

Convicts and conservation: Inmate labor, fires and forestry in southernmost Argentina



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 5 October 2015
Received in revised form
30 December 2016
Accepted 14 January 2017

Keywords:

Argentina
Prisons
Forestry
Labor
National parks

ABSTRACT

The modern penitentiary was rarely a fully closed, insular, or placeless institution. Approaching penology as environmental history can therefore restore connections that have been severed between prison studies, political ecology, and geography. This article uses the Ushuaia penal colony/ penitentiary, located in southernmost Argentina, to explore relationships between penology, inmate labor, and forestry. In the early 1900s, inmates erected the prison that would house them, and labored to provide roads, government buildings, and electricity for Ushuaia. Their main activity was felling timber, which brought together the prison and forestry departments, thus linking discipline with deforestation, and blurring the lines between the interior and exterior of the penitentiary. After decades of extensive forest fires, the lack of a self-sustaining economy, and charges of inmate abuse, the prison was closed in 1947. A subsequent campaign to salvage the region by supplanting ominous images of a natural prison with those of a beautiful landscape resulted in the establishment of a national park in 1960. And, in 1997, fifty years after its closure, the defunct prison was converted to a museum. The national park and prison museum now attract thousands of tourists annually, offering two competing — rather than co-constitutive — versions of national history. This juxtaposition of green and dark tourism is not unique to Ushuaia, and thus highlights tensions inherent to when and where sites of punishment, conservation, and memory overlap.

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Ushuaia, Argentina is one of the world's southernmost cities. Best known as *el fin del mundo* (the end of the world), the port is located on the heavily forested Beagle Channel at the southern fifty-fifth parallel, just a few kilometers east of the Chilean border and a few hundred kilometers north of Antarctica (Fig. 1). Travel narratives and popular accounts stress how the region lies beyond civilization, at what British missionaries in the nineteenth century called 'the uttermost part of the earth'.¹ At the turn of the century, the Argentine government began construction on a modern penitentiary in Ushuaia, which at the time seemed nothing more than a frigid outpost. For nearly fifty years, inmates would fell timber for the prison until its closure in 1947, and in 1960 a national park was created in these same forests. Today tourists come from around the world to trek through this protected landscape, to see sub-Antarctic tree species and wildlife, glaciers, and the defunct prison that became a museum in 1997.

This juxtaposition of natural prison and national park, however, was entangled from the very beginning. Prison operations were tied to the surrounding environment in multiple ways, ranging

from a therapeutic vision of inmate-environment interactions to expansive forest fires caused by the prison's timber industry. Inmates labored in the surrounding forests, turning timber into buildings, furniture, and other goods for the community. Land claims and extraction rights passed through the forestry office, and, because the primary economic enterprise for the prison was timber extraction, this institutionalized a co-constitutive relationship between penology and forestry. This relationship played an integral role in the region's resource management and development, and it created a town dependent on the prison's timber economy.

Forestry and penology sciences had been emerging since the eighteenth century in various parts of the world. They were part of positivistic narratives concerning order, progress, and the mastery of nature (human and environmental).² Forestry brought scientific

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¹ See the family biography, E.L. Bridges, *Uttermost Part of the Earth*, New York, 1948. Patagonia as 'accursed' has a long history, but nearly all claims refer to, C. Darwin, *The Voyage of the Beagle*, London, 1839.

² On forestry, see H.E. Lowood, The calculating forester: quantification, cameral science, and the emergence of scientific forestry in Germany, in: T. Frängsmyr, J.L. Heilbron, and R.E. Reider (Eds), *The Quantifying Spirit in the 18th Century*, Berkeley, 1990, 315–342. On state sciences, see J. Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed*, New Haven, 1998. On prisons, see D. Rothman, *Discovery of the Asylum: Social Order and Disorder in the New Republic*, Boston, 1971; M. Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Modern Prison*, New York, 1977.

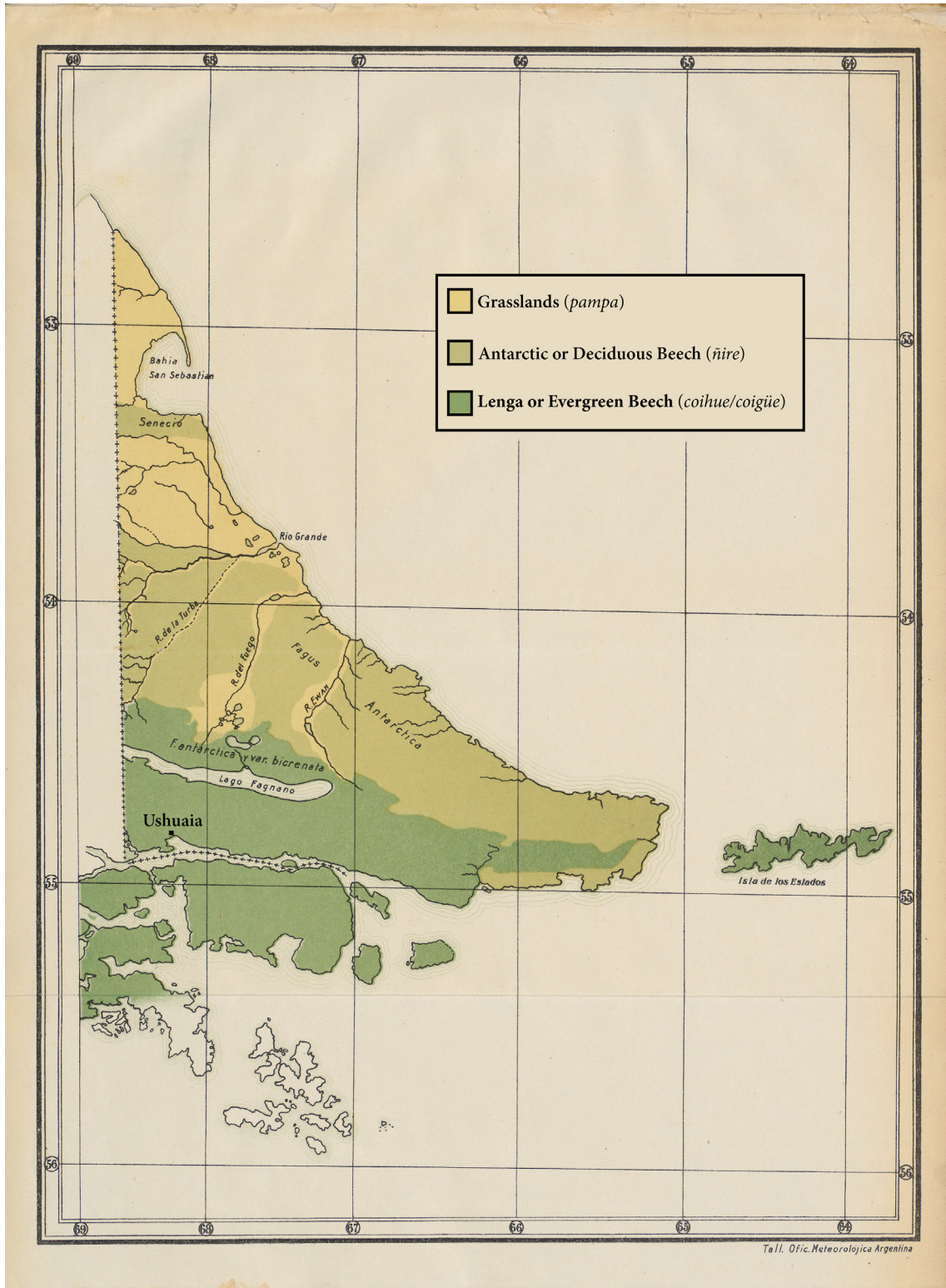


Fig. 1. This map of Tierra del Fuego originally appeared in, E.H. Holmberg, *Viaje al interior de Tierra del Fuego*, Buenos Aires, 1906. The image has been modified to highlight Ushuaia, and provide a legend in place of the original title, 'Capítulo IV: Distribución del Fagus antártica y var. bicrenata en Tierra del Fuego 1902'. Used by permission of Harvard University Library.

methods and rationalization into the field, while penology sought to eliminate outdoor labor and transport incarceration, and instead bring inmates into hospital-like institutions of rehabilitation. The two seemingly unconnected enterprises collaborated in

Argentinean Tierra del Fuego. In 1902, prison director and engineer, Catello Muratgia, established the Ushuaia penal colony as an 'open-door' institution that embraced the architectural aspects of a modern radial and cellular penitentiary while utilizing the sub-

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