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# Conflicts and cooperation in the mountainous Mapuche territory (Argentina)

## The case of the Nahuel Huapi National Park

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**Abstract:** Over the past two decades, indigenous issues have become a major concern for different countries all over the world. Argentina is one of these countries, with 600 000 people who recognize themselves as indigenous, representing 1.5% of the nation's entire population. Nevertheless, these populations are still too often marginalized on a regional scale. This is the case for the Mapuche in the Nahuel Huapi National Park, located in the two provinces of Rio Negro and Neuquén. Even though both international and some national texts rehabilitate essential human rights for these populations, local

realities are more contrasted due to regional stakeholders' divergent interests. In the particular context of Argentina, where a large part of the population faces problems gaining access to land, national parks have emerged as a relevant tool for indigenous peoples to recover their ancestral lands, especially thanks to a new process taking place in these territories: co-management.

**Keywords:** mountain, indigenous, Mapuche, Nahuel Huapi National Park, conflicts, cooperation, Argentina.

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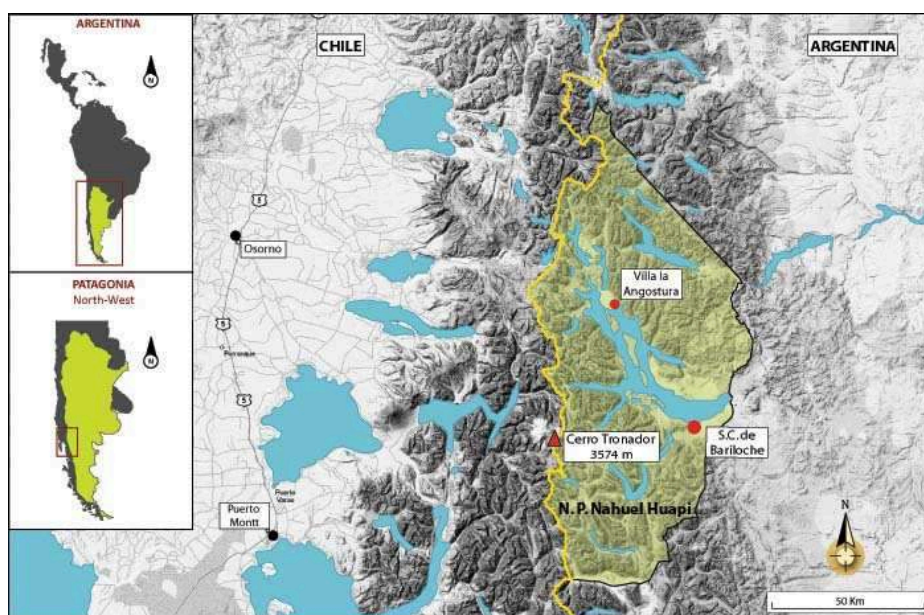
Nature conservation is an ideological projection and a philosophical position (DEPRAZ, 2008) fed by specific representations of nature, such as Romanticism in the 19th century or "patrimonization" of nature in the 20th century. The conservation embodied by natural park policies, and its economic, land-related, and touristic effects, is nowadays criticized by a growing number of indigenous populations the world over (Alcorn, 1994; Amend & Amend, 1992; Ghimire, Pimbert, 1997). This is the case in the southern Argentinean Andes<sup>1</sup>,

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<sup>1</sup> The Andinean frontier, defined as the border between Chile and Argentina, has denied the existence of indigenous realities on both sides of the mountain range (Amilhat-Szary, 2006). Argentina became independent in 1810 and Chile in 1812. This emancipation from the Spanish crown would permit the two newly-formed countries, in their quest for territorial and economic expansion, to envisage the conquest of the southern part of the continent. This would be called the "Conquest of the Desert" in

where most of the Mapuche still live in rural communities<sup>2</sup> in and around the mountainous National Park Nahuel Huapi (NPNH) (Fig. 1).

The NPNH is representative of a mountain with various uses as well as contradictory and controversial representations (Debarbieux 1995 and 2001; Dolfus, 1989) such as: a natural space, a geopolitical tool, a place for transit and exchange, an economical asset, a powerful urbanization factor through touristic development (15% population increase over the last fifteen years in San Carlos de Bariloche), and, finally, an ancestral territory for the Mapuche. Conflicts arise between the Mapuche's demands for ancestral land restitution<sup>3</sup> and never-ending urban and touristic growth. In this controversial context, how can a national park, with its distinctive territorial identity and sustainability objectives, diverge from standard policies in light of indigenous issues?



**Figure 1. Location of the Nahuel Huapi National Park in the Andes. Authors' map, 2009**

Argentina, or the "Pacification of the Araucaria" in Chile. This territorial fight to conquer Patagonia would come to an end in 1882, through an arbitration from the British crown, which would define the frontier between the two countries as passing over the summits of the Andes.

<sup>2</sup> According to the INDEC (The Argentinean statistics institute) 70% of the Mapuche are now living in urban areas in Chile and Argentina.

<sup>3</sup> The Mapuche are officially acquiring, through a slow process, credibility and legitimacy in the international sphere (UN, etc.), but also more and more sympathy from the western world due to media coverage of their fight (Le Bonniec, Guevara, 2008).

## The Nahuel Huapi National Park: a fragmented territory

The Nahuel Huapi National Park's creation participates in diverse ways in the history and the reinvention of the mountain's contradictory uses and representations:

- In the Mapuche's perception, the mountain appears as a symbolic object. It plays an important role in the cosmology<sup>4</sup> of this transandinean population (initiatory journeys, spiritualizing nature, etc.). This perception is perfectly integrated into the idea of a sacred mountain, a recurring notion since Antiquity.
- For the Argentinean explorer Francisco Moreno<sup>5</sup>, the mountain seems more like a space to preserve for its natural aesthetic. It also serves as a geopolitical tool to define the border in the delicate context of the conquest of Patagonia.
- Finally, for the two cities of San Carlos de Bariloche<sup>6</sup> and Villa la Angostura<sup>7</sup>, located in the heart of the national park, the mountain is a tool for touristic development and therefore acts as the principal motor for the local economy.

Throughout the 20th century, the stakeholders managing the national park and its riverside cities have attempted to apply these contradictory logics while denying the cosmology and practices of the Mapuche. These different territorial perceptions create today a growing number of conflicts.

Geopolitical stakes and urban sprawl: which conceptions of development?

### *The park as a stabilizer of the frontier*

The long-disputed border between Argentina and Chile was established in 1882, and then was marginally modified in 1902 following arbitration by the British crown (Gallois, 1903). The creation of the National Nahuel Huapi Park therefore appears as one of the essential historical elements in the political stability of this region bordering Chile. In order to avoid new rebellions that could lead to other conflicts, F. Moreno, highly influential in Argentina, proposed to create protected areas along the border with a view to demarcate the territory and to populate the lands with civilians and not the military. In 1903, F. Moreno returned 7500 hectares of land that had been offered to him, in gratitude for his numerous explorations, in the aim of creating these protected areas. On this space, under the name of "Southern National Park," the first national Argentinean park was established in 1922. Then, with the creation of the National Park Administration in 1934, the park assumed the name of Nahuel Huapi. This type of territorial demarcation would be extensively used in Argentina and in Chile (Fig. 2).

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<sup>4</sup> The cosmology consists of a set of elements and beliefs constituent of Mapuche culture.

<sup>5</sup> Francisco Moreno was an Argentinean explorer, naturalist, and geographer.

<sup>6</sup> 93 101 inhabitants in 2001; 2008 estimate, 105 000 (INDEC).

<sup>7</sup> 7 525 inhabitants in 2001; 2008 estimate, 15 000 (INDEC).

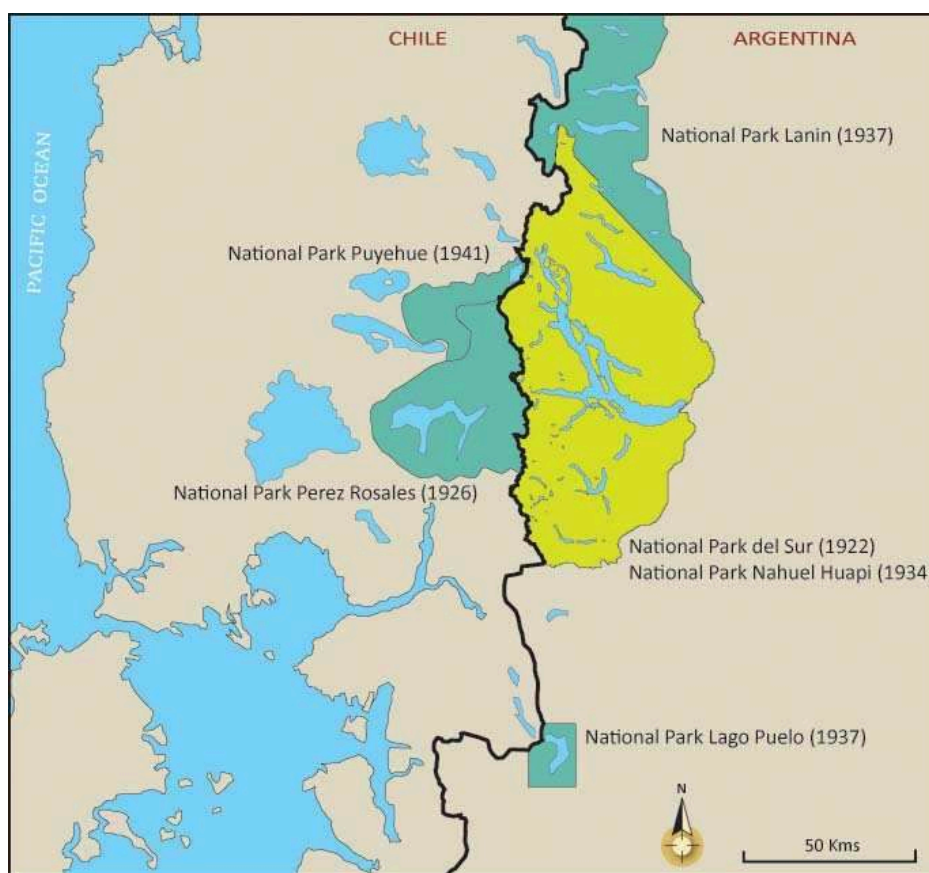


Figure 2. Border parks and years of creation. Authors' map, 2009

The majority of pioneer populations, that came to populate the region after the “Conquest of the Desert,” was foreign (Swiss, German, etc.). Populating the territory with pioneers was a type of racism; it was assumed that the preexisting indigenous population, in this case the aforementioned Mapuche, would not be capable of developing the territory. Here is found a cohabitation of two distinct territorial visions: on one side, the conquering vision of the pioneers, and on the other, the “defensive” vision of the Mapuche. The creation of a national park thus represents a veritable white domination land strategy that generates conflicts.

*Tourism, an economic stepping stone? For whom?*

The creation of the parks acted as an economic stepping stone for the entire region, particularly for initiators of large-scale development projects. This political stabilizing tool would actually prove to be a lever for the creation of a huge urban and touristic pole (Photo 1). In 1903, following a national decree, the city of San

Carlos de Bariloche was born on the banks of Nahuel Huapi Lake. When the first pioneers settled the land surrounding the lake, they immediately understood the touristic value of this territory located over lakes and mountainous terrain. During the 1920s and 30s, this region knew economic growth thanks to the construction of roads and the creation of touristic transportation companies, along with the setting up of hotel complexes close to riparian coasts.



Photo 1. Newspaper La Razón, dated April 10, 1918. Museum of Patagonia, 2009

Translation: "Creation of the Huge Southern National Park: The Nahuel Huapi zone and its beauty - a gathering place for the tourism of the future".

Tourism has played an increasingly important role throughout the 20th century, with the development of diverse infrastructures to welcome this financial potential. This phenomenon implicates a major paradox for the park, due to the simultaneity of highly endemic zones (therefore of strong ecological interest) and touristic zones (therefore of strong economic interest). In fact, while the majority of Argentinean national parks take out 79% of their budget from State-provided subsidies, the Nahuel Huapi National Park distinguishes itself from the rest in generating 61% of its revenue through touristic activity (Della Cha & Otero, 1997), especially in summer. Winter tourism, on the other hand, is less lucrative for the park. However, it represents one of the principal reasons for urbanization, due to the presence of ski lodges situated on the administrative territory of the two principal cities. Urbanized areas have a status of autonomous provincial

territories<sup>8</sup>, not a federal status like the park. The profits garnered from tourism on this administrative territory are retained by the two cities, and do not return to the national park.

*Tourism not without consequence: Urban sprawl*

Touristic development necessitates important infrastructures. Here is another of the National Park Nahuel Huapi's great paradoxes: throughout the 20th century, the demographic growth of San Carlos de Bariloche and Villa la Angostura was very high. Moreover, the economic crisis in 2001, caused by ultraliberal politics during the 1990s, plunged a large part of the population into poverty without precedent (Velut, 2002). Many Argentines then saw in touristic development a veritable economic alternative. Since this observation, these cities within the park have not ceased wanting to augment their capacity to welcome tourists.

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<sup>8</sup> The city of San Carlos de Bariloche has an autonomous status of "ejido municipal".

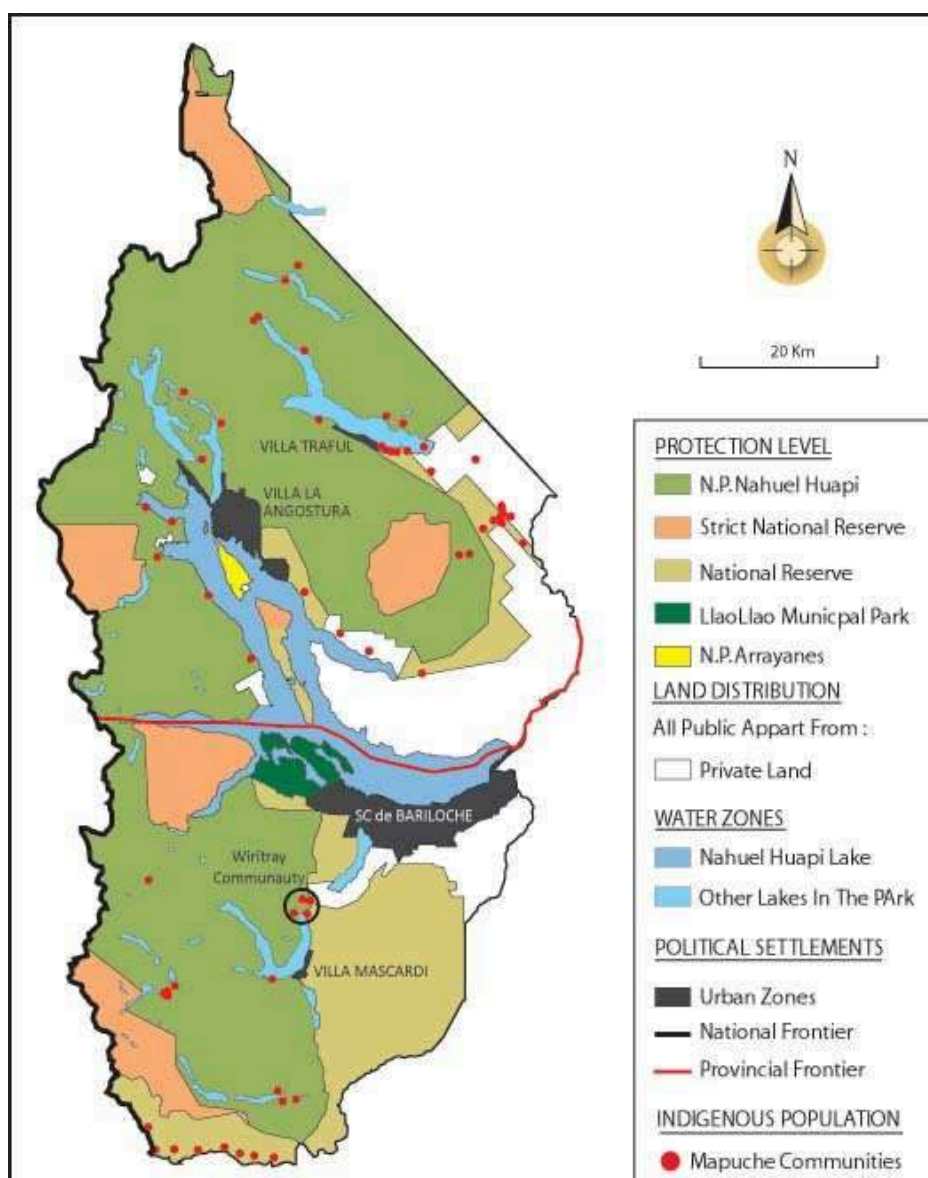


Figure 3. The national park and its cities. Authors' map, 2009

Touristic affluence has been principally generated under the name and image of San Carlos de Bariloche, which has done nothing but accentuate the paradox: the city is almost entirely frequented by the upper class of the Argentinean, Chilean, and Brazilian populations. From a financial point of view, the park cannot do without the city in order to peacefully continue to exist. This

“city-park” territory is therefore fragmented between its urban spaces and protected spaces. Obviously, this fragmentation is only one aspect of the recurring and complex land reflections involving indigenous peoples at the heart of the National Nahuel Huapi Park.

A park opens itself up to the city; the city closes itself to the Mapuche: Is a territorial cohabitation possible?

The creation of a commerce surrounding its “Swiss” chocolate sales, its Swiss-style restaurants (Photo 2), and above all the presence of its world-famous Cerro Catedral<sup>9</sup> ski lodge, led to rapid economic expansion and the swift urbanization of San Carlos de Bariloche. The “dark” side of this growth was the exclusion of the natives to the area, the Mapuche. They were not integrated into these development policies which took place after the “Conquest of the Desert”; policies which in addition did not take into consideration the preexistence a different civilization with a different perception of the territory. Indeed, an occidental vision of the economic development was at work during this period. This is visible today in some of the remaining conflicts.



**Photo 2. Left, the most famous chocolate seller in Bariloche; right, a typical restaurant with its Swiss architecture, both vestiges of the Helvetic past. Authors' photos, 2009**

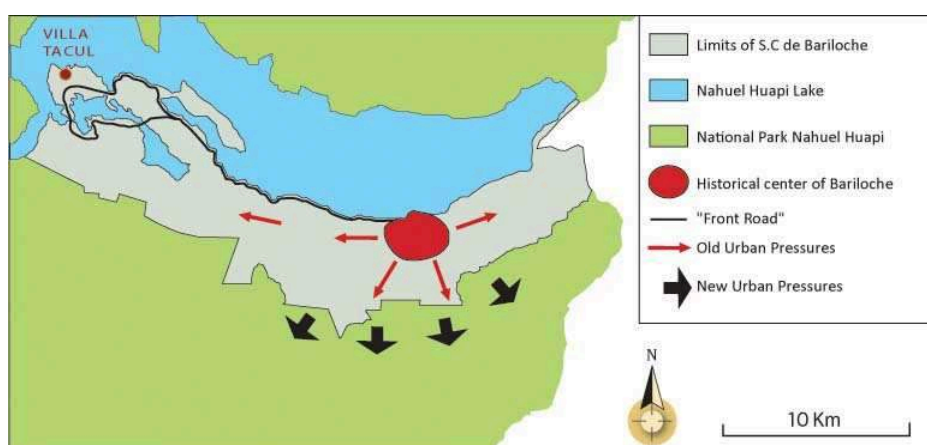
*The case of the Tacul Chewque Mapuche community*

The case of the Tacul Chewque community is symptomatic of this process of exclusion. The community's presence on the banks of the Nahuel Huapi Lake dates back to the end of the 19th century. In 1938, the national park ceded hundreds of hectares to the city of San Carlos de Bariloche to permit its expansion.

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<sup>9</sup> The Cerro Catedral is a mountain situated in the national park on the administrative territory of San Carlos de Bariloche.

This is how the city began its development toward the west, creating under the direction of Ezequiel Bustillo<sup>10</sup> a Front Road (Fig. 4) which would permit the implantation of hotels, hostels, etc. This settlement involved the expulsion of the Tacul Chewque community from its ancestral lands. On April 16, 2007, almost seventy years later, the descendants of the community, benefiting from the current ancestral land recovery movement (Miniconi, 2009), reclaimed part of their territory. Since then, the justice system has not given a legal status to this recovery that would seem legitimate in the name of socio-historical argument. This occupation, which should have attested to the territorial precedence of this community, generated a period of strong tension which endures to this day. The city gives no legitimacy to the community. Even so, the historical aspect is undeniable, and in this case, even the toponymy works in favor of the community. The official name of this territory is Villa Tacul. Even the name Bariloche is a toponimic vestige, derived from the Mapudungún (the traditional Mapuche language) word “Vurilofche,” signifying “community on the other side” of the mountain. These names are therefore symbols and proof of the ancient structure of the transandinean Mapuche territory (Moyano, 2008). But the reality is perceived in a different way. The illegal occupation of these lands is a hindrance to the growing economic development of tourism in Bariloche. The members of the community are hostile toward any of Bariloche’s development projects. According to them, these projects look only to favor land speculation at nature’s expense.



**Figure 4. Urban sprawl following the re-purchasing of the lands in the national park, by the city of Bariloche. Authors' map, 2009**

<sup>10</sup> E. Bustillo was a politically influential Argentinean architect and a pioneer in the construction and development of San Carlos de Bariloche.

*Access to the land: municipal desires and private interests versus the legitimacy of the Mapuche communities*

The three municipalities of the park are all in conflict with the Mapuche communities over the issue of land legitimacy. The case of the Tacul Chewque community is the only of its kind. The economic stakes are so great that it seems today complicated to resolve these conflicts, brought about by the desire of the cities to constantly augment their capacity to welcome tourists and their infrastructures (ski lodges, etc.). Moreover, the park does not have the authority to intervene on the administrative territory of these cities, but can only act as a mediator, as it does on occasion for certain communities.

The majority of Mapuche communities have been despoiled. Today, these same communities see wealthy foreigners buying hectares of their ancestral land to build private paradises, or to speculate on the resale price of these lands. This is a reference to people such as Ted Turner<sup>11</sup>, who have acquired tens of hectares on the municipality of Villa Traful to the north of the park (Sanchez, 2007). One can also look at the example of the Hotel LlaoLlao, belonging to an Israeli man, a symbol of these foreign investors who possess hundreds of hectares on the municipality of Bariloche on the edge of the Nahuel Huapi Lake. Consequently, one sees the appearance of a movement to reclaim lands that are no longer ancestral, but which are plots for affluent private investors, left alone for speculative reasons. As a result, a certain number of Mapuche communities (principally urban) form themselves in an “affinitarian” manner, in order to face the problem of access to the land. This is how the “squatting” system on private lands has become an answer to the difficulties met by populations underprivileged and excluded by public land policies.

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<sup>11</sup> Ted Turner is an American billionaire and the creator of CNN.



**Photo 3. The LlaoLlao Hotel, a symbol of this unequal access to the land. Authors' photo, 2009**

Here, unequal access to the land is conveyed through an opposition: rich outsiders with no ancestral connection to the land can afford to purchase it through legal and market-related acquisition, whereas the Mapuche cannot pay such a price despite the legitimacy of their claims to the land. Economic power is evidently the corollary to this legal access, while the only justification for the Mapuche's legitimate access is socio-historic and cultural. This is why the park, which doesn't follow the same economic logic as the urban centers it shelters, has an important role to play in coming to the aid of indigenous populations.

### **From legitimate to legal: is the national park a tool for the Mapuche populations?**

The opposition between legality and legitimacy is made intelligible through the persistent opposition existing between the outdated ideas of "neo-colonization," mainly economic, and of "ancestrality." The repression of these indigenous populations is still a reality despite the existence of international texts (Charter of Rio in 1992, The ILO Convention 169, etc.) that give new hope and new perspectives to these movements. These new expectations have recently been

relayed by the managing body in Nahuel Huapi National Park. In effect, the park is helping to establish a legal status for indigenous peoples supported by national regulations. These new regulations and the near “political autonomy” of the park are creating innovative ways to co-manage the territory.

A new tool for indigenous management in the NHNP: co-management

Co-management is a long-recommended measure in international texts. But Argentina only acquired this management tool for its national parks of Nahuel Huapi and Lanin in 2001. The authorities of the Nahuel Huapi National Park have realized, perhaps in order to keep the social peace, the importance of the know-how of a population that sees nature as having an equal standing with humans in its cosmology. The indigenous way of life and methods of utilizing the earth have been recognized and praised in the international community.

The co-management in Nahuel Huapi Park is born out of two realities: firstly, that of indigenous communities existing before the creation of the park, and secondly, that of the evolution of mentalities and international texts regarding these peoples. This situation leads to a new paradigm for international parks, that of the conciliation of cultural patrimony (including indigenous lands) with nature conservation. Currently, the park tends to favor an integration of indigenous populations in order to conserve nature in a sustainable way. This new legitimacy is born out of a simple logic: if nature has been so well conserved in the area, despite its use by indigenous populations for centuries, it is because these same populations have learned to manage the earth in a way that permits it to regenerate over time.

Thus, an agreement containing diverse points has been established between the national park and certain indigenous communities (Carpinetti, 2007). This cooperation stipulates that the park accept the presence of the community on its ancestral lands. The park entrusts the community with the management of the natural environment in its traditional manner. Moreover, a narrow collaboration between both parties permits the communities invested in the project to benefit from subsidiary revenues, issuing from diverse jointly-led processes: for example, the creation of campsites or the sale of Mapuche traditional products or artisan crafts, etc. At present, only four communities out of eight in Nahuel Huapi Park have been integrated into this new co-management system. But in light of the positive results, more and more communities want to take part in this program. This co-management inspires one to review and rethink the indigenous cause, and brings one to believe that the reclaiming of ancestral lands will find a legal echo in the coming years.

## A change of status for indigenous peoples or social peace for the park?

What are the concrete consequences brought by the co-management concerning the change in the perception of indigenous peoples? Where are the Mapuche today in their fight, firstly to be recognized in their legitimacy and secondly to find a legal standing in order to recover their ancestral lands?

Finding a status for Argentina's indigenous populations is a long process governed by different laws. Because they were preexistent to the present States but also because of their historical and cultural continuity, the Mapuche, like other indigenous populations, are in a singular position which is juridically a source of laws (Mackay, 2002). In Argentina these rights were added to the constitution in 1994. Currently, the major blockade stems from the fact that these communities alone cannot stand up to economic pressure and lobbying from big groups over lands judged to be economically exploitable. This is where territorial co-management and cooperation with the national park begin to make sense.

To reclaim their ancestral lands, indigenous peoples must first form into communities. These communities must be recognized as having strong and ancient links. One cannot constitute a new community on a "non-ancestral" base. Once a community is reconstituted, it has to make an official request to the Argentinean state in order to be recognized as a juridical entity. As long as the community is not recognized as a juridical entity, it has no legal status. Without legality, no equality; land property can only be recovered after the community's legal recognition.

According to the law 26.160, established in Argentina in 2006, a slow and complex process of land inventory has been put into place and will be finished in 2013. The aim is to enumerate all of the lands demanded by indigenous peoples. One can take the example of the Wiritray community, located in the south of the park close to the city of Villa Mascaridi (Fig. 3). In 2006, it became the first Mapuche community to gain recognition as a juridical entity. Since then, the community and the park have jointly initiated a process of ancestral lands inventory. It should soon recover a part of its territory, approximately 800 hectares (out of 2500 requested) in the national park. This community was one of the first to join the co-management program initiated by the national park in 2001.

Here, the interest in having co-management program is brought to light. The advent of participatory and common management of the park's natural resources has permitted the communities to show their willingness to be integrated into the state system. Nevertheless, many communities continue to demand integral management of their lands. Before they can receive legal recognition from the state, the park can help the communities to move from a legitimate to a legal status. In effect, through the use of co-management, the park has the ability to "suspend time" in order to find common ground with the communities in terms of nature conservation. This is the future challenge for Argentinean national parks.

For indigenous peoples outside of national parks, gaining legitimacy and land appears to be much more complicated. They are hindered by the neoliberal

policies of the provinces and the state concerning land management. Thus, one can better understand the role played by the park in the management of its territory and of the diverse conflicts plaguing its indigenous population.

## **Conclusion: Is legality limited to touristic management?**

In the diverse land and environmental conflicts that have been mentioned, only the role of conciliator played by the parks allows the fate of the indigenous population to truly evolve. The park has thus become a mediator between indigenous communities and their demands for recognition and land recovery. However, these populations are demanding complete and total governance of their land without oversight. This autonomous land management demand is simply made in the name of ancestrality.

The ancient transandinean connections, weakened but not truly broken, are being revived between the Mapuche of PuelMapu (east of the Andes) and those of NguluMapu (west of the Andes). These organizations are strongly politicizing themselves and finding numerous leaders. Moreover, support from non-indigenous populations is becoming more and more frequent. In effect, these indigenous movements could be, for many, related to alter-globalist movements. This is why the legitimacy of these populations is becoming stronger and stronger, especially in certain intellectual and academic circles.

In 2008, Argentina and Chile both signed an agreement which will lead them to create a biosphere reserve including both sides of the Andes, from the north to the south of Patagonia. Is this first sign of trans-boundary cooperation between two countries which were recently disputing their common border a mark of a territorial renewal? Can the Mapuche benefit from the creation of this trans-frontier biosphere reserve?

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