



Legacies of Transnational Mining and Hydropower in Defining Costa Rican Environmental Sovereignty

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Abstract

This paper analyzes the linked histories and changing national discourses surrounding a transnational mining concession and subsequent plans for national hydroelectric development in the Pacific south of Costa Rica. My analysis shows how the framing of a development project shifted from un-environmental to green; this shift paralleled a change in the national debate from defense against a transnational threat to support of national sovereignty. Following a controversial contract-law with the Aluminum Company of America (Alcoa), the Costa Rican government committed to building a hydroelectric project to support the mining operation. After the Alcoa project was canceled five years after national protests in 1970, the Costa Rican Institute of Electricity (ICE) took on modified ideas of the hydroelectric project for energy export and national consumption. Now the dam—which has yet to be constructed—is described as renewable energy development for the good of the nation. Exemplifying the contradictions of environmentalism, framing the hydroelectric project as clean energy in support of national sovereignty has conflicted with environmental defense of biodiversity, and the territorial sovereignty claimed by local indigenous communities.

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