as we all know now, has lost most of its potency as a theoretical perspective on history and change’ (Giddens 1996: 366) and Beck stated that:

With the end of the predominance of Marxian theory, the century-long petrification among Europe’s intellectuals has been lifted. The father figure is dead. In fact, only now can the critique of society get its breath back and see more clearly (Beck, 1999: 79).

Although Marx’s historical materialism is deterministic and reductionist, that is no reason to disengage with all of Marx’s ideas. It is noteworthy that Beck (1999) overtly presented himself as anti-Marxist even though ‘Beck’s work is indebted to Marx’s’ (Curran 2016: 21). Beck’s theory of the *risk society* refused to link itself to Marxist ideas, possibly because admitting the importance of *class* ‘would undermine the possibility of a general solution to the problems of society through

a single solution' (Ibid). Regardless of the reasons why risk theory and Eco-Marxist approaches have not been combined previously, the *coexistential rift* provides a framework for investigating and understanding not only the experience of smallholders in Galapagos, but also the causal effects of *manufactured risks* like COVID-19 on a worldwide scale. Furthermore, it may be possible that the *coexistential rift* has always existed at some level in other contexts, but nowadays the cycle is accelerating and overheating (Eriksen 2016), thus amplifying anxieties and risk to the point of existential crisis.

## Conclusion

Based on my ethnographic fieldwork in the Galapagos Islands, in this paper I have argued that the central problem in the archipelago is not the lack of a cohesive culture, but instead a twofold attack on people's identity: inequality and the *conservationist paradigm*. Within this context, it is difficult for people to form a sense of belonging. Although Bocci (2022) is correct in observing that older farmers do have a sense of *arraigo* and nostalgia for the past, during the COVID-19 pandemic I observed farmers struggling with compounding challenges and focusing their time on making money to pay back debts. The 'geographical opening' (Grenier 2007 [2002]) of the archipelago in the 1940s is probably irreversible, as global flows will continue to arrive to the islands.

Instead, there should be an effort to rethink how humans coexist on the archipelago and actively support farmers. Many present-day problems were identified decades ago (Bonilla 1998; Chavez 1993) and solutions have already been suggested by other academics, such as involving farmers in policymaking (Laso 2020), subsidizing local produce, taxing imported goods (Viteri 2017), and addressing systemic inequality (Salcedo 2008). Additionally, I think the problem of expensive labour and lack of capital could be solved through low interest loans and potentially creating a new migratory category for farm labourers and subsidizing those costs. The farmers I spoke to are tired of talking to academics conducting studies that create no viable change in their livelihoods. Equally, they have complained that the more powerful sectors of society (politicians, conservationists, and the tourism sector) should not just think about increasing profits, but should also care about the community. Ultimately, Bocci (2022) is right in that we need to strengthen a sense of belonging to achieve a more sustainable archipelago, but this cannot happen unless we recognize the struggles that people are currently facing. In order to reverse the alienating effects of the *coexistential rift*, we must not just focus on survival, but on coexistence.

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