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Violence and conservation: Beyond unintended consequences and unfortunate coincidences

Diana Bocarejo ^{a,1}, Diana Ojeda ^{b,1,*}

^a Escuela de Ciencias Humanas, Universidad del Rosario, Calle 12C # 6-25, Edificio Santafé, Of. 502, Bogotá, Colombia

^b Instituto Pensar, Pontificia Universidad Javeriana, Carrera 7 # 40A-54, Segundo Piso, Bogotá, Colombia

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ABSTRACT

While the relationship between violence and conservation has gained increasing attention in both academic and activist circles, official and public discourses often portray their entanglements as (unlucky) overlapping phenomena. In this article, we show how, under specific practices of state territorialization, conservation becomes both the means and reasons for violence. Based on ethnographic research in Colombia's emblematic Tayrona National Natural Park, we detail how both the war on drugs and tourism promotion shape these state practices, and how they have translated into everyday, yet powerful, means of dispossession in the name of conservation. By analyzing the effects of the production of peasants as environmental predators, illegal occupants and collateral damage, we show how official conservation strategies have justified local communities' political and material erasure, and how they have resulted in the destruction of their lived ecologies and the erosion of their livelihood strategies.

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1. Introduction

During the last two decades in Colombia, both the war on drugs and tourism promotion have become central mechanisms of state territorialization in the midst of intense armed conflict. In this article, we study how these mechanisms have translated into tight entanglements of violence and conservation. In particular, we show how state-led conservation programs have actively shaped landscapes of exclusion and destruction, where peasants' erasure – both political and material – has been justified. We refer specifically to the transformations that the area of Tayrona National Natural Park and its surroundings have undergone under state policies of *Seguridad Democrática* (Democratic Security). Launched in 2002 by former President Álvaro Uribe, democratic security policies combined the militarization of national territories with an intensive campaign of tourism promotion. Under the slogans of “Colombia is passion” and “Colombia, the only risk is wanting to stay,” tourism became part of a larger strategy of counterinsurgency and security proliferation. This is evident in official documents: “The National Government will guarantee the security conditions that will allow free movement through the main highways of the country... In this way, threats from illegal armed

organizations and common delinquency on the national roads will be counteracted” (Ministerio de Defensa, 2003: 58, our translation). Media and government discourses thus effectively framed travel and recreation as important means for taking back the country from guerrilla control. The possibility to transit the country's militarized roads became the means as well as the proof that peace had finally been achieved (Ojeda, 2013: 767).

Within this context, state officials, as well as conservation and development experts, started to see ecotourism projects as the logical way to simultaneously assert territorial control in presumed wild and remote areas, and take advantage of national parks' natural riches. A neoliberal rhetoric in which wildlife, local communities and the state would all benefit from the securing of tourist sites, and thus capital investment, shaped new forms of nature commodification and privatization around the country. But while carried out in the name of local communities' development, ecotourism projects largely criminalized local populations as invaders and environmental destroyers, resulting in their eviction and the impossibility of them making a living within park limits.

This article is the result of an ongoing conversation between the two authors that started back in 2009. We have tried to bring together different academic backgrounds and research projects with the aim of understanding the regional practices and political implications of environmental conservation for local inhabitants in Tayrona and, more broadly, Colombia's Caribbean coast. Our fieldwork throughout the past six years has been based on qualitative

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: diana.bocarejo@urosario.edu.co, dbocarejo@gmail.com (D. Bocarejo), diana.ojeda@javeriana.edu.co, dianaojeda@gmail.com (D. Ojeda).

¹ Authors listed in alphabetical order.

research, mainly ethnographic work. Through participant observation, semi-structured interviews, life histories and informal conversations, we have followed the everyday practices of local inhabitants to ensure their land, labor and livelihoods in the disputed context of Tayrona's recent history. As we will show, this context has been shaped by the concession of tourism services to a private company, the complex state of affairs imposed by paramilitarism and drug trafficking, state development interventions and coca eradication programs, and the reinforcement of political divisions within communities through multicultural policies.

In this text, we reflect on the mutual constitution of violence and conservation in this context through the resulting *erasure* of local peasantry. As we show in the following sections, this erasure works in three dimensions: (i) the actual removal of park inhabitants through eviction, direct threats and murder; (ii) the attacks on local communities' livelihood strategies; and (iii) their delegitimization as rightful inhabitants of the park and their illegibility as state subjects. Each dimension provides a lens through which we explore the different articulations between state-sanctioned violence – physical, structural and symbolic – and conservation, as well as its results in terms of local communities' dispossession in the name of protecting nature. In the next section, we further delve into the ways in which an ethnographic approach to Tayrona National Park contributes to the literature on the relationship between violence and conservation. In the following sections, we then proceed to piece together the ways in which conservation discourses and practices have shaped local community members, in particular peasants, as environmental destroyers, invaders and collateral damage. In the conclusions, we return to the ways in which conservation practices are connected with local communities' erasure and dispossession.

2. Conservation as dispossession, violence as erasure

The case of Tayrona National Park exemplifies well how state anxieties regarding territorial control in Colombia concur with both paramilitary violence and private capital's interests around tourism promotion. The park is one of the most important protected areas in the country, comprising about 15,000 ha. Historical geographies of uneven access to resources and of the state's meager role in providing basic services have contributed to its production as a strategic area for illegal crop production, with a strong presence of illegal armed groups. Paramilitary forces, formed in the 1970s in order to take part in the illegal crop business and to provide private security services to drug lords and landowners usually targeted by guerrilla groups, rapidly gained control of the area.

In the 1990s, Hernán Giraldo, also known as “El Patrón” (The Boss), headed a private militia that, operating with state knowledge and support, quickly grew in number and started to gain more power over different economic activities. By 2001, paramilitary power in the Sierra and Tayrona was so strong that forty per cent of all national coca exports that year – with a value of nearly 1.2 billion US dollars – came from Giraldo's territories (*Verdad Abierta*, 2010: online).² The landscapes of fear forged by state-sanctioned violence at the expense of local communities made possible the success of Tayrona National Park as an ecotourism destination. Ironically, the violence – of massacres, forced disappearances and displacements – contributed to the park becoming the

poster child of the war on drugs and ecotourism: a “paradise regained” (*USA Today*, 2006: online; *Hammer*, 2007; see *Ojeda*, 2013).

It is in this way that tourism and militarization have worked side by side toward the country's “reconquest,” and more recently toward its “consolidation,”³ reasserting the myth of a post-conflict society. A myth that even if critiqued by local communities, is also longed for by them; a promise for a new form of legibility in which they would not be judged as illegal *cocaleros* or illegal armed group “sympathizers” and would thus be able to ensure new ways of experiencing everyday life and new livelihoods with activities such as tourism. As Jasmín, a local Tayrona resident, recalled:

Here we had to live with lots of distrust. Many of us grew up with distrust towards newcomers because there were the [armed] groups, but also the [coca and marihuana] crops... How many died! Now with tourism, you're sitting down in my home, my husband's work is more stable and they call me during high peak season; one learns to be nice to outsiders.

[personal interview, June 2012]

Under the promise of imposing law and order, Democratic Security policies translated into a particular framework for both making legible and controlling peoples and nature. The specific conjunctures we study refer to the military actions carried out under Uribe's government (2002–2010), as his promises of defeating guerrilla groups became an effective platform for the intensification of warfare. At the same time, in 2002 the United States allowed the use of antinarcotics resources in military operations against guerrilla combatants. The eradication of illegal crops by the Colombian military, mostly in the form of massive aerial fumigations with the broad-spectrum herbicide glyphosate (*Mattié*, 2003), then became part of the war against insurgency, which has now been rescaled as the war on terror. The “retaking of national territory,” as announced repeatedly by former President Uribe, became a powerful trope under which the war on drugs and the war on terror found a useful common enemy in the FARC (*Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia*) guerrilla group. Official and media discourses produced paramilitary forces, working often with state sanction and even in cooperation with the military, as natural allies in the defeat of guerrilla groups (*Bolívar*, 2006).⁴

Understood broadly as the production of boundaries and jurisdictions, state territorialization allows us to understand the everyday practices through which state formation takes place (*Trouillot*, 2001). The scholarship on “resource wars,” as stated by *Peluso and Vandergeest* (2011: 257), “has focused on the relationship between warfare and access to valuable natural resources, although the ways war helps construct forests as a category of state power and jurisdiction has not generally been a part of that discussion.” The entanglements of violence and conservation in Tayrona illustrate such practices of state territorialization. Like other protected areas in Colombia, state attempts to implement order and control have resulted in the production of highly exclusionary

³ The language of Colombia's “reconquest” and “pacification” characterized Democratic Security policies. Juan Manuel Santos' government, installed in 2010, started to use the language of territorial “consolidation.” While often using a less militaristic tone, tourism promotion and security proliferation continue to be central to state agendas, particularly those regarding rural development.

⁴ This is, for example, the case of the army captain Guevara, who was an active member of the paramilitary group led by commander Jorge 40, Bloque Norte, operating in the Tayrona area at the time. In an official hearing, Guevara stated: “My command “(Jorge) 40” used to send me his self-defense troops and I used to pass them as army troops. I used to go to combat against guerrillas leading self-defense units (...). Everybody knew” (*Guillén and Villa*, 2014: online, our translation). Even political elections were completely managed by the paramilitary group through the designation of four “electoral districts” in the Magdalena department, which put in power several congressional representatives as well as regional and local state officials (*Verdad Abierta*, 2013).

² Giraldo was among the few demobilized paramilitary leaders to be detained and extradited to the United States for drug trafficking (see *Verdad Abierta*, 2009) as part of the highly questioned process of paramilitary demobilization carried out between 2003 and 2006. Despite his imprisonment and 38 year sentence, the paramilitary control of Tayrona continues until today.

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