Whose Paradise? Conservation, tourism and land grabbing in Tayrona Natural Park, Colombia

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Paper presented at the
International Conference on
Global Land Grabbing
6-8 April 2011

Organised by the Land Deals Politics Initiative (LDPI) in collaboration with the Journal of Peasant Studies and hosted by the Future Agricultures Consortium at the Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex

LDPI International Conference on Global Land Grabbing
University of Sussex, Brighton, UK – April 6 to 8, 2011
Panel: Green Grabs

Whose Paradise? Conservation, tourism and land grabbing in Tayrona Natural Park, Colombia[1]

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Abstract:
The last decade in Colombia has been marked by a massive counter-agrarian reform, forcibly displacing 4 million people from an estimated 5.3 million hectares of land. The land grab stands in close relation to paramilitarism, illegal crop production and high-end corruption. While war-related dynamics of dispossession are widely recognized as causes of land grabbing, the logics of exclusion and expropriation behind "greener" projects (agro-fuel production and ecotourism) are obscured under discourses of conservation, climate change mitigation and sustainable development. The case of ecotourism development in Tayrona National Park, on the northern coast of Colombia, epitomizes the greening of the global land grab. Based on participant observation and in-depth interviews with community members who live and work at the park, I examine the case within the shifting resource politics in the area. Following the criminalization, exclusion and forced eviction of community members, I trace the problematic couplings of conservation, tourism and land grabbing. Ecotourism serves as a powerful mechanism of accumulation by dispossession that evidences not just the workings of global capital, but also the green pretexts that produce class-, race- and gender-marked subjects as expropriable, disposable beings.

Key words: tourism, neoliberal conservation, land grab, resource politics, politics of difference, Colombia.

[1] This paper is based on preliminary findings from my dissertation research. In particular, I draw from ethnographic research conducted between June 2009 and December 2010 in Bogotá, Santa Marta, different areas of Tayrona National Park and the park's buffer zone. This work has been funded by the Inter-American Foundation's Grassroots Development Fellowship, the Society of Woman Geographers' Pruitt National Dissertation Fellowship and Clark University's Pruser-Holzhauer Enhancement Dissertation Award. I would like to thank everybody who generously shared their stories with me in the midst of their busy daily schedules. This work would have not been possible without the knowledge and support from Alejandro Suárez, Julián Montalvo and Óscar Campo, who have carried out extensive research in the area. I also want to thank Roosbelinda Cárdenas, Carlos Del Cairo and Roberta Hawkins for their insightful comments on a previous draft.

Introduction

According to the results from the recently published report from the Colombian Commission for the Assessment of Public Policy on Forced Displacement (CSPPDF 2010), between 1998 and 2008, about 4 million people (10 percent of the total population) were forcefully displaced from 5.3 million hectares of land in different regions of Colombia. This humanitarian crisis and substantial counter-agrarian reform, which has not stopped nor been reversed despite recent state projects for victims' reparation, is rooted in the complex dynamics of the country's history of unequal access to land and its long lasting armed conflict. During the last decade, entangled processes of territorial control expansion by paramilitary and neo-paramilitary groups, illegal crop production, large agribusinesses promotion and high-end corruption have resulted in entrenched uneven geographies of resource access and control in different regions of the country. While these violent dynamics of dispossession and removal have been accounted for as causes of land grabbing, "greener" projects such as plantations of palm oil for biodiesel production, environmental conservation strategies and tourism development have not usually been understood by analysts, the media or scholars as part of these dynamics. This is particularly true for the case of tourism-as-conservation, which is even portrayed as an environment- and community-friendly alternative to productive activities such as large scale agriculture and cattle-ranching.

In this paper, I argue that ecotourism does not necessarily work against this land grabbing logic, but actually complements it despite green imperatives of environmental conservation and "tourism done right". I use the case of one of the most important

protected areas in Colombia, Tayrona National Park, to show how ecotourism development and its subsequent transformation of resource politics in the area has translated into the criminalization, exclusion and forced eviction of community members who have lived and worked in the protected area for decades.[2] First, I provide a brief history of tourism and war in Tayrona, highlighting the touristification process that has taken place during the last decade as tourism became a fundamental site of the production of natures, spaces and subjects. I pay particular attention to the strategies of securitization and tourism promotion behind Tayrona's production as "paradise regained". Second, I examine the privatization of strategic areas of the park that has resulted from the concession of tourist services to the travel company Aviatur and the way in which ecotourism, as a particular form of neoliberal conservation, has transformed the livelihood strategies of local community members including: tour guides, food vendors, transporters, fishermen, peasants and others. Finally, I analyze how the shifting resource politics in the area are profoundly entangled with the politics of difference, local community members socially marked as "not green enough" subjects and, thus, as bodies out of place. Through this case, I seek to trace the problematic couplings of tourism, neoliberal conservation and land grabbing, pointing out how ecotourism can work as a powerful strategy of accumulation by dispossession.

[2] Throughout the paper I use the term "community members" which is the way people who live and work in the park refer to themselves. I do not use "the community", trying to counteract romantic and homogenizing visions of communities as coherent unities. "Local community members" thus refers to the different people for whom Tayrona and its surrounding areas represent home and/or workplace –food vendors, cooks, transporters, tour guides, fishermen, peasants, groundkeepers, indigenous peoples, *colonos* (settlers), etc.– despite their different background experiences, places of origin, interests, opinions and social positionalities within the complex political ecologies of the park. Some of them live and work seasonally in Tayrona, while others do so permanently, and some of them commute on a daily basis from nearby towns.

"Paradise regained"[3]

Located in the northern Caribbean coast of Colombia in the Department of Magdalena, Tayrona National Park is one of the most important protected areas in the country with 15,000 hectares, of which 3,000 are in marine areas, and nearly 250,000 visitors per year. Only 35km away from the city of Santa Marta, the park was legally established in 1964 and in 1982 the UNESCO declared the combined area of the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta and Tayrona National Park a Biosphere Reserve. This combined area constitutes traditional indigenous territories of the Arhuaco, Kankuamo, Kogui and Wiwa groups and is home to about 30,000 of their members. In its extension, from the sea level to 900 meters of altitude, Tayrona includes dry tropical forests, thorn forests, beaches, coral reefs, mangroves and coastal pools, among other endangered ecosystems. Considered a biodiversity hotspot, the park's image has been reworked since the 1980s as an ecotourist destination, overlapping with its long history as a seaside attraction.

Despite the fact that Tayrona's ecologies, species and landscapes are generally seen as constitutive of its "natural tourist vocation", there is nothing "natural" or immediate about turning "one person's provision ground into another's playground" (Sheller, 2003: 13). In particular, the recent increase of international and domestic visitors to the park from about 90,000 in 2004 to 250,000 visitors in 2010 is the result of the intensive process of touristification that has taken place under the national policy of Democratic Security implemented in 2002 by former president Álvaro Uribe. A state project of *securitization* that stands in accordance to the War on Drugs and the War on

[3] USA Today's (2006) article referring to the Colombian Caribbean and how tourism has increased in response to a perception of less violence.

Terror, Democratic Security has been framed as the answer to the urgent necessity to "restore order and the dominion of law" in all corners of the national territory.[4] Officially defined as "the concrete possibility for all citizens to enjoy their fundamental rights... [a] possibility [that] only becomes true when the state's prompt and effective coercion is guaranteed" (President Álvaro Uribe, quoted in Barco, 2002), Democratic Security has indeed relied on coercion, among other securitization mechanisms. As a result, what privileged Colombians usually from urban areas celebrate as their possibility to finally return to their vacation homes, is what human rights advocates and state victims have denoted as a project based on state terror and the elimination of political dissidence: a dirty war.[5]

The double strategy of tourism promotion and militarization of tourist spots and travel routes (that connect main urban centers with seaside attractions) have resulted in the production of the country, and in particular of the Colombian Caribbean and Tayrona National Park, as tourist destinations. In fact, Tayrona's historical geographies of violence seem to contradict its effective conjuration as a paradisiacal spot.[6] A strategic area, the park connects the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta, where mostly illegal crops (marihuana,

[4] I use the concept of "securitization" to refer to a political and cultural project of hyper-vigilance and exclusion of particular spaces and forms of citizenship, usually based on militarization and the mobilization of fear (see Hyndman 2007, Katz 2007a, Sparke 2006).

[5] For example, official statistics from the Fiscalía General de la Nación (General Prosecution Office) count 50,000 persons forcedly disappeared during the last 20 years, with clear increases in the last 8 years: "During Uribe's first year [2002] there were four persons disappeared per day. But between 2002 and 2006 the number was seven persons per day, and between 2007 and 2008 this number grew to eleven. Eleven every single day" (Caballero, 2010, my translation). Even if it is too early to judge current President Juan Manuel Santos's administration, the continuation of the Democratic Security policy was central to his presidential campaign and strategies of securitization linked to tourism promotion have been an important part of his government strategies. It is also worth noting that Santos was Uribe's Minister of Defense.

[6] In order to trace the historical geographies of Tayrona National Park, I heavily rely on local community members' life histories. I triangulate this information using secondary sources and newspaper articles.

coca and poppies) are harvested, to maritime access points through which products are transported and then distributed to Central America and Mexico, to then be sent to their final destinations in the United States and Europe. Partly because of these activities, the last four decades in the Tayrona area have been marked by the strong presence of both official and irregular (i.e. guerrilla and paramilitary) armed forces. In the 1970s –with the marihuana bonanza– and the 1980s –with the coca bonanza– in the Sierra Nevada and different areas of the park, paramilitary forces were formed in order to take part in the business and to provide private security services to drug lords and landowners.

Originally under the names of Autodefensas del Mamey and Los Chamizos, the paramilitary groups organized by Hernán Giraldo, also known as "El Patrón" (The Boss), constituted an anti-guerrilla private armed force, mostly against the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionaras de Colombia (FARC) that had presence in the area around the mid 1980s (see Ramírez, 2006; Silva and Carrasquilla, 2008). The following decade was marked by the consolidation of Giraldo's armed, economic and political power, his private militias often operating with state sanction. In 1995, when his paramilitary forces were renamed Autodefensas Campesinas del Magdalena y la Guajira, Giraldo had expanded his territorial influence and control to include significant areas of the two departments of the Caribbean coast. The group's actions were funded mainly through *boleteo* ("protection" fees), extortion, "taxation" on land and cattle, theft, drug traffic and contraband. It has been estimated that by 2001, forty percent of all coca exports with a value of nearly 1.2 billion dollars went through Giraldo's territories (Verdad Abierta, 2010b).

Parallel to Giraldo's growing power and popularity throughout the 1990s (he is seen by many as a benefactor and protector, some sort of Robin Hood who stole the rich in order to give back to the poor), the area that comprises Tayrona Natural Park and the northeastern slope of the Sierra Nevada was characterized by massacres, selective assassinations, forced displacement and forced disappearances (personal interviews with local community members; see Verdad Abierta, 2009, 2010a). Because of this violence, the park closed during 1994, 1995 and 1999.[7] Talking to Andrés,[8] a young food vendor, tour guide and artisan of the region in his mid-30s, he recalled what life was like in the Tayrona area at the beginning of the 2000s: "It was simple: 15 percent of all earnings had to go to the *paracos* (paramilitary groups). Everything, from what you made showing tourists around to what you fished… we had to pay in exchange so that they would leave us alone. If you refused, you got killed. Simple. …Even the ticket money collected at the park entrance was subjected to this fee" (personal interview, May 2010).

In 2002, the Castaño brothers and "Jorge 40", leaders of the largest paramilitary group in Colombia called the Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia (AUC), declared war to Giraldo. Giraldo's army, now under the name of Frente Resistencia Tayrona, refused to surrender and to hand out territories and combatants until February 2003 when, after a bloody war, the two groups signed a truce and "Jorge 40" took charge of the Tayrona area. The two paramilitary structures of the Colombian Caribbean region –the AUC and the

[7] In the ten years following its closing in 1994, the park received an average of 50,000 visitors per year, about a fifth of 2010 visits (calculations based on data from the Office of Attention to Visitors, National Natural Parks System's Special Administrative Unit – UAESPNN).

[8] For confidentiality purposes, I use pseudonyms and omit some identifying characteristics. All interviews and conversations took place in Spanish, direct quotes are my translation.

Frente Resistencia Tayrona– were then unified under AUC's Bloque Norte. Bloque Norte's dominion continued undefeated, constituting an army of nearly 1,200 men and women. The group nominally ceased activities in 2006, when it participated in the highly questioned process of paramilitary demobilization carried out under Uribe's government between 2003 and 2006. Hernán Giraldo was among the demobilized and was detained in 2006; he was extradited to the United States two years later and faces a 38-year sentence (see Verdad Abierta, 2009). When I asked Andrés if things are better now at the park, he replied: "Most of us are still paying *vacunas* ("protection" fees). It's a *calma chicha* (a superficial calm that hides the storm beneath), as it has been for a while. …You come from Bogotá and think "nothing happens here". But it's not easy… paramilitary bands are organizing again. You can tell because rules are getting tight again: we know for sure that only tourists can smoke weed. Us, peasants, would get killed for that… You see? Tourism is the façade, you don't see what's behind" (personal interview, May 2010).[9]

One of the reasons why the peace process between the government and paramilitary groups has been deemed as a failure, is the fact that criminal organizations were not dismantled and neo-paramilitary groups or "emerging criminal bands" (BACRIM) have continued operating, often with state sanction, and have even increased their violent activities and expanded their area of influence in different regions of the

[9] In his account, Andrés pointed out one important aspect of paramilitary control throughout the country, and in particular in the Caribbean region: the detailed control of everyday life. Using exemplary forms of violence, these right-wing militias controlled private aspects of entire populations' daily life including marihuana use, infidelity and minor theft. Local community members' life histories included stories of how friends and family members were killed for stealing chickens, smoking weed and, in the case of women, for not being home after dark. In my dissertation, I expand on the problematic and gendered ways in which these rules applied differentially to tourists and locals, mostly under the instruction that tourists should not be touched.

country, as Andrés noted (see Human Rights Watch, 2010).[10] In the Tayrona area, the dubious demobilization process has meant the violent redefinition of territorial control, illegal crop production areas and traffic routes. With more than 11,000 combatants nationally and strong presence in 24 of the 32 departments of the country (Corporación Nuevo Arco Iris, 2009), the actions of multiple neo-paramilitary groups in the Caribbean Region and in Tayrona in particular –including Los Mellizos, La Banda de los 40, Los Gaitanistas, Los Paisas, Los Urabeños and Las Águilas Negras– challenge images of paradisiacal spots commonly associated to the area and reveal the seemingly impossible relations between war and tourism.

As mentioned above, the intensive tourism promotion and development that the country has experienced during the last decade has been a central aspect of the state project of securitization undertaken by the national policy of Democratic Security. Paramilitary violence has played a crucial role in this project, even if not openly recognized by official sources, as FARC "subversives" started to be understood as "terrorists" at the beginning of the 2000s and were deemed as the country's main enemy and the only obstacle to attaining peace.[11] This was and is particularly true in the Tayrona area, where paramilitary control has guaranteed tourists' mobility and relative safety. As long as service providers pay their dues, tourism's façade is maintained. This state-led touristification process, in which violence has played an important role, has relied on the

[10] One of the most problematic aspects of this peace process if what has been called the *parapolítica*: the strong links between government instances –including several politicians, Congress, and local, departmental and national elections– and the formation, funding and operation of paramilitary groups.

[11] This contradicts recent national statistics which signal that while the state was responsible for 17 percent of human rights violations at the beginning of Uribe's first term in 2002, four years later, it was responsible for 56 percent of the violations, compared to 29 percent by paramilitary groups and 10 percent by the FARC guerrilla in the same year (Leech, 2008).

production of leisure spaces, exuberant natures and exotic others often in the name of increased security, biodiversity conservation and economic development. Moreover, the "retaking of the country", as former President Álvaro Uribe has often referred to the effects of this double strategy of militarization and tourism promotion, has been based on the "re-conquest" of the national territory, a patriotic endeavor performed by both soldiers and families on vacation.[12]

The imagined geographies circulated by promotional videos, brochures, journalists and presidential speeches alike have resulted in the production of the park as "paradise regained", even despite the war taking place in the area.[13] This cannot be seen as a simple omission, but needs to be understood in relation to violence's central role in enabling and sustaining tourism to Tayrona. Statistics show that the level of foreign visitors to the country increased in nearly 26 percent from 2002 to 2004 and that national air travel experienced the highest increase in a decade reaching nearly 8.5 million domestic travelers in 2006 (Ministerio de Comercio, Industria y Turismo, 2007). Correspondingly, visits to Tayrona National Park have increased remarkably and steadily since 2004 reaching 250,000 visitors last year. These "miracle" numbers of tourism, that beg the question "security for whom and at what cost?", speak to the new geographies, both

[12] Uribe's speech at the International Hotel Fair in June 8, 2010 exemplifies well the role tourists have had in this "re-conquest" and how travelling through Colombia has became a patriotic act: "Nothing would have been achieved by pouring our National Armed Forces to the roads if they had not been followed by a vigorous reaction from everyday Colombians. That holiday… of November 2002 was as if the country was being freed from a collective kidnapping, amazing" (Uribe, 2010, my translation).

[13] For example, in 2007, The New York Times declared in a rather triumphant tone that Tayrona National Park was "recovered" for tourism. The article in The New York Times reads: "For years the park and its environs were a battleground between guerrilla and paramilitary groups... Now, however, Tayrona has been transformed. In late 2003, the Colombian president, Álvaro Uribe, cracked down on crime. With the Sierra Nevada now largely safe, the government has set about promoting Tayrona as a tourist paradise" (Hummer, 2007). These overstatements of a pacified zone had to be rectified by the newspaper weeks later.

symbolical and material, that tourism and violence have forged in Colombia. Along with the new spaces and subjects that the Democratic Security policy has produced, it is important to note that it has dramatically reworked discourses of what Colombia's lived reality is and what it means to be Colombian. Through a massive public-private national branding campaign called Colombia is Passion, notions of security, war and peace have become profoundly entangled with tourism promotion. Seeking to promote tourism, competitiveness and foreign direct investment, Colombia is Passion has included intensive advertisement campaigns, compulsory awareness workshops for government officials, a curriculum for high school students and the promotion of sponsored products from Renault cars to potato chips. The wonders of the country we live in are professed on every corner at every minute in what has became a powerful new way of nationalism. Discourses based on the trope that Colombia has more good things to see and show the world than bad ones, have played a key role in configuring a new phase of "the administration of forgetting" in the country (see McClintock, 2009).[14]

This double strategy of militarization and tourism promotion, with a focus on the Colombian Caribbean, has produced a spatial fetish –an illusory space detached from the realities of its production (see Katz 2007b)– as the violence necessary to the production of tourist sites is obscured, as well as tourism's violent effects in the everyday lives of local community members. This has contributed to making state and paramilitary

[14] Promotional material from the campaign focuses on the good things Colombia has to offer: images of beaches, carnivals, "undiscovered paradises", ethnically-marked Others and sexualized women are used over and over again. "There is progress, exquisite coffee, countless beautiful women and orchids", says one of the videos, in English and Spanish, that circulate on TV and on the internet reassuring that "this is a magical country, full of colors, flavors, places, good people, many many good people" (Colombia es Pasión, 2006).

violence invisible, hiding both the violence that tourism produces and the complex dimensions of the internal armed conflict. Narratives of "out of this world" places and "paradises awaiting discovery" have effectively created the illusion that, when you come visit the country, "the only risk is wanting to stay", as Colombia is Passion cynically asserts. It is in this context that ecotourism became a powerful mechanism in reimagining the park, the region and the country. The shared itineraries and landscapes of war and tourism in Tayrona National Park have been enabled and sustained by the problematic couplings of tourism, conservation and violence this article examines. In what follows, I specify some everyday aspects of this violence in terms of land grabbing dynamics in Tayrona and its effects over local resource politics.

A public park in private hands

Tayrona National Park is a protected area rife with land tenure conflicts, including the fact that 90 percent of the public national park is de facto in private hands. As reported by one of the most important newspapers in the country, "Tayrona belongs to very few Colombians. ... In the majority of the hectares that belong to property owners, occupants or *colonos* (settlers) with false titles, imposing private buildings raise" (Coronel, 2009, my translation). As one walks the different beaches of Tayrona Park, it is easy to be surprised by the huge private properties within it and the barbwire that marks them. These properties range from yoga retreats for high class tourists from Bogotá to elegant recreational homes from powerful members of local elites: landowners and high-end government officials who, judging by recent sentences for *parapolítica*, have connections with drug traffic and irregular armed forces. In a report from 2003, it is revealed that private plots within Tayrona have been expanding. Just between 2002 and

2003, the park passed from 108 to 160 properties of which 52 are titled –some of them by royal decree back from the Spanish colonial period– and 56 do not have a valid title (Coronel, 2009). In my interview with a top conservation consultant, he referred to this problem: "Many members of the ruling classes, politicians, have private properties within the park. They have been kicking out fishermen and peasants from the best places, beaches and coastline inlets… even people who were there before the park was established in 1964". When I inquired about their legal status as property owners, he explained: "That the park, as a public land, can only be sold to the Nation hasn't been true in the case of Colombia. The property map isn't clear at all… most titles are involved in legal dispute or are plainly illegal. There have been efforts to clear these titles, but members of the local elites have skipped the law from start to finish" (personal interview, December 2009). In addition to this, as it can be inferred from the previous section, paramilitary control of the area, and its connection with local elites, challenges the public character of the protected area having a strong influence on resource use and access.

In spite of these important factors shaping the political ecology of Tayrona and its surroundings, I want to focus on the everyday effects that strategies of neoliberal conservation through tourism have had over local communities. Specifically, the production of Tayrona as "reclaimed paradise" has had profound impacts on the resource politics and, as explained in the next section, on the politics of difference in the park. In my conversations with several people who work and live in different areas of Tayrona and whose livelihoods depend mostly on tourism (i.e. on the income it generates in exploitative relations of food, lodging, transportation, guidance and entertainment provision), the concession of ecotourist services to Aviatur was always signaled as a

major change in their capacity of making a living.[15] While, *de jure*, the concession only entrusted the provision of tourist services to the company, strategic areas of the park have been *de facto* privatized with significant effects over local community members' livelihood strategies.

In 2005, tourist services within strategic areas of the park were given in concession by the state for a period of ten years to Unión Temporal Tayrona, an alliance among Santa Marta's Chamber of Commerce, the private national travel company Aviatur and the travel agency Alnuva, being Aviatur its major stakeholder. While the alliance holds a relatively small fraction of Tayrona Natural Park, it has control over the two important tourist zones of Cañaveral and Arrecifes, as well as over the two park entrances and registering booths –Palangana (which leads to the tourist spots of Neguanje, Gairaca and Playa del Muerto) and Zaíno (which leads to the tourist spots of Cañaveral and Arrecifes). As shown below, the concession's establishment has increased the pressure over resources and territories where tourism is the main means of subsistence, resulting in the criminalization, relocation and expulsion of workers and park residents. Under the ideal that tourism would bring jobs to the local community and financial resources for biodiversity conservation, while relieving the National Natural Parks System's Special

[15] Aviatur is the major travel company in Colombia with more than 1.5 million dollars of net profits in 2007 (Semana, 2008). It has 23 subsidiaries with a total of 3,300 employees and 298 offices in 30 Colombian cities, besides offices in Venezuela, Ecuador, Cuba, Panama, France and the US (Aviatur, 2011). The company monopolizes the concession of tourist services in the four most important natural parks of the country. As explained below, the concession of tourist services in Tayrona was not just given to Aviatur. In spite of this, the company is the major stakeholder within the temporal alliance and its most visible member, its logo impressed on uniforms, tablecloths, hammocks and paperwork alike. Community members, government officials and NGO professionals all referred to Aviatur as if it was the only concessionary. In this paper, I refer to Aviatur, the company and the concession interchangeably.

Administrative Unit (UAESPNN)[16] from the technical and economic burdens of tourism's administration, the provision of tourist services in certain areas of the park was put up for concession. According to the official guidelines under which the conditions for the concession were stipulated, ecotourism development needed to be promoted as a profitable economic activity that could provide the funds necessary for the conservation of protected areas around the country and for environmental education programs (República de Colombia, 2004).[17]

Even if, at least on paper, Aviatur won the public contest, most community members and some former UAESPNN officials argue that the call for participants through which the concession was determined was never open to the public. "We even asked for information at the Parks office (UAESPNN), but it was as if it was all secret. We didn't have time to organize, participate or anything… We've been doing this ecotourism thing for years, we know about the business. But the concession was *amañada* (fixed) all the way from the beginning", one of the tour guides said to me, aptly summarizing the feeling of many other community members who felt that none of the changes were discussed or arranged with them (personal interview, June 2010). Local community members from

[16] Derived from the Ministry of Environment, Housing and Rural Development, the UAESPNN is the governmental entity in charge of managing the system of protected areas in the country. It counts with a regional office for the Caribbean region. In my work, I was able to interview UAESPNN who work at the national, regional and local level, from sub-directors to those who perform daily duties of park maintenance at Tayrona National Park.

[17] As noted by Mejía (2005), the concession was made under the old pretexts of UAESPNN not having enough resources to continue taking care of the park and the need to improve the quality of the services offered. "The justification was framed in the best style of all privatizing policy: in exchange for venture capital, the inclusion of an operator specialized in maximizing benefits and new investments… the state allowed for the private sector to gain entry (to the parks) without clarifying first the territorial litigations with indigenous territories and other overlap of legal figures between collective areas and protected areas" (Mejía, 2005, my translation).

different areas of the park expressed they were left out, ignored when invited or even threatened if they continued to oppose the concession. Many of them identify the changes since the establishment of the concession in terms of Aviatur taking advantage of them and their work, and in terms of UAESPNN displacing them and violating their right to work in order to protect Aviatur's interests (personal interviews).

Since 1996 –after the park reopened and when the provision of tourist services was structured in a more ordered manner– up until the concession, tourist services were provided by local associations: vendors, tour guides, transporters and *arrieros* (mule drivers, herders) organized in cooperatives which negotiated directly with local officials from the UAESPNN of the moment. "Only Aprestayrona and Asoplam (two of such associations) are alive, just some remains of them, really. Everyone else got displaced… The concession has been a serious mistake. … Before, the general good was over the particular good, you see? Things have changed…", said a former UAESPNN official I was able to interview (personal interview, February 2010). By putting pressure on local associations to sign a contract with the company, the concession's establishment changed the rules of the game. Some tour guides and *arrieros* signed a contract with Aviatur in order to be able to continue working at the park. They said they have had to increase their fares and pay the company a significant part of it. "Before, if one charged 40,000 pesos (US$20) for the day. Now, one has to charge 80,000 pesos (US$40). So less people buy your services. And Aviatur takes half. And you have to work to their rules and their clock, not yours", explained Yair, one of the tour guides who decided to stop working with Aviatur after six months of working for the company (personal interview, March 2010). He was not alone in his opinion. "We had to sign if we wanted to stay, and now Bessudo

(Aviatur's owner and CEO) takes a good chunk of what we make", another tour guide told me. "It's not good business anymore, but what can I do? I've got five mouths to feed" (personal interview, December 2009).

When I asked Yair why he decided to sign with them in the first place, he answered: "Many tour guides had been kicked out of business and of the park itself. I didn't want to be one of them". Yair now works independently even though he is convinced it will not last for long. In our walks around the park, he told me different stories about friends and former *compañeros* (co-workers) who are out of business, according to him, because of the concession. The story of one of his friends, a guide who had been working in the park for more than 50 years, is particularly important to him as it seems to corroborate Aviatur's power: "Before things were arranged and discussed directly with Park officials. Now, it is different. For example, take the case of my friend Arturo. Arturo was a guide before the term even existed. He knows the park better than any of us. … People who work for Bessudo wanted to kick him out. And he fought for it". In his story, during one of Bessudo's visits to the park, Arturo approached him: "you cannot kick me out because Ley 300 (Tourism's General Law) gives me the right to work in the park". "But you know what Bessudo told him?", he asked me. "Bessudo laughed: "I was the one who made that law"".

Like Yair, most of the people I've been able to talk with complained about the advantageous position of the corporation. The establishment of the concession has meant that those who signed a contract no longer feel in control of their time, work and earnings. Those who did not signed were not able to work under the terms they used to

work under before. Yair works without the license that became compulsory for tour guides once the concession was established. "The license is 300,000 pesos (US$150). I can't afford it, that's all. Maybe next year", he said. "What for, anyway? It doesn't guarantee anything. Many of my friends who studied for three or more years to become official tour guides now work as bellboys for Aviatur", he added.

One of the stories that what brought to my attention in different occasions was the case of two middle-aged women who used to sell juice and water in a kiosk, a modest corner store, near the Cañaveral area. I did not have the chance to talk to them, as they do not come to the park anymore and one of them is critically ill. The case, now emblematic, was told to me many times. Even if versions varied from time to time, some elements of the story remained the same: They used to have their kiosk which was their way of making a living. For years, UAESPNN officials were okay with them being there as they provided an important service to tourists and workers. But the concession came and Aviatur did not want them around. They became competition and because of orders from high up the company, they had to go. Their kiosk was moved to other less visible, and thus less profitable, areas of the park until, finally, the company decided to expel them from the park and sent UAESPNN to do so. The effects this had on their livelihoods and on their health were always stressed. The story, as told by the different vendors, tour guides and transporters, was used as a powerful proof that Aviatur, as a concessionary of tourist services, has more power than that. "It controls businesses within the park beyond Arrecifes and Cañaveral, it controls our lives", as one tour guide put it (personal interview, September 2010).

This was also the opinion of some of the officials, scholars and professionals I interviewed in Bogotá and Santa Marta. In my conversation with a large international development NGO's consultant, he expressed his concerns about what he saw as the increased privatization of protected areas in the country. "I've been travelling to different sites throughout the country, assessing different development projects. …I can't believe what the government is doing to local communities everywhere. A good part of the country is being handed out to Aviatur! It is a monster, one that will soon get out of hand" (personal interview, October 2009). This idea of Aviatur as a greedy expanding entity was also very common among transporters, vendors, tour guides, fishermen and peasants. They referred to the company as an "octopus" –the same nickname that the United Fruit Company received a century ago when it ran its banana plantations in the Magadalena region. Of course, not all community members were against the concession. Some vendors, tour guides and transporters signed contracts with the company and are happy to have done so. Others, who live near the park, decided to become Aviatur's employees and proudly wear its uniform –an imitation of traditional Kogui attire with a big Aviatur logo on the chest. Despite these workers occupying lower positions compared to workers from cities like Santa Marta or Barranquilla and the interior of the country, they usually mentioned that job stability and having a contract was definitively a plus of working for the concession.[18]

[18] I did not have the chance to talk to Aviatur's employees as extensively as I did with other community members. It was not as easy to interact with them at their work and, understandably, they always showed very wary of speaking about their employer. Perhaps, aware of the opposition towards the company in the area, they preferred to point out the positive aspects of their job and keep our conversations brief.

In addition to the changes the establishment of the concession has brought upon workers' lives and their capacity of making a living, it has also changed the relations among them, implementing what could be interpreted as a different "moral economy", in E. P. Thompson's sense (1971). As one cook and food vendor told me:"Things among us are different now", the woman said, "Aviatur employees are paid for telling on their *compañeros* (co-workers). So if they see them doing something or someone tells on them, they are put in the street like dogs… It's like we're being put against ourselves" (personal interview, March 2010). Her comment came up as part of our conversation inside the collective taxi cab we took to the park. Two of my friends and I arrived to the park very early in the morning with the intention to travel with food vendors and transporters coming from Santa Marta to Playa del Muerto for a busy day of tending to tourists. Our stop at the registration booth in Palangana's entrance was taking longer than usual. One of the workers who came with us in the cab, a young man, was negotiating with Aviatur's employee his entrance fee. Sometimes local community members had to register and sometimes they did not have to. As they come and go through the park on a daily basis, they are not usually charged an entrance fee, some sort of implicit agreement between them and UAESPNN. After the concession, they complain of having to explain themselves more, even if they do not end up paying. Just the fact of having to negotiate with concession employees seems to upset them. The taxi driver said, loud enough so the people at the registering booth could listen: "They know they shouldn't charge the locals. Aviatur employees watch this thing as if it was theirs. And then, they simply replace them or kill them… Aviatur employees know nothing about loyalty". While I was sitting on the back of the car, I realized the power that Aviatur has just by being in charge of the

entrance, control and registry points at both entrances of the park. Even if UAESPNN is supposed to be the maximum authority, it is to the company that locals and tourists alike have to report in order to gain access to the park.

The company's presence at the beaches given in concession caused problems too. In Arrecifes, the company renovated the hammocks and camping area, mainly upgrading the bathrooms and the restaurant that UAESPNN used to manage. From the tourists' point of view, while the area in general looks nicer, other than raised-prices, no significant improvements were made in terms of infrastructure or service provision. But Aviatur's interventions had caused tensions among peasants, fishermen and other people who live at the park. Tayrona, as a protected area, is a zone where particulars cannot do any *mejoras* (improvements) to the land they occupy. As perceived by local community members, this law is applied selectively. "We cannot build bathrooms or put a single straw for a roof. But see? The Dávilas (a family of the local elite) have their mansions and Bessudo can build a spa, a bar and a Jacuzzi. We aren't invading the beaches where turtles come to lay their eggs; Bessudo is. And everybody pretends not to see it", said one woman, a peasant who has lived in the park as long as she remembers (personal interview, June 2010). The woman was probably referring to Cañaveral, the area that the company turned into a high-scale tourist spot. Formerly a nesting place for sea turtles, the endangered Carey among them, Cañaveral became a surreal place in the middle of the forest where you find luxurious cabins (at US$350 per night), Jacuzzis, floating beds, a spa and numbers of employees in uniforms running around to bring martinis to the tourists that relax at the beach. To me, Cañaveral constitutes an "evil paradise": a dream-world that "inflame[s] desires –for infinite consumption, total social exclusion and physical

security, and architectural monumentality– that are clearly incompatible with the ecological and moral survival of humanity" (Davis and Bertrand-Monk, 2007: xv).

Speaking about the concession and its effect on excluding less privileged tourists from enjoying the park, one local UAESPNN official told me: "The concession progressed even with the opposition from several of us (UAESPNN officials). But the order came from above, from Presidency, and there was little that could be done… What I really regret is that the park is no longer for public use, it's for elitist use… only for rich people's use". Some of the community members seemed to find connections between this new "target consumer" and their deteriorating living conditions. One of the young women who works everyday at the park tending tables at an informal restaurant by the sea told me: "They want this place to be exclusive… So, naturally, we make the park ugly, they need to get rid of us". In fact, this privatizing effect can be observed in other areas of the park, and even in other protected areas of the country as Aviatur is in charge of other three important parks in the country –Amacayacu, Los Nevados and Gorgona. According to the perception of local community members, there are plans to expand the concession to other beaches in the park, such as Cinto and Neguanje. Moreover, according to conversations with tour guides, food vendors and fishermen, Aviatur's entry to the park has opened the doors for other tourist concessions to be made. As an elder fisherman in Gairaca explained to me, "local elites would have not allowed for themselves to be left behind, of course. They have their own plans of building a five-star ecohotel right here", he said with irony.

Fishermen, food vendors and transporters in Gairaca and Playa del Muerto, among other beaches at the park, say they are experiencing more pressure to leave after the

concession was established. They think other potential or actual tourists spots they depend from would be put out to tender in a matter of years. Many of them, including people who have lived and worked at the park for several decades, have been threatened of eviction both by UAESPNN officials, private parties and armed actors. In March 2010 I arrived in Gairaca a few days after a fishing community was evicted, their homes for around fifty years destroyed. According to the fishermen in the area, UAESPNN officials entered escorted by policemen and demolition trucks: they destroyed seven houses from fishermen who have lived in the park for decades, but none of the luxurious private houses were touched. While some of them decided to move to other beaches in the park, at least temporarily, most of them are now in Santa Marta looking for a way of making a living. "We don't know what will be of us", said another one of the fishermen. "They will come after us, kick us out, even the ones at other beaches. I have no doubt this will all be turned into ecotourist concessions… that's what it is said around here". When I asked who was interested in Gairaca, many of them assured me it was Bessudo: "This is a tourist mine" (personal interview, March 2010).

In Playa del Muerto, where middle and middle-upper class tourists come to spend the day by the sea, eviction orders and even death threats abound. But the situation in Playa del Muerto is different. Mostly food vendors, fishermen and transporters, community members do not live at the beach. For years now, big all-inclusive resorts near Santa Marta bring tourists in buses to spend the day at the beach. The community provides for their transportation from and back to Neguanje in motor boats, as well as for food and beverages at different restaurants they built and manage. Asoplam, their association of transporters and fishermen, has remained strong despite the different

mechanisms by which they have been pressured, including the tragic death of seven of their members back in the 90s. One former UAESPNN official recounted it in our conversation: "The community there is strong. I think it has to do with the massacre… a tragedy. Seven people killed from the same family, armed men, ordered to kick them out. They had to come together… (and protect) the business that started little by little. … They have kept trying to take them out of the beach". When I ask him who is trying to take them out, he replied: "People with power, elites. They know that beach is a gold mine… even more now with the doors open for more concessions". I was also able to speak with community members who felt that despite their internal frictions, the association is strong and they would not be evicted. One of the first people who came to work at the beach decades ago told me confidently: "They want it all, but they won't kick us out" (personal interview, March 2010).

These contradictory relations between private and public spaces within Tayrona National Park point at the effects that tourism development has had in the area. While carried out in the name of biodiversity conservation and the environment, strategies to increase tourism to the park have had problematic effects on livelihoods, landscapes and ecologies. By identifying some of these effects through the lens of changes in local livelihood strategies, this section hinted at how resource use, access and control in the park has been shaped by the logics of neoliberal conservation. Following McCarthy and Prudham (2004), I understand neoliberalism as a set of ideologies, discourses and practices that constitute an environmental project. As a project, neoliberalism is always already political and never complete. By "neoliberal conservation" I refer to the particular forms such project has taken at the articulations of neoliberalism and environmentalism

(see Antipode, 2010; Brockington et al., 2008; Duffy, 2008). In the next section I expand on this analysis, focusing on the role that politics of difference have play in these articulations for the particular case of the park.

Eco-guardians/Eco-threats

Efforts to enclose certain natures for their alleged protection are usually advanced by making them available to different forms of capitalist exploitation, from carbon-offsets to the visual consumption of charismatic species around the world (see Brockington et al., 2008). In the case of Tayrona, the promotion of particular forms of "eco"-tourism, at the expense of others, have made particular landscapes and natures more readily available to those who can pay for them. Under the promise that revenues from tourism will be used to fund biodiversity conservation, sea turtles, coral reefs, howler monkeys, beaches, workers and forests have been put at the service of tourism. The neoliberal project, understood in its outstanding capacity to reimagine, transform and produce spaces and natures, is clearly also about the reconfiguration of subjects and their relations among themselves and with their surroundings. Thus, the multi-scaled ecologies that sustain life at the park are about the production of nature as much as they are about subject making. One particular aspect of said ecologies is the way in which discourses and practices of both conservation and neoliberalism have shaped them. Trying not to reinforce a totalitarian view of capital, I have identified a particular form of such project –neoliberal conservation– as it can be traced through the strategies of conservation-through-tourism implemented in Tayrona National Park.

Conservation –as defined by government officials, NGO professionals and tourist entrepreneurs I had the opportunity to interview– comprised those necessary actions to Tayrona's protection from imminent destruction. When I inquired about the reasons behind promoting what most of them acknowledged was not a very "eco" form of tourism, conservation was invoked as an ulterior purpose, a mission. If tourism was one of the main conservation strategies within Tayrona Park, that conservation imperative of "taking the necessary measures for the protection of life" was coupled with (often violent) means of capital accumulation. Some of these couplings, and their close connections with the politics of difference in the area, became evident in a meeting I had with UAESPNN officials in the Santa Marta office. I describe it extensively, with the hope to convey key aspects of how local community members are produced as environmental threats.

As soon as I arrived to UAESPNN's regional office in Santa Marta I was led to a small office were one of the officials was sitting on a poorly lighted spot. Not a very nice guy, he prompted me about my permits to carry out fieldwork in the park. He explained that these were "different times" and that UAESPNN was being very selective about research because "kids like you have caused enough trouble to the institution". When I expressed my interest in the concession and its environmental and social impacts, he did not seem happy. "Bring your permits first; then, I can tell you all about how we're very open to proposals from private parties to develop tourism in specific zones of the park, see if that would prevent the park from being destroyed. Better to have those peasants serving tourists than to have them slashing and burning the park, don't you think?". After my evasive and probably clumsy answer, he showed me the way to the office where my research could be registered.

I followed his directions and reached an office where I met with two women and a man. After they asked for basic information about my research, I proceeded to explain my interest on the concession. One of the officials, apparently highest ranked among the three, said to me in an emphatic tone: "Listen, we are conservation experts –biologists, ecologists, environmental engineers– we are not waiters nor sheet-washers… the concession does what Parks (UAESPNN) shouldn't be wasting time in". I replied promptly that she was probably right, but that I have heard critiques across the board about the concession's practices and how they cannot be really seen as environmentally sound. Because I could even finish, she added: "I don't see what your problem is. All this concession deal was done under a Conpes (an official) document, all the guidelines have been followed, all the environmental *and social* guidelines were specified". I could not resist as asked her: "But what about rumors that the carrying capacity has been exceeded systematically since the concession was established?" To this, she said: "We're stopping that thing. We used to get orders from the top that said to keep it open, but UAESPNN is now calling: "close it!"". At this point, the other officials intervened and told me how complicated their job was. The other woman, younger and perhaps an assistant to the other woman, said: "Well, not everything is under our control. Sometimes orders come from above". To this, the man agreed: "Yes, the *guamazo* (smack) simply fells on us". Everybody laughed. And the young woman continued, referring to the concession: "Our hands are tied".

The apparent conflation of Aviatur's interests and UAESPNN's actions was an issue that came up constantly throughout my research. From the perspective of local community members, UAESPNN had become the company's lackey (personal interviews).

Even NGO and government officials shared this concern. The discomfort and prevention the issue raised among UAESPNN called my attention. After talking a little more about details of my project, the two women proceeded to show me the very long list of documents and (academic and personal) information I needed to submit in order to obtain a research permit. They explicitly warned me: "The researcher needs to be impartial. He can't come to the park and start generating noise… We will not allow anymore these fake researchers who ally themselves with one side or the other. That's what has been the problem, that they can't leave their politics at home, as they should", said the first woman. I asked what she was referring to. "It's like, for example, all this fuzz about some fishermen that *dizque* (supposedly) have the right to food, the right to work! Please!" she added, probably not knowing I knew she was referring to the Gairaca fishermen. She continued: "Those fishermen think, everybody thinks they can do whatever they want inside the park!... it is difficult to do our job having to deal with *illegal occupants* and *invaders* everywhere". Their warnings, at this point, sounded like a threat to me. The man, who had remained silent for most of the conversation, proceeded to explain to me in a very didactic tone, as if I was a kid: "It's simple. You have your rights, but not if you're within the park". I bit my tongue. He continued to illustrate his point with an example: "You surely have the right to drive at 120km per hour in any road of the country (the national limit is 80km/h). But you lose that right once you enter park limits. Conservation here comes first and if your actions bother the park's wildlife, our duty is to take the corresponding action". The meeting ended briefly after.

I recall this conversation to illustrate not just the pressure local communities experience in the name of conservation, but to note how their production as

environmental subjects had everything to do with the politics of difference in Colombia. Authors such as Bocarejo (2009) have noted the spatial dimension of multicultural regimes of the production of difference in the country. In her work, for example, Bocarejo notes how multicultural typologies in Colombia invoke particular subjects upon which particular topologies are assigned. As indigenous peoples are supposed to belong to reservations, peasants to agricultural fields, and Afro-Colombians to river basins in the Pacific region; the peasants, fishermen, vendors, tour guides and other not-ethnic-enough subjects who inhabit the park become *bodies out of place* –following Creswell's (1999) useful notion to understand the politics of mobility– that constantly transgress the logic of bounded difference in the country. I argue that this ethnic entrapment takes particular forms for the case of Tayrona as its touristification has heavily relied on problematic discourses that reproduce multiple forms of difference and domination.

The natures of tourism are never neutral (nor empty) and revert to gendered, class-based, racial/ethnic and colonial stereotypes, values and roles that are central to the production of paradisiacal spots. The "exotic" and "backward" inhabitants of "exuberant natures" fall into two exclusionary categories: they are either eco-guardians or eco-threats. For the particular case of ecotourism development in the Tayrona, local community members hardly fit within the ideal version of multicultural and environmental subjects that constitute noble savages and environmental stewards. While indigenous peoples, Afro-descendants and peasants in the area of Tayrona and the Sierra Nevada are usually portrayed as objects of development and peace-building initiatives, only indigenous peoples are seen as eco-guardians –and not all of them as one UAESPNN regional official told me: "some of them are not really Indios anymore and they take

advantage of their supposedly indigenous status to invade and destroy areas of the park" (personal interview, June 2010).

Not falling within the range of green- and ethnic-enough others, vendors, fishermen, tour guides, transporters and other community members are left to the categories of occupants, invaders and *colonos*, all deemed as agents of environmental depletion. In my conversations with officials from UAESPNN and from other government instances, as well as with NGO professionals in the region, fishermen were thought of as not being conscious about the coral reef and, because of their livelihoods, were usually signaled as responsible for fish shortages. Peasants, on the other hand, were thought of as coca growers and *raspachines* (pickers), also depleting the forest by opening *monte* (wildlands) and establishing yucca, plantain and other crops. Even two UAESPNN officials I talked to at the park associated peasants with wildfires: "They get drunk and leave bottles. Of course the fires get started" (personal interview, July 2010). Their moral decadence, as that of fishermen, was also accounted for by government officials and NGO professionals I had the opportunity to interview in Santa Marta and Bogotá. Fishermen and peasants in the area were dismissed as "paramilitaries' and narcos' allies. Not real peasants or fishermen" (personal interview, September 2009).

I argue that these connections between resource politics and powerful dynamics of social demarcation based on class, gender, race, ethnicity, national origin, etc., have played an important role in the criminalization, relocation and eviction of people who live and work in the park. One of the elder fishermen in Gairaca said to me, clearly sad: "I've wasted my life in this beach". Talking to him over a cup of weak and very sweet coffee, he

explained the problem to me: "We will be evicted, that's for sure. We are blamed for deteriorating the environment and breaking conservation laws… all these are false accusations: that we cut trees, that we don't know how to dispose waste, that we overfish… not true". Another fisherman, also in his 60s, added: "You know? There are different definitions of *subsistence*. They say we fish over the limit. But we are the ones who know the limit. No young scientist from the interior can tell in a week what we have lived for decades". He added: "PNN thinks subsistence is just eating; me eating, not my children eating as well. Subsistence for them doesn't include sending the kids to school or clothing them, so there we disagree" (personal interview, March 2010). These different notions of "subsistence" evidence the complexity of what notions of conservation really entail.

As local community members' vast knowledge and work towards the conservation of the spaces and natures they call home is obscured, the extractive ecologies implied in ecotourism promotion to the park are hidden as well. My work echoes that of authors who have researched the problematic configurations of resource politics and the politics of difference that result from environmental conservation projects, particularly within protected areas (e.g. Lohmann, 2000; Moore et al., 2003; Neumann, 1998; West, 2006). I hope to contribute to this literature by critically analyzing the problematic couplings of tourism, neoliberal conservation and violence. For the particular case of Tayrona, I seek to point out how allegedly "eco"-tourism is entangled with the global politics of land grabbing and works as a powerful strategy of accumulation by dispossession.

Final remarks: Green pretexts

As I intended to convey in this paper, my travels around different tourist spots within Tayrona National Park, including the areas of Cañaveral, Arrecifes, Gairaca and Playa del Muerto, allowed me to gain valuable insights on the grounded struggles and negotiations regarding resource access, use and control that resulted from tourism promotion in the area during the last decade. After identifying the strategies implied in the touristification of the park, I traced the unfortunate couplings of conservation, the neoliberal project and violence in the area through their effects on local livelihood strategies. I have also showed how resource politics and the politics of difference have played an important role in the criminalization, exclusion and even eviction of local community members who live and work at the park. Green pretexts of paradisiacal spots in need to be protected have enabled coercive practices of conservation, facilitated capital accumulation, caused deteriorating working conditions and legitimized difference forms of violence in the park. Discourses and practices of tourism-based conservation at Tayrona have made of ecotourism a powerful strategy of accumulation by dispossession (Harvey, 2003), complementing other less "green" mechanisms of land grabbing in the country.

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