

The Island Conservation NGO: some important clarifications

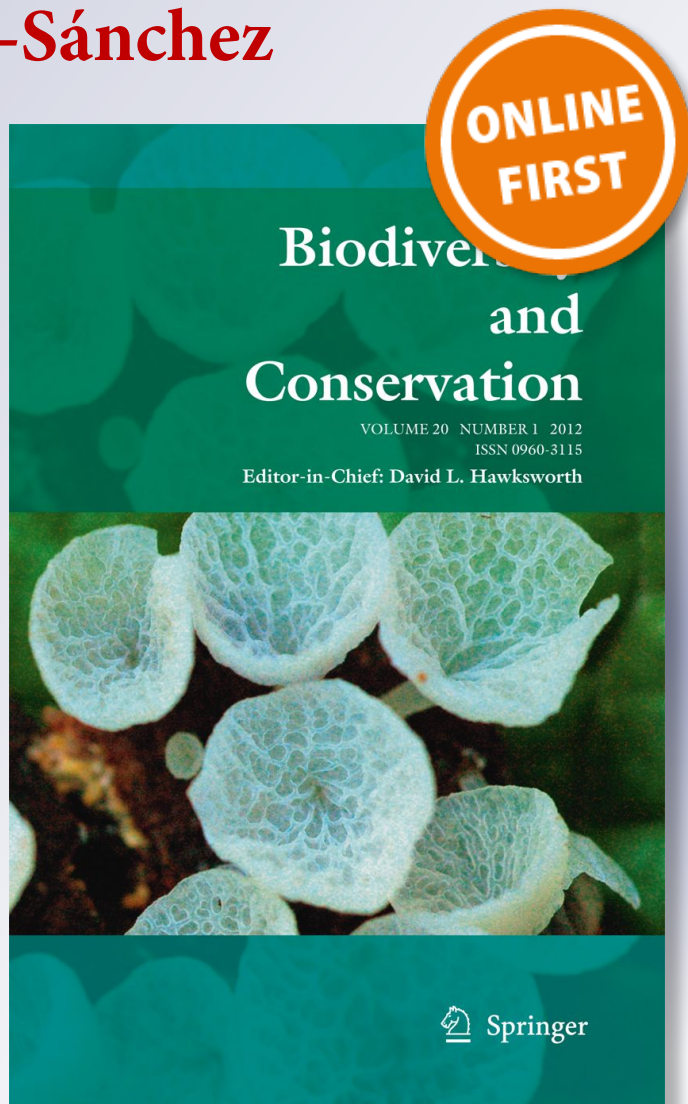
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Abstract This comment draws attention to some of the contents in the paper of Tershy et al. (Biodivers Conserv 21:957–965, 2012) concerning the work of Island Conservation, an NGO. In particular, it clarifies and explains the role of partnerships with other bodies in the restoration and other work of the NGO. We point out that the Mexican Grupo de Ecología y Conservación de Islas had a major role in the execution of much of the work reported on by Tershy et al.

Keywords Grupo de Ecología y Conservación de Islas · Island Conservation · Mexican islands · Mexico

This comment draws attention to some of the views portrayed in the published article by Tershy et al. (2012). Given the convincing information offered by these authors, we can understand that the reviewers of the Tershy et al. paper overlooked some pertinent information and on which we feel obliged to make some important clarifications. We consider that these comments are relevant for an accurate record of achievements in the implicitly covered topics, i.e. the restoration of island ecosystems, the collaboration partnerships between NGOs from different countries, and the sociology of conservation.

While Tershy et al. use facts and quantitative information that are not in dispute, they also tell a story and make an interpretation which is necessarily subjective. It is primarily the latter with which we are concerned. Essentially, Tershy et al. report to the scientific community at large that important conservation work has been achieved by Island Conservation. This is an US-headquartered non-government organization. However, it was a Mexican organization, the Grupo de Ecología y Conservación de Islas, A.C. (also Conservación de Islas or GEICI), which conducted the vast majority of the reported work and achieved the corresponding outcomes. This necessarily involved the Grupo de Ecología y

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Conservación de Islas undertaking tenacious, devoted, creative, ambitious, and professional, hard work. It was Mexican scientists and technicians, together with a very wide network of Mexican government agencies, national and international donors, academic institutions, fishermen cooperatives, and other local organizations that collaborated to improve the environmental health of the Mexican islands for over a decade. Indeed, the Grupo de Ecología y Conservación de Islas, with 25 people, is strongly committed to restoring and conserving the Mexican islands, and it is important that its work is recognized explicitly.

Further, the Grupo de Ecología y Conservación de Islas, is not “the Mexican branch of Island Conservation”, as Tershy et al. suggest. That organization has never been a branch of Island Conservation in Mexico or a branch of any other organization. Conservación de Islas was incorporated formally on 7 October 1998, in Mexico, and under Mexican federal laws, as a Mexican non-for-profit organization. Its board members and employees have been all Mexican from its inception, and it has remained legally independent from all other national and international organizations.

The complex and on-going permits required to conduct eradications on the Mexican islands mentioned by Tershy et al., and the corresponding research, were granted by Mexico's Federal Government to Conservación de Islas, and not to Island Conservation. As stated in the Mexican Constitution, the Mexican islands are federal territories, and as such, a foreign organization such as Island Conservation (or a “branch” of it) cannot, and actually did not get, permits nor support to conduct conservation actions from the mandated bodies: the Ministry of the Interior, Ministry of Environment, Protected Areas Commission, National Institute of Ecology, the Mexican Navy, and Biodiversity Commission.

The relationship between the US and the Mexican organizations was based on a “pass-through grant”, a financial instrument that facilitated the transfer of funds coming from several donors from the US to Conservación de Islas. The scheme was unfortunately terminated by Island Conservation in 2009. Auspiciously, Conservación de Islas had developed other alternative funding sources, and some US donors directed donations directly into our Mexican organization, which has been able to continue and enhance its work.

We also note that there are some mistakes in the legal names of the Mexican islands used in the paper. In Table 1, Isabela (Galápagos) should be corrected to Isabel (Mexico), and Montserrat to Montserrat.

During 2010, Tershy reviewed an article prepared by Conservación de Islas staff, which was published in December of 2011 as a part of the impressive *IUCN Island Invasives Proceedings* (available at www.issg.org/publications.htm#iucn_publications), derived from the Islands Invasives International Conference held in Auckland, New Zealand, in December 2010. All the papers in the *Proceedings* were peer reviewed and followed strict editorial criteria, and represent the most important collection of recent knowledge on island restoration. The papers in this work (Aguirre-Muñoz et al. 2011a, b; Samaniego-Herrera et al. 2011; Luna-Mendoza et al. 2011), offer a wide, more accurate perspective and review of the work of Conservación de Islas in restoring and conserving the Mexican islands, but unfortunately were not referred in Tershy et al. (2012).

The main goal of Conservación de Islas is to restore and protect the unique and bio diverse Mexican islands. To 11 April 2012, it has removed 54 invasive mammal populations from 35 islands in the Mexican Pacific, Gulf of California, Gulf of Mexico, and, recently, the Mexican Caribbean, representing a total insular surface of 508.15 km² (Fig. 1). Other relevant activities include the development of island conservation public

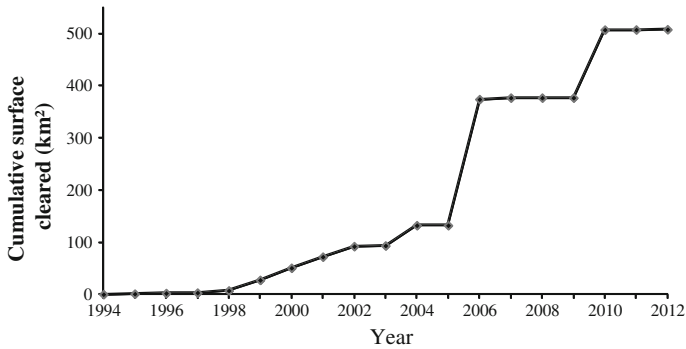


Fig. 1 Cumulative island surface cleared of invasive alien species in Mexico by Conservación de Islas through a collaborative partnership between the Mexican Federal Government, local communities, and national and international donors. (Adapted and updated as for April 2012 from Aguirre-Muñoz et al. 2011a)

policy instruments, such as the recently published National Strategy for the Conservation and Sustainable Development of the Mexican Insular Territory (Comité Asesor Nacional sobre el Territorio Insular Mexicano 2012)—perhaps the first of its type in the world, promoting also sustainable livelihoods for the islands' local communities, and environmental education and outreach.

In conclusion, we consider it is important to clarify that Conservación de Islas is committed to and believes in the value of international collaboration, and regard it as quintessential to the conservation of biodiversity. However, that collaboration must be based on mutual respect, trust, and the recognition of the roles of different partners.

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