



# Defining the forest, defending the forest: Political ecology, territoriality, and resistance to a protected area in the Dominican Republic



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## ABSTRACT

Political ecologists have considered the social and economic impacts that nature reserves, national parks and other forms of protected area can have on neighbouring communities, and how this can generate conflicts between them. This paper analyses such conflicts through the lens of territoriality, considering how the way protected area territories are created, delineated, and defined is linked to the social impacts experienced by local people. Conflicts between locals and conservation authorities over protected areas are about rival attempts to define the boundaries of protected areas, who the land should belong to, what it should be used for, and what its purpose is. Yet the ability of local people or conservation authorities to impose their meaning is unequal. It illustrates these processes with the example of a scientific reserve in the Dominican Republic, and a decades-long conflict to define what the reserve should mean, what it should look like, and who it should belong to.

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## 1. Introduction

In recent decades, national parks, reserves, and other forms of protected area have expanded across the world, currently covering more than 12% of the earth's land surface area. This expansion has involved the creation of new territorial entities and new rules over the use of these places. This often creates considerable conflict between protected areas and resident and neighbouring communities over the meaning of these areas, what purpose they serve, whom should they benefit, and who gets to decide all this, particularly when conservation regulations negatively affect the wellbeing of local people. These conflicts have been the subject of numerous studies within political ecology, and have been analysed through various theoretical lenses, including post-colonialism and neo-colonialism (Butt, 2012; MacDonald, 2005; Neumann, 1998; Roth, 2004), everyday resistance (Benjaminsen and Svarstad, 2010; Norgrove and Hulme, 2006; Robbins et al., 2006), and new forms of neoliberal governance (Buscher and Dressler, 2007; Fletcher, 2010; Sachedina, 2010; Vacanti-Brondo and Bown, 2011). This paper argues, following Roth (2008) and Corson (2011), that protected areas are projects of territorialisation, and conflicts over protected areas are in large part battles to define and defend territories, and therefore territoriality provides a useful lens for understanding conflicts over protected areas. Territoriality is "the attempt to affect, influence, or control actions, interactions,

or access by asserting and attempting to enforce control over a specific geographic area" (Sack, 1983, p55). Territorialisation involves delineating a particular space, determining what behaviour and activities are and are not allowed within it, giving it particular political and social meaning, and communicating this delineation and meaning to others. It is a political process, serving particular social, political, or economic ends, pursued to make control over space easier.

Territorialisation is a useful lens for understanding protected areas for two reasons. Firstly, protected areas are attempts to create new spatial units, with new meanings, and are therefore acts of territorialisation. Whilst all struggles over natural resources involve an element of territory, as different actors compete to access, define, and own, resources, this is more pronounced with protected areas, where struggles are strongly grounded in clearly defined spatial units (Roth, 2008). Secondly, territorialisation illuminates key processes occurring in and around protected area which have been analysed by political ecologists, in particular how protected areas impact local communities and their economy, society, and culture, and how these communities in turn try to reshape and redefine protected areas to their liking.

The paper begins by exploring protected areas as products of state "internal territorialisation" (Vandergeest and Peluso, 1995), showing that territorialisation is a useful concept in political ecology analyses of conservation, particularly on the social impacts of protected areas and resistance to them. It then describes a decades-long conflict between a protected area and local populations

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in the Dominican Republic. It explores the variety of strategies used to assert and defend territorialities, such as violence, legal-judicial means, everyday resistance, and discursive strategies, and demonstrates the relative success of reserve authorities and local people in asserting control over various areas. This paper adds to the political ecology literature on the social impacts of protected areas by providing a detailed case study of power, territorialisation and resistance around one scientific reserve.

### 1.1. *Territorialisation, political ecology and the social impacts of protected areas*

Protected area territorialisation is best understood through internal territorialisation (Vandergest and Peluso, 1995), where states sub-divide their territory, creating territorial units within national boundaries, defining these and determining what happens within them, in particular deciding who gets access and use rights to resources, and how these are realised. This is done firstly in abstract form, as state institutions create maps of a terrain, its people and resources, and use these to delineate different territorial units such as protected areas in maps, laws, and official documents such as management plans, ascribing political, economic, social and cultural meanings to these places. Subsequently, these are defined more concretely, by enforcing land uses in reality. Internal territorialisation allows states to justify coercing its own citizens, and the rights to use the newly defined and created territories can be allocated to private entities as well as the state (Vandergest and Peluso, 1995). States sometimes create protected areas to extend their control over remote or ungovernable parts of their country, particularly during frontier expansion or for geostrategic reasons (Roth, 2008; Aagesen, 2000; Ybarra, 2012; Monterroso and Barry, 2012). Conservation NGOs sometimes provide political, technical, financial, and discursive support for state internal territorialisation of protected area, part of global shifts to neoliberal forms of conservation which emphasise civil society's role in saving biodiversity in place of the state (Corson, 2011; Sundberg, 1998, 2003). NGOs are particularly influential the global south, where states are often unwilling or unable to invest in biodiversity conservation (Corson, 2010, 2011; Igoe and Brockington, 2007; Sundberg, 1998, 2003). Territorialisation happens in protected areas under all forms of governance, but this paper deals with state and NGO managed protected areas rather private or community areas, which have distinct territorialisation processes (Corson, 2011).

Below I identify three ways in which territoriality adds to political ecology research on such interactions between protected areas and local people. It does not claim to show universal processes but rather to illustrate some phenomena involved, particularly around stricter, state protected areas.

Firstly, protected areas have historically followed the binary distinction between nature and human society dominant in much of Western thought. There is often a clear separation in both discourses and policies on protected areas between places for nature and places for people. Protected areas become designated as places for nature, and most human activities within them (other than certain legitimate activities such as tourism and research) are deemed illegitimate, inappropriate and out of place. Regulations and policies restricting the presence of illegitimate people from a protected area's territory are backed by popular and policy discourses that see protected areas as people-free places. The early history of US conservation attempted to create protected areas as wildernesses, places untrammelled by human hands, based on a binary distinction between society and nature, although to establish such people-free territories, resident populations of Native Americans and European settlers had to be removed (Cronon, 1996; Jacoby, 2001; Spence, 1999). Ironically, "uninhabited wilderness had to be created before it could be preserved" (Spence, 1999, p4) – a

new, historically problematic, meaning had to be imposed in the territorialisation of a protected area, discursively, legally, and physically. Similarly, imperial authorities in British East Africa created protected areas as people-free places, yet in order to do so, resident populations had to be removed against their will, with widespread state violence characterising the creation of these areas, and their maintenance in subsequent decades (Neumann, 1998, 2001). Neumann (2004) shows how media discourses legitimise state violence in current conservation practice based on ideas of protected areas as people-free places. There are also contemporary cases of eviction for conservation, which may be linked to the rising influence of international conservation NGOs promoting western ideals of protected areas as people free places (Brockington and Igoe, 2006; Chapin, 2004; Sundberg, 2003).

Evicted populations suffer from long-term economic and social disruption and deprivation, and resentment and opposition to this can last many decades (Craig et al., 2012; Stern, 2008). Even where people are not physically removed from their homes, the creation of people-free protected areas can have considerable negative social impacts, as long-standing livelihood activities are banned or greatly restricted, or as people are removed from culturally important places. The impacts of protected areas are often unequally distributed by gender, class, caste, or ethnicity (Adams and Hutton, 2007; Holmes and Brockington, 2013). There can be positive benefits from this territorialisation process, such as when evictions come with sufficient compensation (Beazley, 2009; Kabra, 2009), or when the new legitimate activities such as tourism bring new sources of income, although such benefits are often subject to elite capture (Ojeda, 2012; Vacanti-Brondo and Bown, 2011). Not all protected areas are spaces for people-free nature. Some protected areas, particularly community and indigenous areas, are intended as places for local people, formalising and strengthening their control and rights over a place, and combining this with biodiversity conservation. This is still problematic when people and activities are excluded when they are seen as insufficiently indigenous or local (Cardozo, 2011; Sundberg, 2006). Mollett (2010) shows how state attempts to create simplistic distinctions over which ethnic groups had a legitimate presence in different parts of the Rio Platano Biosphere Reserve in Honduras, in place of more complex and shifting identities and spatialities, led to hardships and increased inter-ethnic conflict. Additionally, the process of formalising and codifying customary titles in written form during the reserve's creation disenfranchised certain groups, particularly women. Secondly, many protected areas still contain resident human populations, despite this being illegal (Lasgorceix and Kothari, 2009), due to a lack of will or ability to sufficiently enforce regulations – an incomplete territorialisation. Many protected areas are subdivided into sections which allow greater or lesser amounts of human activity, particularly the Biosphere model found throughout Latin America (e.g. Mollett, 2010; Sundberg, 2006), which contains a strictly protected core surrounded by a buffer zone allowing limited resource use. One protected area can contain several clearly delineated sub-territories, each with their own designated purpose and ownership.

A second link between how protected areas are territorialised and their social impacts is that, excluding community or private areas, they tend to be demarcated and managed in a centralised and top down manner by a distant authority, mainly the state, but increasingly with involvement from international conservation NGOs and aid agencies. States and their allies often claim to be representing a much broader constituency than local people, saving biodiversity for its intrinsic value on behalf of all of humanity, or for the economic wellbeing of the whole country. This implies that ownership and control of protected areas and their resources should reside with them, rather than local people (Grandia, 2007; Ojeda, 2012). The creation of global maps and

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