

The Effects of Ecotourism on Women's Traditional Activities in Gateway Communities Bordering Fray Jorge National Park, Chile

Susan Qashu

Introduction

IN THE SEMIARID LIMARÍ PROVINCE OF NORTHERN CHILE'S COQUIMBO REGION, households not only sustain themselves through farming, but also rely on fishing, mining, and animal husbandry. This region experiences yearly droughts, resulting in decreasing water supply, diminishing crops, and desertification—all factors that potentially affect households. The people of these agrarian communities, until now completely dependent upon traditional rural practices, will soon be forced to cope with a major change to their livelihoods: the advent of ecotourism.

The Corporación Nacional Forestal (CONAF), the Chilean national park service, decided to move the entrance road to Fray Jorge National Park (FJNP), rerouting it from its isolated location to one that passes through three agricultural communities, though there were two additional communities who wanted to be included in the road's relocation. One result will be that various ecotourism activities that take place outside of the park's boundaries will be shifted into these rural communities' backyards. This inspired me to ask: How will FJNP's management decisions affect livelihood practices, specifically women's household roles, in the affected communities? In cooperation with the park service and a local university, I worked with Chilean colleagues to facilitate meetings with five communities along FJNP's northern and southern boundaries, using various methods to study the issue, including participant observations, individual interviews, and focus groups. We used these mixed methods to assess future tourism development and the need for community training.

The yearly environmental stresses mentioned above prompted Chile to adopt UN policies that aim to combat desertification through empowering women and integrating them into the labor market, which should alleviate household poverty. From the 1970s to the 1990s, Chilean women's groups, including the National Women's Service (SERNAM), were promoting their issues onto Chile's political agenda. Currently, one function of SERNAM is to collaborate with local government agencies to encourage women to develop small busi-

The George Wright Forum, vol. 29, no. 3, pp. 371–378 (2012).

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nesses, such as tourism, in their poor rural communities. With this in mind, the new policies concerning ecotourism have important implications for women's household decisions in the Coquimbo region. As an interview with a regional tourism director described, such projects directed at women provide a higher standard of living for rural people in the Coquimbo region.

The jewel of the Coquimbo Region

Limarí, a semi-arid province in the Coquimbo region, is bounded to the east by the Cordillera de los Andes (Andes Mountains) and to the west by the Cordillera de la Costa (Coast Range) and receives 72 mm of precipitation annually. The topography is dominated by alternating valleys and ridges trending east-west. Level land is found on marine and fluvial terraces; alluvial plains stretch from Ovalle, Limarí's provincial capital, to the marine terraces (Bahre 1979).

The jewel of the Coquimbo region, Fray Jorge National Park, lies 80 km west of Ovalle and 100 km south of La Serena, the regional capital. Founded in 1941, it protects 9,959 ha and in 1977 the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) designated it as a biosphere reserve for its diverse ecological landscape. The park includes four ecosystems: Valdivian temperate cloud forest, surrounded by coastal Mediterranean scrub, bordered on the south by the Limarí River's riparian zone, and limited to the west by an intertidal zone facing the Pacific Ocean. FJNP's coastal semi-arid desert landscape emerges at sea level and receives 113 mm average annual rainfall. The relic temperate forest at the nucleus of the park is located at 600 m elevation and receives 1,000 to 1,500 mm of moisture annually, due to the *camanchaca*, or coastal fog (Campodonico 1997: 65).

In addition to its unique biological features, the area where FJNP is today was once home to indigenous people and later to settlers of European descent. This has led to a unique situation of conflicting claims of land ownership based on the following synthesized summary of 200 years of agrarian land reform. Before the land reform, there existed *comunidades*, which held land in communal ownership. Bahre (1979: 3) describes these *comunidades* (small-scale agricultural communities) as the following: "A property holding that includes both private and communal land." The *comunidad* is a system of land tenure that originated in the early colonial period. It has its own legal status and is frequently encountered in the Coquimbo region. Until the advent of land reform, a small number of (largely absentee) owners of *fundos* or *haciendas* (land holdings) controlled the majority of Limarí's productive lands.

Changes in Chilean land tenure from 1965 to 1975 brought about small-scale property ownership (Dubroeuq and Livenais 2003: 193). Land reform has allowed *comunidad* members to exercise more legal control and management over their communal land. *Comunidad* members inherit the use of portions of communal land and often sell it as private property by a group vote, generally selling off small plots of land for a house or fields, small- or large-scale agriculture, or small- or sometimes large-scale tourism. Many community members claim to know their genealogy and can trace their ancestral rights to land on the *comunidad* to the 1620s (Bahre 1979: 3). Today, this region has the largest remnant of these

historic agricultural comunidades, contributing to conflicts between the legal property owners to whom the comunidades sold their land, who are often absent from their newly acquired estates, with those who, by virtue of continued residence on the land, perceive themselves to still hold ancestral ownership ties to it, despite having sold it. The five gateway communities explored in this study, Valdivia de Punilla (Valdivia), Lorenzo Peralta de Punilla (Lorenzo), Peral Ojo de Agua (Peral), Limarí, and Sauce, are examples of the conflict between legal property owners who purchased the land from the comunidades following the land reform and those with ancestral ties who do not recognize that their communal land was sold.

My experience with many of these communities began as a Peace Corps volunteer stationed at FJNP from 1993 to 1996. I returned to the area in 2005 for my pre-dissertation research to observe the changes in these resource-dependent communities caused by their neighboring protected area. In the 1990s, CONAF began encouraging gateway communities nationwide to develop a change to their traditional livelihoods: ecotourism.

Based on the UN's Agenda 21 and subsequent UNESCO biosphere reserve meetings on the importance of integrating local communities into park management strategies, CONAF began a participatory process throughout Chile in 1994 (UNESCO 1996, 3; Rao and Geisler 2001: 23). In the five communities I visited, this process began ten years later. In 2005, 2008, and 2011, I interviewed several CONAF directors and learned that integrating resource-dependent communities and women into the conservation and use of FJNP is challenging. The process is burdened by diminishing budgets and larger-scale political transformations, including changes in property and water rights and in leadership in communities, provinces, and regional governments.

In 2005, CONAF decided to move the entrance of FJNP, rerouting it from its isolated location to one that passes through three of the five gateway communities. At the same time, CONAF began a pilot ecotourism project with Peral, Valdivia, and Lorenzo (CONAF N.d.: 6). CONAF, with Chile's Department of Transportation, rehabilitated the existing road, which had been constructed in 1940. The road winds from the Pan American highway 8 km west to Punilla; then it passes by Lorenzo, 1.3 km farther to the west; finally, after climbing southwest through the coastal range for 9.3 km, it reaches Peral. Once the existing road was repaired, CONAF constructed a 10-km road south of Peral to the new park entrance. CONAF's objectives for this project were to: (1) better its relations with its park neighbors and (2) provide them with alternative income-generating opportunities. The Ministerio de Obras Públicas (Ministry of Public Works) will eventually connect this road to a new coastal highway, called the *Borde Costera*, which will extend from the Coquimbo region's northernmost limit to its southern border. This massive coastal highway construction promises to bring large-scale tourism development to the province. Many of the institutions working in the province are seeking ways of converting large-scale tourism practices to an alternative, rural tourism.

Posing the question

In 2003 and 2004, CONAF worked with local, provincial, and regional stakeholders to foster the involvement of surrounding communities along and within the park, an example of

which was a project to build a network of trails connecting the communities. In addition, CONAF conducted a series of surveys. The ostensible reason for conducting these surveys was to collect data on households that would potentially be involved in new ecotourism ventures made possible by the rerouting of the road and entrance to the park. Of a 90-household socioeconomic survey, CONAF selected 44 for a further study to determine whether small-scale tourism would be an effective alternative to traditional livelihoods. CONAF gave preference to the households closest to the road, with reliable access to food and water, and home construction sturdy enough to host tourists safely. Fourteen were in Peral, 11 in Lorenzo, and 19 in Valdivia. Of those 44, CONAF chose a subset of 11 households for FJNP's ecotourism pilot project. Of these households, in Punilla, three were headed by women and one by a man; in Lorenzo, three by women and one by a man; and in Peral, three by women. The project was a collaboration between CONAF, who commissioned the project and included me as an observer and analyst, and a local university, which conducted the fieldwork.

The question driving the 11-household pilot project was: How would FJNP's decision to move the road and park entrance affect household livelihood strategies in the three agrarian communities, both within their own communities and inside the park? To answer this question, the team aimed to uncover past, present, and likely future provincial livelihoods and to investigate the relationships among gateway communities outside the park and park management inside the park, and their interactions across the park boundary. The team used a mixture of techniques, including observation, interviews, and focus groups, to discover if the neighboring households would shift their traditional livelihoods to tourism. CONAF suggested that tourism in this area consist of handicraft and goat cheese production and sales, and campground maintenance and management. Because men were the principle pastoralists and farmers before the relocation of the park entrance, while women ran the household, I hypothesized that men would retain traditional livelihood strategies and women would embrace new, tourism-focused activities made possible by the new entrance.

Community field visits

We interviewed the 11 households in July 2005. The interviewees had diverse responses. We learned of issues that affected the households: discontent about CONAF's initial selection criteria, lack of training in the new tourism practices and emergency response, and lagging tourism-focused infrastructure development around the park. When selecting households for the project, CONAF excluded many of the economically disadvantaged families who might benefit from inclusion, though some of those households have alternative means of participating in tourism. One household head stated, "Just because the road does not pass by my garden does not mean that I cannot sell vegetables to the tourists as well." When I observed CONAF employees in the field while they delivered wooden posts and nursery netting to the families involved in the project, they frequently spoke of the jealousies within the communities. They discussed how the community of Punilla, which lies to the north of Peral, Lorenzo, and Valdivia, feels excluded from the project.

Many households voiced concerns about a lack of training and its effects on their business practices. Three households expressed fear of not receiving the correct amount of money. One interviewee explained: "We are in dire need of further training and elementary

education: basic arithmetic, map reading, first aid, and tourism guiding.” Several households reported that they did not know how to operate small-scale tourism businesses or interact with visitors, and those households that had been given some training felt it was insufficient and without follow-up. One Limarí leader described how CONAF promised a training program geared towards developing small business projects, such as selling fish and collecting seaweed with the tourists, but that program never happened. Some women explained that the only way to receive training and physical infrastructure development, such as materials for new tourism ventures, was to seek it from other institutions, such as SERNAM.

Others expressed the need for CONAF to train them on how to respond to emergencies such as fire. Because of persistent drought and the attendant extreme risk of fire, the process of moving the park entrance included a decision to relocate the campgrounds from within the park to the gateway communities. Families who were chosen to host the new tourist campgrounds had neither training in emergency response nor access to water. One participant told us, “We have picnic tables, camping spots, but no running water. What do we do if our guests create a fire? I guess my *morrones* [bell peppers] will be roasted! We need fire training and basic infrastructure such as hygienic facilities and running water.” Without water or emergency training, the families feared that the campgrounds and their property would not be safe. Local leaders also expressed concern about the lack of first aid training, since the communities are isolated from medical services.

In all communities, there was a general concern about how they could support a new tourist population with existing water supplies, which were already scarce. Peral has a communal well, though the water level is dropping annually and the well is shared with nearby Sauce. In the other communities, there are no communal wells, though some owners do have private wells. Registration of wells and water rights, however, are often changing and even a family in the tourism project with a private well can lose access if they have not kept up with fluctuating water rights policies. Families without access to wells depend on municipal water deliveries trucked in weekly. The supply is inconsistent, however, with two months sometimes passing between water deliveries. In addition, the municipality fills plastic containers along the roadway but many households have no way to transport the containers to their property. In Limarí, they are sometimes forced to collect brackish water from the river along the park’s southern boundary.

CONAF and collaborating government institutions promised new tourism infrastructure, road development, and water access by December 2004. My visits revealed that CONAF has made some progress, but specific tourism infrastructure and water access is still not complete. Although the new park entrance, fee booth, and visitor center were built in 2007, coastal highway construction has not begun. One unclear sign has been placed by the Department of Transportation near the Pan American highway exit, but no other signage is visible. Due to lack of official signage, local residents have made some of their own after enduring frustrated and lost visitors. Today, community members complain that the government institutions have still not provided tourism training or infrastructure development.

Conclusion

When the team finished their final community visits, there was a general impression concern-

ing the region's seemingly inevitable mass tourism development. While CONAF asserted in its environmental impact statement that the only changes in the area would be positive ones, many households doubt CONAF's long-term commitment to the project. One of the women's leaders in Punilla expressed it this way: "If I do not take the risk [referring to her new small business venture, a restaurant], then I will never cross the wild river. I cannot improve the way of life for my family, if I do not further my own training and education." Women, whether part of the project or not, showed dedication in seeking outside funding sources and means to further their own small business ventures. Comparatively, only two men, one in Lorenzo and one in Punilla, agreed to manage campgrounds. The latter also made leather horse bridles and was the only man in the project who was engaged in traditional handicrafts. Future small-scale tourism developments and initiatives appear to be driven by local women.

Not only households that CONAF chose for the gateway community pilot ecotourism project but other households have begun their own rural tourism ventures. Some women have sought out park managers and asked these officials if they could sell local food and display their handicrafts at FJNP's visitor center. Today, the gateway community tourism participants and FJNP managers claim that changing regional park politics strained the relationship between the communities and the park. CONAF claims dwindling budgets do not allow staff to interact regularly or foster continued relationships with local communities. Local women counter that CONAF has sufficient funding, though they hire many more park rangers from outside the communities rather than locals. As such, they argue that CONAF has forgotten their promise to connect and strengthen their communities ties to their local protected area.

FJNP's sustainability will depend on how well its management coordinates with local agrarian needs. A methodology directed towards tourism planning needs to be implemented whereby CONAF managers and other agencies observe, listen to, and learn from the rural coastal agrarian peoples' values through participatory appraisal techniques. Hopefully, the use of a wide range of methods will help officials understand which factors influence critical behaviors, including neglected sociocultural ones within this Chilean province. Additionally, the confused state of land ownership and property and water rights in and around FJNP's gateway communities contributes to an equally confused system of tourism development.

In the future, a cooperative tourism plan could be slowly integrated into the Limarí province. Our rapid assessment provides a glimpse of this trend, in which rural women will have a stronger leadership role and households will have more meaningful interactions with park management. Power imbalances between the households fostered by CONAF's pilot ecotourism project will make it challenging to implement cooperative values among the gateway communities and the protected area. Park management should share information concerning park operations and explain why projects do always not proceed as originally planned. This may ease tensions with the gateway communities.

Since CONAF no longer has funding to supply the 11 households, local leaders could approach other agencies to provide tourism training for all interested community members. Training could be facilitated by a non-biased consultant where workshop participants would establish an equality of voices, share power and responsibility, and respect the values of others.

This research has led to answering equity, empowerment, and gender household issues. In the communities surrounding FJNP, the majority of men continue to practice fishing, growing local produce, and animal husbandry. Some of these men, with their wives' encouragement, are learning to greet visitors, manage campgrounds, and practice otherwise lost traditional handicrafts. The majority of women are attempting to find training or seeking support to learn new small-scale tourism trades such as family management, campgrounds, lost artisan handicrafts, traditional food sales, and improving their communication with visitors.

Because the Chilean park service lacks funding, there is little effort to provide training to gateway communities. Funding focuses on operational management of the park itself. Thus, women who want training to foster tourism must go out and seek training from other institutions or find it in larger towns and cities. The necessary infrastructure for tourism projects can be maintained if households take the initiative to find government institutions that can foster training and infrastructure projects. Individual households must find a way to secure small business loans; this is challenging because many of the households are illiterate and must rely on community leaders or more educated family members living outside of their community to advocate on their behalf.

This ecotourism project could be successful in the future if given ample funding and collaboration from institutions that can supply households with long-term development. If future CONAF managers coordinate projects and collaborate with the gateway communities instead of working against them, they can create a motivated environment for the communities to be actively involved as ambassadors of the park's operations and as protectors of its biodiversity.

Acknowledgments

For work done during 2005, I would like to thank Erika Zuniga, anthropologist, at the University of La Serena (ULS) and her undergraduate students; also, Eugenio Ruiz, Fray Jorge National Park (FJNP) superintendent, and Rodrigo Hernández, CONAF provincial heritage director. For work done during 2008 and 2009, I would like to thank the ULS biologists, Juan Monardez and Juan Calderón, for their transport and field assistance; in 2010 and 2011, FJNP's park administrator, Mario Ortiz, and regional director, José Miguel Torres. This pre-dissertation field research was made possible by funding from the Tinker Foundation.

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Susan Qashu, 945 West Las Palmas Drive, Tucson, AZ 85704; sqashu@email.arizona.edu