

**Attending to the Pulses of the Territory:
Local Officers, National Parks, and Indigenous
Territories in Colombia**

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Introduction

We met while we were both working on our PhDs, in the headquarters of Parques Nacionales (National Parks), which operated from the seventh floor of a gray building in the hectic center of the Colombian capital, Bogotá. Hanging from the wall in an artificially lit room was a map of the Colombian National Natural Parks System. Back then, and up there, this meant fifty-four neat shapes scattered inside the country's silhouette, covering about 12 percent of its surface: thirteen million hectares where the institution had implemented its mission to conserve nature for the nation, exerting its environmental authority.

On that same map, if you looked carefully, you could also see shapes in a slightly different color, covering about one-third of the country, most of them in forested areas. These shapes represented *resguardos*: indigenous territories legally recognized by the state, where collective land tenure had been granted to many of the eighty-seven officially recognized indigenous peoples. In *resguardos*, indigenous people hold the right to govern themselves; there, they are the public authorities. Both national parks and *resguardos* are constitutionally outside the market; their land cannot be sold or confiscated and their rights can never be proscribed. Twenty-nine national parks were superimposed on indigenous *resguardos* in that map.

Given that the authorities of the *resguardos* and the Parques Nacionales may have had potentially conflicting aims, in 2000, the Parques Nacionales developed a policy tool called the Special Management Regime (SMR) to

act as an agreement among indigenous and Parques Nacionales authorities in parks that overlapped with *resguardo* lands. An SMR is “an articulated and harmonized set of rules and procedures, which allow for the planning, implementation and evaluation of coordinated actions between the two authorities present in the area where their jurisdictions overlap” (UAESPNN, *Elementos*, 3).

Two forces are in tension when co-government agreements are negotiated: the need to conserve “nature,” a threatened nonhuman entity as presented by science to the modern state, and the vindications of the indigenous socio-natural worlds taking place in the territories. It was in this field of tensions in which we both conducted our research, in radically different places. Julia was working in the Northern Caribbean deserts of Makuira National Park, inside Wayúu territories; I was doing research in the seasonally flooded Southern Amazonian rainforests in the Amacayacu National Park, whose area partially coincides with Tikuna lands (see Figure 1).

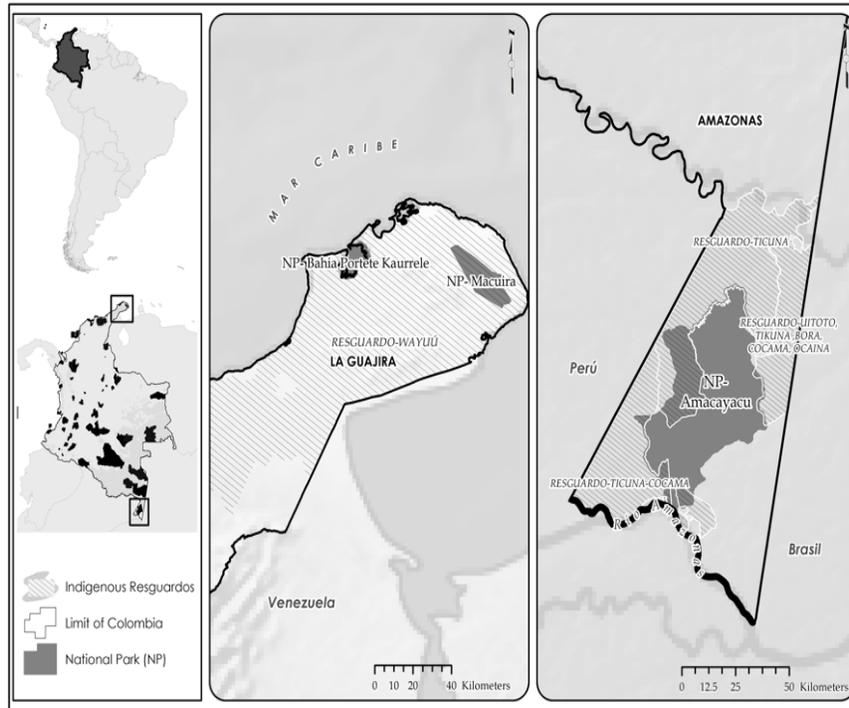


Figure 1. Colombian National Parks, Indigenous *Resguardos*, and Locations of Authors’ Field Research. Instituto Geográfico Agustín Codazzi (IGAC) and National Natural Parks. 2018.

What we witnessed in our “overlapped parks,” as Parques Nacionales calls them, was not the imposition of standard concepts and practices for territorial control by the central state on local understandings of nature and ways of governing it—an imposition that political ecology has powerfully denounced (Bocarejo and Ojeda; Neumann). Rather, what we experienced was what Juanita Sundberg describes as *encounters*, in which contestations and resistance, but also empathy and appropriation, take place.

But what we saw in these places of encounter was not only mediation between cultures. Thinking with Marisol de la Cadena, we were able to see how the mediation carried out by local officers allowed for new entities to irrupt into the politics of nature conservation (*Earth Beings*). Conservation in protected areas has conventionally been about protecting “biodiversity” as understood and allowed into human politics by science (as a number of nonhuman, nonmetaphysical, discrete entities, like genes, species, or ecosystems). We shed light on how, in these co-managed parks, hand in hand with local officers, otherwise impossible hybrids of human and nonhuman, physical and metaphysical entities irrupt in conventional conservation politics.

Local park officers allow these “earth-beings,” as Marisol de la Cadena might call them (de la Cadena, “Indigenous Cosmopolitics”), into park management thanks to their partial connections to the different worlds that coincide in overlapped parks. The particularities of their partial connections as Parques Nacionales officers, and the implications of these particularities for the earth-beings that they allow into conservation, however, only became clear to us as we had the unexpected chance to converse again with local officers many years after our fieldwork, as we were writing this essay. It was then that they told us about the “Pulses of the Territories.”

This essay goes from the ethnographic to the conceptual, trying to follow our own intellectual journey. We begin with the territories: the places of encounter where we carried out our research. The second section narrates local officers’ ways of mediating these encounters, by tuning the national institution’s times to local social-natural rhythms and by allowing “the right voices” to take part in institutional frameworks. The third section sheds light on some of the hybrids that are allowed into conservation politics thanks to these mediations. In the final section, we resume our stories in a more conceptual light and look at the particular characteristics of local officers’ work and their earth-beings with the unexpected help from some of the main characters of our story.

“Our” Parks

In the months previous to that first meeting in Parques Nacionales’ headquarters, both of us had been travelling long distances from Bogotá, where we both grew up, to our research sites: Julia to the Northern Caribbean deserts and I to the Southern Amazonian rainforests. “Our parks” were indeed very distant from that twenty-story building in the center of the capital, and from the map hanging on that wall. Distant in spatial terms, as the flights, bus rides, and boat trips demonstrated, but also distant in the ways national parks and *resguardos*, nature and culture, and the physical and the metaphysical are imagined to take part in conservation.

Amacayacu. I was researching the ways in which scientific ideas of conservation planning were deployed in the Amazon, in the extreme southeast of the country, where 290,000 hectares of seasonally flooded, very humid rainforests were delimited as a national park in 1973. Six years after my initial visit, I still remember clearly the first time I travelled to Amacayacu. After a plane trip to Leticia, the departmental capital, over an ocean of tree crowns; a night in the humid, noisy city, populated with motorbikes; and a two-hour boat ride along the shore of the Amazon River—much wider, browner, and more tranquil than I had imagined, bordered with many more pastures and cows and huts than the other parts of the Amazon I knew—I arrived at the park’s harbor. A couple of local officers, out of the total fifteen that I later learned were “in charge” of this immense territory, received the boat. Two other biologists and a few tourists from the United States, attracted by the advertisement published by the recently established private tourism operator, arrived with me.

In the facilities, which were a series of wooden stilt houses connected by platforms, besides the hostel-style bedrooms, dining room, and accommodation for researchers, there was an improvised shop. A barefoot Tikuna woman wearing a ragged skirt and a faded t-shirt, on which the propaganda of a long since defeated politician could still be discerned, sold very simple indigenous crafts.

The Tikunas have inhabited the Amazonian lowlands for around ten thousand years. In the last century, along with other Amazonian peoples, they were subjected in different ways to the consecutive rubber, fur, timber, and coca booms. They were often displaced from their original territories, and their traditional knowledge of their land was radically transformed. Over the last few years, Tikunas have also become tour guides, sellers of crafts, and providers of food and transportation for tourists. Since the 1980s, all five indigenous settlements that are in or around the park, most of them housing people from different ethnic groups, are part of three *resguardos*, which amount to slightly more than one-tenth of the park’s area. All of them have a Catholic or Evangelical church and in only one of them is the Tikuna language still spoken.

After leaving my backpack in the bedroom, I took one of the paths that depart from the facilities into the forest, accompanied by Alberto, the indigenous park ranger, a tall, thin, strong man who was silent, almost expressionless. The dense canopy, around thirty meters above us, was weaved by the branches and twigs and leaves of *yanchama*, *ceibas*, and *chambiras*, twisted lianas, in one of the places in the world where scientists have counted the largest numbers of tree species.¹ A huge blue butterfly flew across our path. It seemed cicadas had been screeching forever and would never stop. I hoped to hear again the howling monkeys, that thunder-like sound that had shocked me years before in the Caquetá rainforests.

We crossed creeks and circled small marshes. Alberto indicated the level to which they would shrink in the coming summer, like every year. The big lake at the end of the path, where I could make out the fleeting backs of a couple of pink dolphins, would then contract, and most swamps and ponds would totally disappear to give way to dry patches, paths, grasslands, and beaches. Between May and July, the Amazon River itself is ten meters lower. The harbor where I arrived would then be that much farther away from the houses. The landscapes and all the visible and invisible connections between Amazonian beings change profoundly twice a year, with the changes between the *aguas bajas* and the *aguas altas*.

He also told me that the forest around the facilities was not that old: when the park was founded in the early 1970s—one action among many to gain control of the country's borders with Peru, Ecuador, and Brazil, and to eradicate the growing coca business in the region—this was one of the six landing places for the coca traffickers' light aircrafts inside what is today the national park. What had seemed an ancient forest when I arrived suddenly became an abandoned, overgrown pasture in my eyes.

Makuira. When we met, Julia had recently arrived from the opposite corner of the country from where I was working. She was doing her fieldwork in Makuira National Park, in the Península de la Guajira, the northeastern finger of Colombia that extends into the Caribbean Sea, where she was looking at the practices of collaborative governance between Parques Nacionales and Wayúu indigenous chiefs. Makuira is a miraculous oasis in the middle of an immense desert, a small isolated mountain range of 25,000 hectares. Regarded by scientists as a unique biogeographical island, where dozens of species of migrating birds rest every year, Makuira is also the center of the mythic origin of the Wayúu people. To get to the park, one must take a flight to the coastal city of Riohacha and a drive in a four-wheel truck for between ten hours and a few days, depending on the driver's ability to find the tracks in the desert and to fix any vehicle breakdowns.

The first time Julia visited, she rode all night in a truck that transported people, sacks full of rice and corn flour, cases of beer, chickens, and two goats. For hours, the headlights illuminated cacti and thorny bushes in the sand. She felt they were driving in circles, everything looked the same. It was a mystery to her how the driver could find the way. At dawn, she finally caught sight of the mountain range, with its greenish-blue humid forest emerging from the flat, yellow horizon. Clouds wrapped the three peaks, like thick blankets. On their way, creeks became more frequent as trees replaced thorny bushes.

The park facilities are located in Nazareth, a small village at the edge of the park. Except for the park facilities, a hospital, and a boarding school, all other buildings are Wayúu family houses. She was taken into one of them, where the family offered her a big, colourful *chinchorro*, or hand-woven hammock, of pink and orange, with green and blue flowers and fringes hanging on both sides. Only Wayúunaiki was spoken.

The quarter of a million Wayúus are the most numerous indigenous people in Colombia. The Península de la Guajira is, since the 1980s, primarily *resguardo* land, divided into territories belonging to different extended family groups or clans, each with their own Wayúu chief. The park, established in 1977, is only a tiny spot in the *resguardo*. Of the park staff, only the manager was non-indigenous, or *arijuna*.²

Julia had arrived at a national park, but above all, she was now in Wayúu territory. Two scenes announced that arrival. The first week, she went in the park's pickup truck to a meeting with Wayúu chiefs. The bottle of *chirrinchi* the park staff bought along the way was not for drinking.³ They stopped a number of times on the way and sprinkled it on the dirt road, as offerings to mischievous beings that could do them harm. It was a guarantee for safe travels. Then, at four o'clock the next morning, when her hosts offered her a sweet coffee, they only asked: what did you dream? That was their good morning, nothing else. Every morning, Wayúu ponder the meaning of their dreams; they are revelations about the future, guidance for finding medicine in the mountains or in the desert, and communications with the dead. Dreams can tell you what kind of person the dreamer is, what kind of healing she might need.

We were thus both immersed in places where the state's ideas and guidelines about conservation, based on neat divisions between nature and culture, between science and politics, are to be implemented by national park staff in indigenous territories. In both of our research sites, some members of the park staff were indigenous men and women, or people who had been living in those places for decades. Wearing the institution's uniforms and getting paid by the state, and also living in the land of their ancestors, where they grew up, where their children are born, where their food is cultivated, and where their

dead are buried, they negotiate the idea of a national park and the entities that are allowed into its management through their everyday localized practices.

We were witnesses to those negotiations: in their meetings with *palabreiros* in *rancherías* in the deserts; during their rounds with *capitanes* on flooded soils under the dark green Amazonian canopy; in their games with indigenous children in tin-roofed schools; in their walks with the crying mourners who carry their dead to burials; in their encounters with Parques Nacionales' headquarters and their policies; and in their collaboration with scientists and their instruments.⁴

A friendship started between the two of us, fueled by our shared uneasy identities as biologists improvising as anthropologists, our fascination with the places we had studied in university classrooms and were now experiencing, and especially our curiosity about our shared discoveries. This essay is an attempt at pinning down some of those treasured findings, about which we have been talking ever since. Environmental cultural studies gave us the opportunity to deepen our experiences and ideas, as it invited us to make relationships between natures, practices, and power visible, through storytelling and reflection.

Mediating between Times and between Forms of Doing Politics

"Local times must be respected": Moving between times. As part of their regular duties, local park officers are in charge of convening meetings requested by national or regional headquarters with indigenous communities. In Bogotá, the national government's goals, like a given number of signed SMRs, are translated into working plans and deadlines, and carefully squeezed into desktop calendar slots. These modern grids are then sent to the local officers, who have to make them come true in territories where the pace is set by nature's rhythms and people's material and spiritual connections to them.

In La Guajira, first and second wakes and funerals determine Wayúu calendars, and are at the core of systems of reciprocity and redistribution. When a person dies and is buried for the first time, she remains in *jepirra*, a place of abundance where the dead live and communicate regularly with the living through dreams, until the second burial is performed a number of years later. For Wayúu people, life consists of a continuous chain of reciprocal favors, and according to strict rules at funerals and wakes, the distribution of meat and of the livestock that belonged to the deceased support the cosmic cycles and an economy based on reciprocity. Therefore, the funerals and the yearly seasons for second funerals have to be excluded from possible meeting dates with national representatives, as do the weeks of mourning following a death.

For Southern Amazonian indigenous people, a meeting cannot be planned independently of seasons of rain and drought, times of flood and times of harvest. In Amacayacu, it is impossible to reach the communities living in the Northern part of the park in times of *aguas bajas*, where you would need to carry a boat on your shoulders along the dry kilometers of the route for crossing the otherwise flooded lands. In the rainy season, people might be busy harvesting fruits from the forest or hunting *puercos de monte* (*Tayassu pecari*) or *cerrillos* (*Tayassu tajacu*) that feed on them while escaping from the flooding of the lowlands. In the dry season, they might be occupied with cultivating short-lived species such as yellow yucca, maize, watermelon, or *aji dulce* in the ephemeral river margins.

Also, in these evangelized territories, every officer knows that there is no chance of organizing a meeting in December or during or around other Christian holidays. “December is dead” was a common phrase among Amacayacu staff.

Organizing a meeting is therefore a slow and complicated process that has to be tuned to local rhythms. Tensions between Parques Nacionales headquarters and local officers often arose because of the importance of respecting local times for the latter. In Makuira, local staff more than once denied the regional director a meeting with traditional authorities, which angered her. A local officer explained:

People in the city are used to setting and cancelling appointments from one day to another; in Makuira this is not possible because of the time required to let someone know about an appointment and the time it takes to arrive from one place to another. . . . Here among us the staff decided it was better for them not to meet like that. We knew that the regional director would most probably cancel at the last minute; they would then get bad reputation in the eyes of Wayúu authorities for not being reliable. And if that happens, the ones who will look bad (*los que quedan mal*) are us, the local officers.

Moreover, it was frequently made clear that Parques Nacionales is a recent guest in the territories, and also a moody one: their guidelines and more generally the country’s institutions and laws change more quickly than local principles and cosmogonies and are frequently contradictory. This directly informs local staff’s positions as negotiators:

We don't know what might come later and affect the territory or us as individuals, laws are always changing to serve different interests . . . How could I negotiate something that will affect my own future? . . . I am from a clan that has its territory in Makuira, I am not alone; I have a big family . . . What will the Wayúu say ten years from now [about me]? You handed over our land to them.

Respect for local times is also at play *during* the meetings. Julia remembers a meeting she attended in Makuira, run by representatives of the Bogotá office in order to make advances in the implementation of national research guidelines. After a brief introduction of the meeting's objectives by the visitors, the indigenous chief's intervention in Wayúunaiki flowed for more than twenty minutes through the hot afternoon air, addressing mainly his own people. Both for Tikuna and Wayúu people, whenever a decision needs to be made about a place, an animal, or a river, their ancestral history needs to be retold. Detailed stories of the origin of the territories and their beings, of the relations with Parques Nacionales and other white people need to be conveyed to fully represent what is at stake. The local officer's translation for the Spanish-speaking visitors consisted only of a brief sentence. "They agree with you being here and will consider your proposals." This was all he said, and then the floor was given back to the chief.

The world of Parques Nacionales was thus welcome in Makuira, enabled by local officers. But it was made clear that its communication with indigenous worlds would happen at the pace set by indigenous chiefs.

We saw how in the places of encounter between parks and indigenous territories, the dance of governance took place (Delgado and Strand). And as the movements of the national institution were adjusted to local rhythms, a space was opened for the voices that summon earth-beings in the politics of conservation.

"The taxi-dog syndrome": Moving between forms of human politics. According to Parques Nacionales policy, the SMR is "an articulated and harmonized set of rules and procedures which allow for the planning, implementation, and evaluation of coordinated actions" (UAESPNN, *Acuerdo*, 3) in national parks that coincide with indigenous *resguardos*. To establish an SMR, Parques Nacionales published a set of principles, criteria, themes, and procedures to be followed. These are comprehensive guidelines that aim at giving voice to local communities in the management of parks, based on modern ideas of democracy and egalitarian participation.

The actual procedure that brings this national script to each park is largely in the hands of local park officers. This involves deciding *whom* to engage

in participatory processes and *how* to do it within local hierarchies, gender relations, dynamic power tensions and alliances, and ways of communicating. This is done so that “the right voices are included, in the right way,” as an Amazonian officer explained to me. The right voices and the right ways, as we realized, were those capable of speaking for indigenous worlds and bringing them into conversations with Parques Nacionales.

In Makuira, fifty-four Wayúu chiefs, one from each independent customary family territory in the park area, constitute a “wise men council.” As part of the joint decision-making strategy for co-governance, for the discussions around any agreement, four meetings on consecutive days were held, each covering one-quarter of the park area. The idea was to have all the territories represented, while sparing the chiefs long-distance travel and avoiding enemy clans from meeting, with possible violent outcomes (Premauer and Berkes). While Julia was in the park, Wayúu staff members opposed attempts by the Participation Office in Bogotá to reduce the meetings from four to two and with just some of the Wayúu chiefs, to save time and money. The staff did not accept this because, as one staff member put it, “The central office is now trying to establish a participation strategy that only takes into account what is best for the *arijuna*.” The meetings did take place, but including “the right voices.”

In their work between Parques Nacionales and local communities, local officers also move constantly between different forms of transcript. The functioning of a national park is only visible for the headquarters if expressed in written documents with stamps, letterheads, and signatures. Meetings and workshops must become minutes, lists of attendance with ID numbers, and autographs of often illiterate participants; days-long boat journeys on Amazonian rivers or hours in a truck under the desert sun need to be made visible in printed receipts that include the tax code of the service provider, the number of gallons of gasoline used, the number of kilometers travelled. These written proofs are the only currency accepted by the institution for measuring activities and acknowledging achievements.

As part of the same logic, for Parques Nacionales, co-governance only exists if it is captured in a document signed by both local and Parques Nacionales authorities. This obligation to articulate processes in terms of checkable lists of achievements was in turn embedded in and reinforced by a larger state grid: the funding for their elaboration came from the national budget for government policies, where a goal of signing thirteen SMRs by 2010 was established. Signing SMRs thus became a government mandate for Parques Nacionales, and this set the pace for individual parks and officers.

In the territories, on the other hand, spoken words are the base of communication. Long-standing relationships slowly build respect and trust, and these

are the roots of any agreement. *Respetar la palabra* (to respect the word) is a fundamental thread of Wayúu relations. Co-governance, there, is an ongoing process of informal collaboration that occurs on an everyday basis. Written documents, on the contrary, are commonly met by indigenous leaders with distrust, as they are the instruments white men have historically used for establishing disadvantageous arrangements.

One Amazonian officer explained the tension implied in complying with formal requirements in the following way: “Imagine you and I married years ago, we have been living together, but the marriage has not worked, it has not been consummated, we have no children and I come with the idea of proposing to you that we should marry again in order to fix the problem.”

Formal requirements by Parques Nacionales are indeed met, and SMRs emerge as a result of the ability of local officers to navigate this tension between a world that is conveyed in written words, and worlds that are verbal.

In a visit to the park’s office in Leticia, the closest city to Amacayacu, I was shocked to see the number of assignments requested by Bogotá. Meeting minutes, activity reports, reports for the government accountability office, research plans, risk analyses, and effectiveness analyses were listed on a whiteboard hanging from the wall beside one of the two desks in the workplace. The park manager explained, pointing at the list: “So, what do we do? Try to spend the shortest possible time and least possible effort doing the homework, and the longest possible time and largest possible effort doing what needs to be done.”

Officers in Bogotá, sometimes with resentment and sometimes with respect, were well aware of this position of local officers: “We call it the taxi-dog syndrome. They tell you ‘yes,’ but they actually often don’t. Simply because maybe what one proposes from here is not useful there.”

He was referring to a common kind of decoration found in taxis in Colombian cities. They are miniature stuffed dogs that have a spring inside their necks. While their feet are firmly glued to the surface of the dashboard, their head moves with the movements of the car.

While keeping their feet on the ground, by responding to what they perceive as “what needs to be done” in the territories, local officers also comply with the national institution’s formalities.

Orchards and Red Ribbons: Hybrids Enter Conservation Politics

Local officers thus adjust the pace of the dance of the central office to local rhythms, and guarantee that “the right voices,” in the right mode, have their

place in the zones of encounter. Doing this enables them to “do what needs to be done”: to let hybrids take part in the management of the parks.

In Makuira, the three peaks of the *serranía*, *Palua*, *Walechi* and *Jiwonnei*, belong to Wayúu spiritual owners. They are dangerous places where people cannot live and may only visit if instructed to do so in dreams. The dwarf cloud forests that cover the peaks are, for ecologists and biologists, the only example of its kind in Colombia, as they grow at an unusually low altitude (below 1000 m) and rely almost entirely on horizontal precipitation—fog forming on the windward side of the mountains. In 2006, a vegetation study of these forests in the three peaks was needed in order to include them in the park management plan and later the SMR. One local officer told Julia how they instructed biologists to do the studies:

You are entering their domains, bring *chirrinchi* and bring tobacco, bring red ribbons. Look, when you take the sample from the plant, take the ribbon and tie it to the branch, think of the owner of that nature there. Tell him: ‘I offer this in exchange, I am going to take a part of the plant, it is just a part, I need it, I am not going to take it all.’ . . . You tie the ribbon while in your mind you say this with much, much respect. And so it happened. Everybody was silent. The technician talked loudly, we told him: ‘if you talk loudly there is no respect and something is going to happen to you, and only to you. You own your life. Lower your voice.’ And there were no dreams, nothing happened to them.

The studies were carried out and the sacred peaks and their dwarf cloud forests became part of the park’s SMR.

The SMR, printed on Parques Nacionales letterhead and signed by the general director of Parques Nacionales and the fingerprints of thirty-two traditional chiefs, starts with a quotation in both Spanish and Wayúunaiki of the creation of Makuira by Juya, the father of Earth, and his offering of all beings of that land to his beloved wife Pulowi: “and therefore all animals and plants that exist in these territories are hers.” Among the presents given to Pulowi were what science calls dwarf cloud forests, which are included as sacred zones in the park’s zonation, along with cemeteries and water springs. In them, only “spiritual and cultural activities” by the Wayúu are allowed—and “the fulfillment of dreams” is one of them. Thus, translated as “sacred zones,” and after a negotiation that took place in Wayúu terms between scientists and the Wayúu owners of nature, mediated by local officers,

Pulowi's presents made it into the park's management plan (UAESPNN, *Acuerdo*, 1).

In Amacayacu, as part of the construction of the management plan, a list of "conservation objects" needed to be established in order to define priorities for research, monitoring, and funding. According to the institution's guidelines, these had to be a limited number of attributes of biodiversity, ecosystem services, or "natural attributes of cultural value" and should be identified "in a participatory manner" (UAESPNN, *Aspectos*, 27). Examples such as endangered species, carbon regulation, or sacred sites were given to them in the guidelines: examples of how to reduce local worlds to a (scientifically or culturally) legitimate representation for modern politics.

This framework was felt to be misleading by local officers. For them, what was really indicative of conservation were the processes (they refused to use the idea of "objects") that connected culture and nature, that could signal the well-being of the people and their regulatory systems, around which conservation agreements could be met (Ungar and Strand 3268). A local officer told me what an indigenous woman who participated in a workshop told him:

First, there is no word for us that means environment. For us, what needs to be conserved is people. If I take care of myself, of my body, then I am taking care of where I cultivate, I am taking care of where I hunt, I am taking care of where I fish, I watch that the *sabedor* communicates with the spiritual owners and asks for permission, because if that doesn't happen there is illness for me.

In Amacayacu and in other Amazonian parks, local officers proposed to replace "Conservation Objects" with "Integral Conservation Priorities" (ICP). Among the most important ICPs were *chagras*: itinerant orchards where an extraordinary diversity of tubers, fruits, and medicinal plants are cultivated in sophisticated spatial arrangements that represent social and gender relations. The quality of a *chagra* reflects the community's inherited understanding of the natural history of species and varieties, of climate cycles, of ecological relations, and of how to communicate with the spiritual owners of the forest, who have to give permission for the *curación* (healing) of the land (van der Hammen).

Salados were put forward as another key ICP. These are mud pits of different sizes that interrupt the thick understory, where monkeys, tapirs, and large birds come to feed on soil minerals. *Salados* are also the *malokas* of the animals; these are their houses and the places where they meet to deliberate. In *salados*,

the timing for hunting and the species hunted have to be negotiated by shamans with the spiritual owners. In Amazonian parks, local officers are well aware that scientists and other visitors need to ask permission to visit *salados*.

Parques Nacionales initially resisted making Integral Conservation Priorities official, and there was a struggle to impose Conservation Objects in all management plans. Years later, they were adopted as part of the institution's national guidelines and are currently still part of its published guidelines for overlapped parks (Leal and Montero).

Making Sense of our Experiences: Mediation, Earth-Beings, and the Pulses of the Territory

Although more than ten years have passed since we experienced what we are trying to pin down here, we still feel those conversations need to be recorded. All this time, as we have continued working in conservation, we have heard stories of discomfort regarding the dominant narratives about conservation as opposition between “Parques Nacionales” and “local people,” as if they were static, coherent, and discreet things. The roles played by local officers—critical and allied, hosts and guests, tied and independent, of both Parques Nacionales and indigenous worlds—seem to be invisible.

We have struggled to find concepts to understand what we see: the role of local officers and what happens when they perform it. The literature on social-ecological systems and co-management of natural resources gave us some insights. Local officers are similar to “bridging organizations” insofar as they mediate between arenas, levels, and scales in order to build confidence and facilitate social learning, horizontal and vertical collaboration, and conflict resolution. These people are making co-management possible by “enabling effective participation, not only on paper, by also by praxis” (De Pourcq et al.). However, these texts do not normally look through ethnographic lenses at individuals in particular places. They are not especially interested in stories or politics.

Our stories, along with those told by Juanita Sundberg about the Maya Biosphere Reserve in Guatemala, problematize the vision of national parks solely as sites of establishment of hegemonic understandings of nature and marginalization of local communities, question the naturalization and freezing of categories such as state officers and local communities, and look at how local officers “engage with, enact and reconfigure conservationist discourses and practices” (Sundberg 243).

Marisol de la Cadena helped us better understand the role of local officers in these encounters between the modern nation-state and indigeneity by illuminating the hybrids that are allowed into politics thanks to these people's work.

Thinking with her, we could see what their mediation results in. We could see how sacred forests where dreams dwell, *salados* where tapirs-people deliberate, and *chagras* where plants that are men and women bear their fruits, walk into Parques Nacionales, translated into things that politics can accept in its assembly. And by doing so they defy from within the fundamental commandment of conservation's political agenda: the modern division between nature and culture.

However, even with her ideas powerfully illuminating our stories, we felt that something was still missing to fully express what we experienced. What differentiates these officers of Parques Nacionales from Marisol's friends in Peru? How are these "conservation hybrids" different from the earth-beings that participate in politics there?

One evening, shortly before the deadline to submit this essay, the doorbell rang unexpectedly at my house. Two Amazonian park officers, old friends from the time of my PhD fieldwork, came to visit me by surprise. While we had kept in touch, we met at most once every year. "Who would believe this coincidence?" I said when I opened the door and mentioned what I was working on. "Do coincidences even exist?" asked Edgar, before pouring a spoon full of *mambe* in his mouth.⁵ He lived for more than ten years in the Cahuinari Park with the Miraña people in the northeastern Colombian Amazon.

Hernán looked out the window and smiled. He is now working in Yaigo-jé-Apaporis, a national park that was declared in 2009, following a request made by traditional authorities of seven indigenous peoples to Parques Nacionales to shield their territories from gold mining by creating a national park on their *resguardos*. Both of them had been directly involved in what we then called the "Integral Conservation Priorities Rebellion" ten years ago, described in the previous section of this essay. The three of us drank beer and they told me about how things have changed in the Amazon since I last visited.

Most Amazonian national parks were subject to the boom of illegal gold mining of the end of the last decade; excavators occupied their rivers, stirring the sand, destroying the beaches where tortoises lay their eggs, and flooding the water with mercury. Many indigenous men became miners and left their land when the excavators left; many young women became prostitutes.

Almost apologizing, I explained what I was writing, and wondered aloud whether these ideas still made sense, so many years later, so many changes later. Edgar and Hernán looked at each other, laughed, and decided to explain to me the "pulses of the territory," the idea about which they had just been talking on their way to my place. Hernán put it like this:

That role of local officers is not always easy. You have to be accountable to both Parques Nacionales and *paisanos*.⁶ You are walking a thin line and sometimes you are looked at with suspicion from both sides. And you have it clear that you are not going to impose things on people, but sometimes, before you mature, you go to the other extreme and idealize your community. When things such as mining happen and you see there are things that are wrong, you realize you need to talk to them as people. And to people you are also critical, you also tell them the hard stuff. But look, this does not mean you are on the side of Parques Nacionales, defending some abstract ideas about conservation. What you are doing is *being tuned to the territory*. And you have to make the territory visible, put it on the table, and talk frankly about it, make people see things. Like the turtles and their beaches needing continued care, like the people needing their elders to talk to them. Both *paisanos* and Parques Nacionales need to see things, to see the territories, and territories are going through changes. This does not mean you are responding to one side or the other. This is not about sides. This means you are *being attentive to the pulses of the territory*.

Immediately after they left, I went back to my laptop and copied every word I remembered. Pulses of the territories shed light on what it was that local Parques Nacionales officers were bringing to our conversation with Marisol. Their work moves within the difficult “thin line” defined by their being accountable to both Parques Nacionales and indigenous people. The earth-beings that these officers summon, and their pulsations, are shaped both by their concerns for what they perceive as the destruction of nature, for which they are responsible—educated as they are in Parques Nacionales—and by their not wanting to “hand over indigenous territories to white people.” Being attentive to these particular *pulses of the territory*, opening space for them in the zones of encounter and translating them into conservation politics was precisely what we felt officers did.

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Notes

1. *Yanchama*, *ceiba*, and *chambira* are the common names for *Ficus yanchama*, *Ceiba pentandra*, and *Astrocaryum chambira*, respectively.
2. For Wayúu people, a white, foreign person or thing.
3. *Chirrinchi* is an artisanally distilled liquor made of sugarcane and different herbs or fruits.
4. *Palabrerros*, traditional specialists in conflict mediation, are central figures of social organization in Wayúu culture. *Rancherías* are small groups of traditional houses scattered in the desert, where closely related families live. *Capitanes* are political representatives of (mainly Amazonian) indigenous communities, different from the traditional authorities or shamans.
5. A powder made of toasted coca leaves mixed with the ashes of other plants. Traditionally used by some Amazonian indigenous people for whom coca is a sacred plant for being focused while talking and making important decisions.
6. This term literally means “person from the same country,” and it is used in the Colombian Amazon to refer to indigenous people.

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