



# Constructing globalized spaces of tourism and leisure: Political ecologies of the Salta Wine Route (NW-Argentina)



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## ABSTRACT

This study contributes to a growing body of literature examining tourism and amenity-led residential development in an emerging global countryside. It does so by analyzing the public-private efforts to nationally and globally position the Salta Wine Region as a premier tourism and leisure destination. A marketing effort highlighting the exceptional natural setting coupled with high-quality viticulture effectively seeks to reposition a peripheral Andean valley as 'the world's highest wine route'. Enabled by neoliberal policies, a variety of actors such as national and international wineries, real estate developers and hotel companies have produced new spaces for leisurely consumption. This paper analyzes the discursive and material restructuring of society–nature relations through a political ecology lens. Drawing on long-term ethnographic fieldwork it provides a grounded, micro-political account of the way in which distinct actors engage in and experience tourism and amenity-led development. Findings show that the current boom benefits the land-holding elite and new investors while escalating costs of living and unequal access to resources have deepened historically inherited socio-ecological inequalities. In contrast to findings from places in the Global North that have experienced a similar tourism and amenity boom, conflicts over landscape aesthetics and environmental protection are virtually absent in the study area. Socio-ecological conflicts concentrate on access to resources, affordable living, and livelihood improvement. Despite an increasing importance of tourism, amenity migration and related speculative investment in the Global South, studies have primarily focused on the Global North. Given the uneven geographies that such developments produce, augmenting the broader literature on tourism and amenity-led rural restructuring with a political ecology perspective comes at a timely moment.

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"Only a few places in the world combine so many facilities in such a perfect location. And none can rival the value of this opportunity. Only a few people have discovered the ideal conditions in this incredible place. Now is the time to join us" (La Estancia de Cafayate Wine & Golf; promotional brochure).

"Many very important people come here and it does not stop to grow. Some say that because of its structure, because of the contribution of the Province, because of the contribution of the private sector, because of the characteristics of place, it could become the Napa Valley of Latin America"<sup>1</sup> (Interview with a

hotel owner on the Salta Wine Route, 10/01/2013; a.t.).

## 1. Introduction

By the end of the 19th century wine production had gained importance in the Calchaquí Valleys (Salta, NW-Argentina); however the peripheral location in the Andes caused transportation problems, the agricultural techniques were outdated, and the region was characterized by high out-migration rates. Since the 1990s and especially from the 2000s onwards this picture has changed dramatically. National and international firms such as Pernod Ricard, Peñaflor, and the Hess Group started to buy properties and/or build new viticulture projects resulting in profound transformations of regional production conditions. Today the great majority of wines from the Salta province are produced by modernized wineries that compete at a global scale in the high-quality wine market segment.

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<sup>1</sup> All citations of interviews and citations from newspaper articles and public documents that have been published in Spanish were translated by the author into English. This is indicated by the abbreviation a.t. (author's translation).

This shift from regionally-oriented wine production towards globally-oriented high quality wines has gone hand in hand with a boom of leisure-induced activities, ranging from day trips to permanent amenity migration. This paper investigates the socio-ecological restructuring related to this leisure boom along the Salta Wine Route and contributes to the body of literature on tourism and amenity-led development in an emerging global countryside (Hall and Williams, 2002; Coles et al., 2005; Torres and Momsen, 2005; Bunce, 2008; McCarthy, 2008; Woods, 2011a; van Noorloos, 2012; Hayes, 2015a). Much scholarly work conceptualizes newly emerging spaces of tourism and leisure as transnational spaces and focuses on the connections between tourism and various migratory forms (not just amenity-led but also labor migration) (e.g. Coles et al., 2005; Torres and Momsen, 2005; Woods, 2011a; van Noorloos, 2012). Recent studies reveal that many world wine regions experience amenity-related influxes, ranging from day-trippers to permanent immigrants (Skinner, 2000; Overton, 2010; Woods, 2011a; Overton et al., 2012; Perkins et al., 2015).

The growing body of literature examining the current rural amenity boom indicates a global phenomenon whereby localities in the Global North, as well as those in the Global South, are reconstructed. Studies do, however, indicate important geographical patterns: the manner in which the rural amenity boom is engaged, contested, and experienced varies greatly across distinct countries and regions. Legacies of past socio-ecological relations play a crucial role in influencing how current restructuring manifests (Perkins, 2006; Torres and Momsen, 2005; Woods, 2007; Overton et al., 2012; van Noorloos, 2012; Hayes, 2015b; Perkins et al., 2015).

In the Latin American context, colonial history and socio-ecological inequalities strongly influence the current reconstitution of rural places undergoing globalization (Bebbington and Batterbury, 2001; Perreault and Martin, 2005). Such regional and Global North/Global South differences have received relatively little attention in the tourism and amenity-led residential development literature. Currently, scholarly knowledge is based mainly on studies conducted in the Global North. Thus, by conducting a case study of the Salta Wine Route and theorizing outward from an Argentinean and Latin American perspective this investigation addresses an important gap in the literature. In order to address this gap a political ecology framework that examines local transformation embedded in macro-structural framings is applied. Through the lens of political ecology historical socio-environmental relations, the production of nature under capitalism, and the micro-politics of land use change are put at the center of discussion. Against this background the study's contribution is two-fold: 1) to increase scholarly understanding of the socio-ecological restructuring related to tourism and amenity-led residential development in an emerging global countryside; 2) to advance a political ecology of tourism and leisure.

Methodologically, the paper draws on ethnographic research along the Salta Wine Route. While ethnography was originally employed to study presumably bounded local cultures, recent studies – from political ecology and beyond – have argued that it is particularly useful for investigating spaces of global connection (Bebbington and Batterbury, 2001; Tsing, 2005; Woods, 2007).

## 2. Literature review: tourism and leisure in the global countryside: situating the Global South

In a recent editorial on “New directions in rural studies” (2012a: 4) Michael Woods calls for more research regarding selected localities in the Global South and their transformation caused by new

global mobility patterns (tourism and amenity migration<sup>2</sup>) that are more commonly associated with the Global North. Such consumption-orientated restructuring of specific rural areas around the globe can be conceptualized as a particular form of an emerging global countryside, characterized by increasing transnational flows of ideas, capital, and people (Torres and Momsen, 2005; Perkins, 2006; Woods, 2007; McCarthy, 2008). It is important to note that few rural places, and even less in the Global South, have undergone this consumption-led rural reconstitution. As McCarthy (2008: 131) states: “Only areas meeting the requisite aesthetic, legal, linguistic, and other preconditions qualify, leaving most rural areas unlikely to receive this form of investment”.

Many wine regions around the world – particularly those characterized by high quality production – have experienced a recent remaking towards high amenity rural areas (Hall et al., 2000; Skinner, 2000; Overton, 2010; Woods, 2011a; Overton et al., 2012; Perkins et al., 2015). Wine production expansion under neoliberal conditions and the prestige associated with wine play a crucial role and fuel up-market tourism and leisure developments (Overton and Murray, 2013). A joint inflow of professionals, tourists and amenity migrants, as well as national and transnational companies operating in the tourism and real estate sector is notable. As Woods (2011a: 379) reminds us, their impact on particular regions should be understood in their interplay. This is particularly the situation in Latin America where various case studies demonstrate that one main beneficiary of neoliberal tourism policies is often real estate business (see for example Janoschka, 2009; van Noorloos, 2012; Hayes, 2015a; for another case in the Northwest-Argentine Andes Rainer and Morales Gaitán, 2014). In Latin America there are still relatively few studies on different aspects of amenity-driven development (see for example Torres and Momsen, 2005; Janoschka, 2009; van Noorloos, 2012; Spalding, 2013; Matarrita-Cascante and Stocks, 2013; Matarrita-Cascante et al., 2015; Hayes, 2014, 2015a). Political ecology is largely overlooked by this literature even though it provides useful conceptual insights to address the complexities of this type of rural restructuring. Considering this background, the next section outlines the main concerns of a political ecology perspective, while the subsequent section pays particular attention to the political ecology of tourism and leisure.

### 2.1. A political ecology perspective

*“Where others just saw a desert, we foresaw great wines”* (Wine label of Bodega Amalaya, Hess Family Wine Estates, Salta Wine Route).

This sentence printed on one of Bodega Amalaya's wine labels demonstrates a key concern that has characterized political ecological research from its beginnings in the 1970s until the present day. From a political ecological viewpoint ‘nature’ and ‘natural resources’ are not understood as being out there awaiting discovery but come into being only through their social framing as ‘nature’ and ‘natural resources’ (Neumann, 2005; Robbins, 2012). Hence, political ecology focuses on analyzing different representations of nature understood as both culturally and economically constructed (Castree and Braun, 1998; Flitner, 1998; Neumann, 2005; McCarthy, 2005). Additionally, discursive shifts reflect and are intended to

<sup>2</sup> Amenity migration has been defined as the “[...] purchasing of primary or second residences in rural areas valued for their aesthetic, recreational, and other consumption-oriented use values” (McCarthy, 2008: 130). For an excellent discussion on the difficulties to define and delineate amenity migration and the various terms that are currently used to capture one and the same phenomenon – a type of urban to rural migration – see Gosnell and Abrams 2011.

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