Community building for sustainability: Floreana’s political process in search of socio-ecological resilience

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Abstract

Community organisation is a key factor in the sustainability of a social-ecological system. Community is not an aggregate of individuals; neither is it a homogeneous social context, but is the result of a sustained process of collective action for articulating humans and environment through the management of strategic resources and social relations. This process is political in nature.

Floreana is a small island (173 km2, of about 200 inhabitants). It is situated in the Galápagos’ archipelago, one of the most emblematic, protected areas on earth, where we have developed ethnographic research for three years (2010-2013) in order to elucidate the social conditions of sustainability, in such a fragile social-ecological system.

Agriculture and tourism are the two key activities for the future of this island: the first, because of the risk that its abandonment may facilitate the proliferation of invasive species; the second, because its development significantly increases human pressure upon the social-ecological system. The State, leading the management of the protected area; and the market, as an inductor of tourism development, are the two main agents of power acting on Floreana. Its inhabitants are looking to improve their quality of life, but they are highly aware of the danger of an acute transformation of the social-ecological system (as has already happened in other islands of the archipelago). This situation has given rise to a reflective process about development and sustainability at local level, in which the islanders claim self-organization in the management of agricultural and tourist resources. This is the basis of the community building process (as a sustained process of collective action) and the emergence of a new political actor within the social-ecological system.

This presentation focuses on the process of community building as a strengthening of the socio-ecological resilience. Thus, island social-ecological system evolution has been analysed through the last century, focusing on: (1) the main economic activities (agriculture and tourism), and (2) the community building process. Internally, building community implies the emergence of patterns of collective action where before there was only the individualism of the first settlers. Only recently have the islanders created institutions for the management of community-based tourism and agricultural activity; as well as developing collective

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definitions of desirable future scenarios for the island. Externally, the community building process leads to the emergence of a new political player (together with the State, mainly represented by the National Park, and the market, embodied by foreign tourist-entrepreneurs): the community. From the community, a multi-level management system for natural resources is claimed.

This case study points out the political nature of the socio-ecological resilience. The analysis reveals how this community building process -through its role in the maintenance of agriculture and the regulation of tourism- facilitates population control, regulation of water resources and control of invasive species, the main drivers of the social-ecological system.

**Keywords:** community, tourism, power relations, politics