

Nationalizing Nature: Conservation, Economy, and Chile's Route of Parks Project

My dissertation research examines a new mega-conservation project in Chilean Patagonia, known as the Route of Parks (RoP), to understand the changing role of land-based biodiversity conservation in national political economy. As a primarily raw materials and commodities exporter, Chile has pursued an aggressive model of extractive capitalism for more than a century, pioneering intensive exploitation of a wide range of natural resources: salmon, timber, wood pulp, grapes, berries, potassium nitrate, copper and, most recently, lithium. Economic and trade frameworks have been coupled with an environmental legal framework that Tecklin et al. (2011) call 'market-enabling' rather than 'market-regulating,' resulting in a regime of environmental institutions and protocols that are often perplexingly bereft of basic mechanisms of protection and enforcement.¹ Situated within this context are state practices of land-based biodiversity conservation, which have long been viewed by the industrial private sector and even the state itself as impediments to growth.

The new RoP project aims to disrupt assumed zero-sum tensions between conservation and development, however, by promoting conservation-*as*-development (West, 2006) for Patagonia and beyond.² The RoP emerges from a first of its kind public-private partnership between the Chilean state and the American eco-philanthropist Kristine Tompkins who, along with her late husband Douglas Tompkins, has protected more private land than anyone else in history. On March 15, 2017, Tompkins and then-President Michelle Bachelet pledged a joint donation of one million acres of the Tompkins' private conservation estate and nine million acres of adjacent federal lands to the national park service, creating or expanding a total of 8 national parks. This landmark pledge qualifies as both the largest private land donation ever received by a national government, and the largest single increase to the national park service in Chilean history. These 8 national parks join 9 others to form a contiguous corridor of 17 national parks running 1,700 miles north-to-south along Patagonia's remote Southern Highway Route 7. Eponymously known as the Route of Parks, this mega-conservation project constitutes an ambitious plan for biodiversity protection while signaling a notable shift in state economic and environmental strategy that warrants further study. My dissertation research employs qualitative and ethnographic methods to ask how conservation-*as*-development suddenly became politically commonsense in Chile, and what the RoP suggests about its processes and outcomes.

With the generous support of a CLAG Field Study Award, I have just completed the first phase of my dissertation research year in Chile: ten weeks of fieldwork in the Lagos and Aysén regions of Chilean Patagonia (February 3 – April 16, 2019). The purpose of this fieldwork was to begin to understand how the RoP is rolling out in local communities. The Tompkins argue that the RoP will be an engine of rural economic development, potentially generating as much as \$270 million annually and creating up to 43,000 ecotourism- and conservation-related jobs. These are significant statistics, given that Patagonia is the least populated and least economically productive part of the country. No less significant, various state ministries have begun to adopt the Tompkins' argument, framing the purpose and anticipated benefits of the RoP in terms of a regional 'conservation economy.'

Over the course of ten weeks, I spent time in five field sites, four of which are gateways to the RoP (Chaitén, Hornopirén, Coyhaique, and Chile Chico) and one of which is home to the foundation Tompkins Conservation (Puerto Varas). Through a combination of participant observation, in-depth interviews, and content analysis of print and online materials, I explored three central questions: (1) How is the RoP project being received by local communities in Patagonia? (2) What are its potential impacts on landscapes and livelihoods? (3) What does a 'conservation economy' look like in practice, and how do residents envision their relationship to it? In addition to participating in activist circles, private conservation events, public meetings of local government, and tourism activities, I also conducted 28

¹ Tecklin, D., Bauer, C., & Prieto, M. (2011). Making environmental law for the market: The emergence, character, and implications of Chile's environmental regime. *Environmental Politics* 20(6): 879-898.

² West, P. (2006). *Conservation is our government now: The politics of ecology in Papua New Guinea*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

semi-structured interviews and a half-dozen informal conversations with local politicians, employees of CONAF (administrating agency of the national park service), employees of municipal tourism offices, employees of the Ministry of Agriculture, employees of Tompkins Conservation, NGO actors, private conservation actors, ecotourism operators, environmental activists, miners, ranchers, and academics.

Preliminary data collected in Patagonia yields several important findings, helping to shape the work yet to come. First, many local people living and working near the parks report feeling uninformed about, and excluded from, the new mega-conservation project. This is the case even for those whose livelihoods are now directly tied to it (e.g. CONAF employees and ecotourism operators). Countless informants criticized the state and Tompkins Conservation for negotiating hastily, behind closed doors, and without proper community consultation. Often, informants attributed the lack of communication to *centralismo*, a phenomenon in Chilean politics wherein the vast majority of decision-making authority is concentrated in the capital city of Santiago and diffused outward toward the regions. *Centralismo* is particularly contested in Patagonia, which has historically been represented as the ‘last frontier’ of the modern Chilean state. Second, following from a perceived lack of communication about the RoP is a perceived lack of preparedness to implement the project locally. Especially in Parques Pumalín and Patagonia – the Tompkins’ large-scale private protected areas that are now national parks – there is concern by state and non-state actors alike that CONAF cannot maintain the Tompkins’ conservation standards due to inadequate budgets and manpower. Paradoxically, while a record number of conservation lands are being added to the public domain in Chile, there is no plan to increase public investment for conservation. Instead, the state will rely on a model of private concessioning to finance the new costs and labor of governing the RoP. Finally, a last-minute and controversial change to the official boundaries of the new Patagonia National Park is generating heated conflict between environmental groups, miners, and politicians at local and national scales. A month before leaving office, in February 2018, President Michelle Bachelet submitted to the Comptroller’s office a proposal for the park boundaries. By August 2018, the proposal had been retracted and amended by President Sebastián Piñera to reduce the park by 5,000 hectares. This reduction coincides with where an Australian mining company has been conducting preliminary, and at times unauthorized, explorations for gold. That there is now a mining project next to the national park is one thing, but that it was permitted to happen through a questionable political sleight of hand following the momentous change in government is another. This single event, I think, captures the contradictory and Janus-faced qualities of the Chilean environmental state. The limits of conservation-as-development at least for now appear to remain defined by the possibilities of resource extraction.



Fig. 1 Parque Nacional Pumalín Douglas Tompkins is one of three national parks created from the Tompkins' private conservation estate. It contains 25% of Chile's endangered alerce (*Fitzroya cupressoides*) native forest, and was previously among the largest private protected areas in the world.



Fig. 2 A *Ruta de los Parques de la Patagonia* poster hangs in the window of a minimarket in Villa Cerro Castillo. One of hundreds displayed throughout the region, the poster represents not only the spatial extent of the project, but also the branding power of this public-private conservation partnership.



Fig 3 The entrance to a private ranch on the outskirts of Chile Chico. Just over the ridge, an Australian mining company is drilling for gold next to the new Patagonia National Park. Access to the drill sites is only possible by driving through this ranch. Locals say the sign (“Private Property, Do Not Enter”) was erected only weeks ago, to thwart curious members of the press and public.



Fig 4 A meeting of the Environmental and Socio-cultural Association Antukulef in Chile Chico. Antukulef was formed ten years ago in response to increased threats to the local watershed, the biggest and cleanest watershed in Chile, from the mining and agroindustrial sectors. The poster reads, “No More Sacrifice Zones” and “Water for Mate is Worth More than Gold.”