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## Before Biodiversity: Trajectories of National Parks in Latin America (1930s–1980s)

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### Abstract

Almost a century ago, long before biodiversity expressed a scientific value for nature, Latin American countries began establishing national parks. Today, they represent over 6 percent of Latin America's landmass. By considering national park creation across a broad regional span and six crucial decades, this article explains a mode of state formation focused on caring for nature instead of just exploiting it. It examines how national parks expanded in the region by identifying three consequent trajectories: the use of these conservation units for frontier development in Argentina and as part of a broader project seeking social justice in Mexico; the formation of more haphazard park initiatives in various countries, taking Brazil and Chile as main examples; and the development of ecologically coherent park systems through the cases of Peru and Colombia. The article also addresses the role of science (especially forestry) and international cooperation in shaping national parks. In this manner, it uncovers the paths that faded from view after the idea that parks intend to protect biodiversity took hold and illustrates a rarely acknowledged aspect of state expansion.

**Keywords:** national parks; state; nature; forests; landscapes; science

### Resumen

Hace casi un siglo, mucho antes de que algunos biólogos acuñaran la palabra *biodiversidad* para abogar por la conservación de la naturaleza, los países latinoamericanos empezaron a crear parques nacionales. Estos parques representan hoy más del seis por ciento del territorio regional. Este artículo explica una forma de construcción estatal centrada en cuidar la naturaleza, y no solo en explotarla, por medio de la reconstrucción de las principales tendencias de creación de parques a lo largo de seis décadas cruciales en varios países. Para ello identifica tres trayectorias consecutivas: el temprano uso de unidades de conservación para desarrollar la frontera en Argentina y como parte de un proyecto de justicia social en México; el posterior surgimiento de iniciativas desconectadas en varios países, con Brasil y Chile como principales ejemplos; y el establecimiento de sistemas de parques alrededor de principios ecológicos a través de los casos de Perú y Colombia. El artículo también aborda el papel de la ciencia, en especial de la ingeniería forestal, y de la cooperación internacional en la formación de parques. Así, revive un pasado que ha tendido a caer en el olvido después de que tomó fuerza la idea de proteger la biodiversidad y que permite ilustrar un aspecto poco reconocido de la expansión estatal.

**Palabras clave:** parques nacionales; estado; naturaleza; bosques; paisajes; ciencia

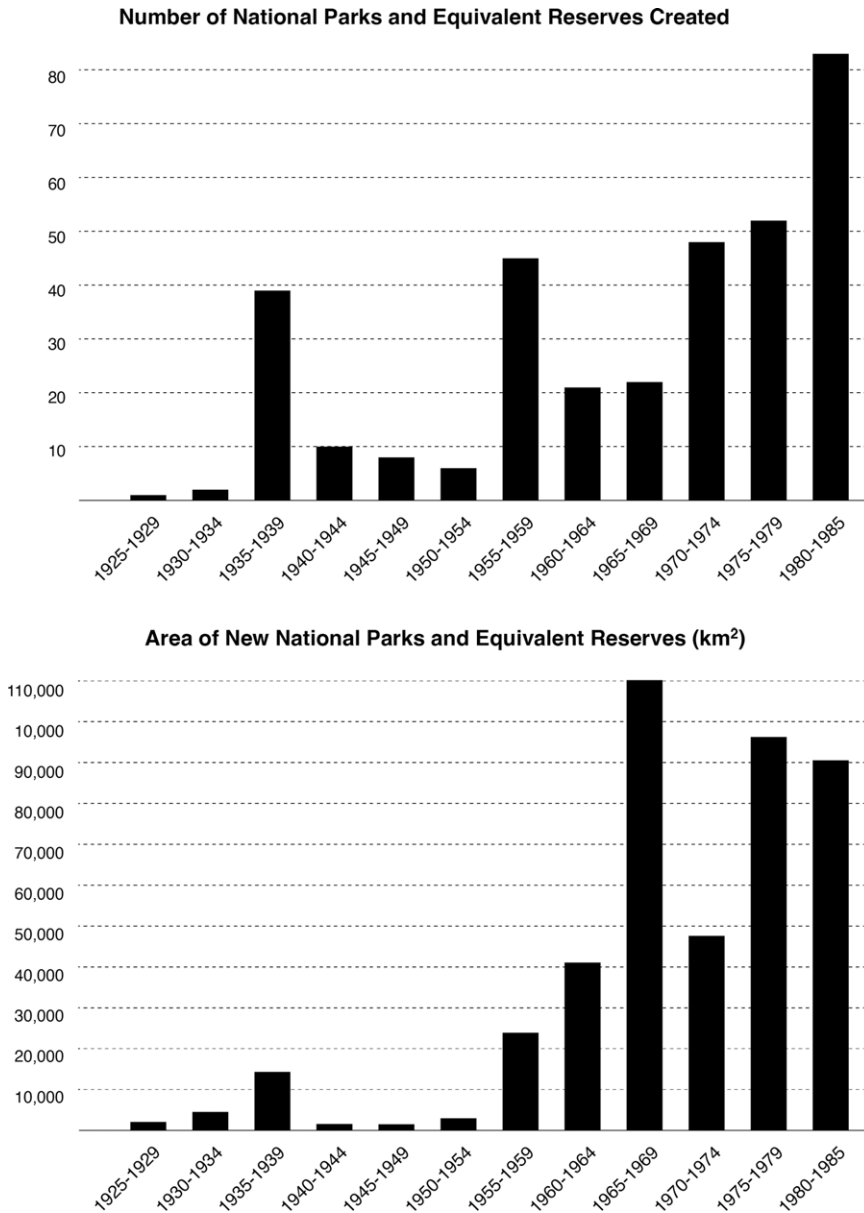
Latin American countries started putting aside land to create “national parks” a century ago—first timidly, then randomly, and finally, in the 1970s, systematically. These areas, denominated *parques nacionales* or *nacionais*, and in a few cases given other names, became the most conspicuous form of nature conservation, largely because they were created and are managed by the central state in the name of and allegedly to benefit the entire nation. By 2022, these types of protected areas covered over three million square kilometers, representing about 6.3 percent of the landmass plus large portions of the territorial waters of Latin America (UNEP-WCMC and International Union for the Conservation of Nature [IUCN] 2022).<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, conservation areas more broadly have come to constitute more than 25 percent of the region.

National parks became a cornerstone of a novel form of state building that, following Von Hardenberg and colleagues (2017; including two of the authors of this article), we call the *nature state*. This concept highlights a relatively recent extension of the state’s remit, intertwined with the formation of an apparatus that includes environmental regulations and institutions, among them parks, which reveal how and in what contexts states embrace the responsibility to protect and not only exploit nature. Growing nation-states used national parks to signal strategic places in their territories that featured nature so treasured that they could represent the nation and be preserved for posterity. In this manner, conservation served to advance various related state goals, notably territorial appropriation and control. The emergence and growth of state capacity in this area exemplifies and is a product of the expansion that characterized Latin American states during the twentieth century, especially from the Great Depression in the 1930s to the debt crisis in the 1980s (Whitehead 1998).

In this article, we reconstruct patterns of park creation across the region from the 1930s through the 1980s. We build on our own research that is based on extensive primary sources (Wakild 2011, 2018; Leal 2017, 2019a; Freitas 2020, 2021a), and we also draw from the literature on national parks in Latin America produced by others, mostly in recent years (Simonian 1995; Evans 1999; Drummond 1997, 2016; Drummond, Franco, and Ninis 2009; Hennessy 2019; Kaltmeier 2021). The novel interpretation we put forward allows Latin Americanists to consider the role of ideas of nature, the natural sciences, and nature itself in twentieth-century state building. We emphasize the territorial dimensions of state formation as a novel approach contributing to studies on the topic by political scientists, anthropologists, and historians (Joseph and Nugent 1994; Knight 1990; Bethell 2008; Bueno 2016). We concentrate on six countries to sketch the varied trajectories of national park building that have been obscured by the strong influence of the notion of biodiversity since the 1980s and an overemphasis on the US conservation model (Jones 2012).

Different levels of state capacity determined the timing and pace of park enactment and development in Latin America. Starting in the 1930s, the countries with the most developed state institutions in the region—most notably Argentina and Chile in the Southern Cone, plus Brazil and Mexico—led the way. We begin by looking at Mexico, which stood out for designating forty parks, and Argentina, whose early efforts had a longer-lasting impact, thanks to the creation of a solid national parks agency that turned Nahuel Huapi into a model park. We then approach a second and much longer period of national park creation, from the late 1950s until the early 1980s, which expanded to almost

<sup>1</sup> These numbers include national parks and equivalent protected areas as per the following categories of the International Union for the Conservation of Nature, IUCN: Ia (strict nature reserve), Ib (wilderness area), II (national park), III (natural monument or feature). They include protected areas from Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Cuba, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Haiti, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, Uruguay, and Venezuela. Of the 3.02 million square kilometers encompassed by national parks and equivalent reserves, 1.76 million correspond to protected territorial waters and 1.27 million to protected lands.



**Figure 1.** Development of national parks and equivalent reserves in Latin America, 1926–1985.

all the region (Figure 1). Through the cases of Brazil, Chile, Colombia, and Peru, we explore how pioneers continued and newcomers began designating parks through loosely connected endeavors that lacked congruity. The result, in these countries and others in the region, were idiosyncratic units that did not constitute coherent national park systems. Yet they indicate early stages in the formation of the nature state. We then highlight the role of forestry institutions and practitioners in the building of national parks and end by exploring how comprehensive systems came into being in the 1970s and 1980s. Three intertwined factors galvanized previous efforts: economic and state growth provided the

**Table 1.** National parks and equivalent reserves in Latin America, 1926–1985

Country	Total land area (km <sup>2</sup> )	Number	Percentage of national territory	Average area (km <sup>2</sup> )
Argentina	20,282	20	0.73	1,014
Bolivia	33,002	9	3.00	3,667
Brazil	136,069	57	1.60	2,387
Chile	84,469	33	11.17	2,560
Colombia	43,119	26	3.78	1,658
Costa Rica	4,299	25	8.41	172
Cuba*	0	0	0.00	–
Dom. Republic	2,253	3	4.67	751
Ecuador	9,003	2	3.51	4,502
El Salvador*	0	0	0.00	–
Guatemala	1,916	40	1.76	48
Haiti	239	3	0.86	80
Honduras	252	3	0.22	84
Mexico	4,022	47	0.20	86
Nicaragua	125	2	0.10	62
Paraguay	10,724	8	14.22	1,341
Panama	7,995	8	1.97	999
Peru	33,562	12	2.61	2,797
Uruguay*	0	0	0.00	–
Venezuela	142,841	40	15.66	3,571
<b>Total Latin America</b>	<b>534,172</b>	<b>338</b>	<b>2.67</b>	<b>692</b>

Source: UNEP-WCMC and IUCN (2022).

Note: The numbers in this table reflect the protected areas on the books in July 2022. They do not account for protected areas that might have been created between 1926 and 1985 but were decommissioned before 2022.\*Countries without national parks or equivalent reserves before 1985. For a history of conservation efforts in Cuba until 1968, see Samek (1968).

means, planning and the principle of ecological representation offered the rationale, and international cooperation gave crucial technical and financial support.

Once in place, park systems continued to expand under the “biodiversity” banner. Yet we do not delve into the past four decades; instead, we concentrate on the period between the late 1920s and early 1980s (Table 1), when national parks first emerged and national park systems came into being. Biodiversity arose as a way to both exalt (tropical) nature and stress its fragility and need for protection. The concept easily recast the emphasis on protecting samples of the ecological units found in each country, and as parks gained force as national symbols, it masked prior intentions. It is precisely this diverse history of conservation we aim to recover here. Today’s concerns over biodiversity dominate discussions of conservation when other legacies and traditions merit recognition for the ways they illuminate alternative approaches to national park creation and related processes of state building.

Before biodiversity, countries created parks to restore landscapes, affirm sovereignty, and promote recreation. For example, among the most obscured motives that led Latin

American countries to signal certain areas as valuable was the idea of rehabilitating crucial degraded environments for their economic use rather than saving unspoiled jewels. While Mexico strived to recover exhausted lands, Chile sought to restore overexploited forests (Wakild 2011; Camus Gayán 2006). The development of distant frontiers and borderlands to affirm sovereignty, especially when they contained striking landscapes, proved a strong incentive in Argentina, Chile, and Brazil. In almost every country, as was also the case in the United States and Canada, tourism or recreation were major drivers for selecting areas, which led to the conservation of spectacular waterfalls, alpine peaks, and tropical bays but also more modest and accessible areas close to urban centers. Both the appropriation of selected nature through visitation and the exaltation of monumental places contributed to fostering affectionate nationalist feelings, mostly among members of the urban middle classes, toward parts of the national territory that became more concrete over time.

The motives outlined here favored some kinds of nature over others. Mountains figured prominently in selected areas in all countries, and so did forests, partly for their abundance and association with water conservation and provision. Deserts, grasslands, and even wetlands remained overlooked until quite late. Unlike the well-known experience of African parks, animals seldom triggered the desire to establish protected areas. Elusive tapirs and jaguars hidden among the foliage were no match to the herds of elephants, gazelles, and giraffes that roamed the extensive African savannas. No matter the kind of nature being valued, a desire to create parks as a symbolic token of civilization often permeated these initiatives.

For the most part, educated men living in cities stood behind park enactment, with several important exceptions, including Maria Tereza Jorge Pádua in Brazil. In certain areas, local actors with national influence were park proponents who shaped the creation of parks in their regions. Torres del Paine in southern Chile is a good example of a park created at the behest of promoters from the area. More often, nationally based actors—those who lived in the capital city and were employed by the national government or a university or museum—were in positions to be influential in crafting national park policy. Sometimes, nongovernmental organizations or nonprofits, domestic and foreign, provided staff and expertise on conservation plans or priorities. Rural and poor people rarely participated or were consulted about the initiatives. However, it was largely men from the countryside and without degrees who forged parks on the ground. They were the blood and muscle that turned relatively few areas into working parks, for enactment went well ahead of implementation.

By the late 1960s, the science of ecology gave new meanings to previously cherished and overlooked environments alike (Elizalde 1958; Tosi 1960; IUCN 1968). The forests in so many national parks came to be considered more than features of charming vistas or crucial vegetative cover for soil and water conservation: they were reconceptualized as intricate webs of life. With these views, national maps were redrawn, emphasizing the climate, topography, plants, and animals that characterized natural regions, and the idea of conserving samples of each gained traction. Environments—by then referred to as ecosystems—that had been neglected came to have a place in new plans for conservation, in which nature deemed national was associated more with the diversity and interconnections of life than with monumental features. Although science was decisive in this move, it was not new in the history of national parks. Naturalists and biologists had played vital roles, and more often than not, foresters led calls for nature protection.

As ecology gained salience, so did a global conception of national parks as strict conservation units incompatible with human habitation. This idea spurred or increased the resentment and resistance of those living within areas that were turned into parks and in their environs, as well as those who later came to live in these places. However, the inclusion of habitation in certain initial park concepts, along with slow and often

nonexistent implementation, as well as the low population densities in certain areas, collectively served to mitigate potential conflicts.

From opposition to pride, parks spurred various feelings and reactions among sectors of the Latin American population, helping to unify and divide at multiple scales. Parks became part of a multifaceted state, imbuing vast portions of national territories with meaning, influencing the use and appearance of landscapes, and ultimately affecting Latin Americans' everyday lives. The history of using national parks to define and govern land, resources, and people provides critical insights into the strategies and imperatives of twentieth-century Latin American state building.

### **Dissimilar nationalist beginnings**

Some of the first *parques nacionales* were conceptualized in Mexico City and Buenos Aires, large capital cities that presided over vast and relatively populous countries. They diverged in their goals and rationales but shared some foundations, as nationalist feelings and aspirations infused park creation in both places. Mexicans established the first parks in the country's central and most populated region, its core since precolonial times. They exalted well-recognized spectacular forests that easily symbolized a shared national landscape and enlisted these symbols alongside productive environments deployed to consecrate the country's social revolution that was aiming to forge a prosperous and more equitable nation. Argentines turned instead to the frontiers, especially along the Andean border with Chile in the south and in the tropical northeast, to promote elite tourism as a way of bringing together a disjointed territory. Signature destinations, especially Iguazú on the border with Brazil and Paraguay (Freitas 2021a) and Nahuel Huapi in Patagonia, absorbed most of the focus. Tourism to these places was intended not to showcase solitude but to create and utilize new infrastructure that expanded state and national presence into areas where it had been previously absent (Administración General de Parques Nacionales y Turismo 1949; Scarzanella 2002; Andermann 2018).

It is no coincidence that nature protection through national parks in the region started in the 1930s, a decade full of fundamental changes to Latin American states. The Great Depression led to economic nationalism, represented by industrialization, heralded as a magic pill to counterbalance the *laissez-faire* excesses that led to the crisis. Economic reform demanded state modernization and resulted in the growth of bureaucracies, mainly in Argentina, Brazil, Chile, and Mexico, countries with small urban middle classes and industries for nondurable goods (Haber 2006; Whitehead 1998, 2006; Drake 1991). This enhanced muscle allowed these countries to push state formation into a novel direction that was beginning to be implemented in other parts of the world (Gissibl, Höhler, and Kupper 2012; Howkins, Orsi, and Fiege 2016).

Argentina designated parks starting in 1903 but began implementation only in 1934 with the creation of formal park administration under the novel Dirección de Parques Nacionales, the first national park service in the region. By then, the southern country had a relatively developed state within the Latin American context. The Argentine government under General Agustín Justo (1932–1938) responded to the Depression by further strengthening the state with a technocratic style of government and increased public expenditure, which jumped from 16 percent of gross domestic product in 1925–1929 to 21 percent in 1935–1939 (Rock 1991). The establishment of the Dirección de Parques Nacionales was part of this trend. It expanded the role of the Ministries of Agriculture and Public Works, where it alternatively resided before 1974, equipping the Argentine state with enhanced capacity to conduct conservation, land, and development policies in focal areas inside and around its national parks.

Mexico's institutional development for park management was less impressive but must also be understood in the context of increased government expenditure, which peaked at

11 percent of GDP in 1939 during Lázaro Cárdenas's presidency (1934–1940), up from an initial 6 percent ten years before. Increased spending helped bolster the social revolution, which involved expanding the size and powers of the state by implementing the desires of the varied social groups that had been incorporated into the 1917 constitution; the apex of the trend came with the creation of the Mexican national oil company after the 1938 expropriation of foreign oil companies (Knight 1990; Joseph and Nugent 1994; Chasteen 2001; James 2000). Forests received their first national legislation in the Forestry Law of 1926, which provided a coherent mechanism for implementing the Constitution in Mexico's forests (Boyer 2015). The reconfiguration of the state that resulted from implementing land reform and expanding educational services and labor rights enabled Mexico to develop novel institutions, among which was a minor one devoted to managing parks. The small *Oficina de Parques Nacionales* within the new Department of Forestry, Fish, and Game (housed, after 1940, within the Ministry of Agriculture) was created to manage the forty newly designated parks, linked to a platform of social justice and placed in areas accessible to large numbers of Mexicans (Wakild 2011).

While the revolution shaped national park development in Mexico, a very different context helps explain the peculiarities of the Argentine case. The violent process of incorporating Indigenous territory into the nation through the Conquest of the Desert (1878–1885) resulted in a frontier largely beyond the reach of direct governing abilities. The occupation of Patagonia opened the prospects for settlement, and *parques nacionales* were partly conceived to help draw settlers (Willis 1914; Dirección de Parques Nacionales 1936). The technical accuracy of scientific expeditions combined with the disciplined violence of military campaigns to produce maps, inventories, and strategic information upon which parks could be built (Nouzeilles 1999). Argentine parks were related to military aims of fortifying the border, evidenced in the refusal by early park planners of proposals that suggested merging Chilean and Argentine border reserves (Navarro Floria 2008).

Despite their distinctive trajectories, in both countries, parks played a strategic role in the state's attempts to define, control, and celebrate the territory over which it presides. Historians have long argued that everyday practices, staged events, political theater, children's books, newspapers, maps, museums, and other performances and rituals contributed to the growth of national identities (Anderson 1983; López 2002; Albarrán 2015). Parks must be considered among the pantheon of activity that helped foster national symbols in the 1930s and beyond. That decade saw novel efforts in that direction by defining and promoting cultural heritage. In Mexico, anthropology served that purpose through the creation, in 1939, of the Instituto Nacional de Antropología y Historia (Lomnitz 2001), and a year before, Argentina established the Comisión Nacional de Museos y de Monumentos y Lugares Históricos to preserve historical and archeological sites (Uribarren 2009). In both cases, national parks joined the broader effort by protecting paradigmatic landscapes. In Mexico, this took the form of dedicating the volcanoes Popocatepetl and Iztaccihuatl as a national park to preserve both the glaciated scenery and the histories of climbing the peaks and passes. The volcanoes had long loomed over the national tapestry; declaring them parks included them in the official national patrimony (Wakild 2011). Similarly, the fetishization of the Patagonian lakes, forests, and peaks as eternal, natural panoramas of sublime beauty made nature an icon, one promoted and managed by the state (Nouzeilles 1999).

National pride was fostered not just by creating the parks but also by facilitating public access to some of them, yet further nationalizing nature through this means faced various challenges. To begin with, not every key player agreed on the advantages of such a strategy. Miguel Ángel de Quevedo, the mastermind behind Mexico's parks, was a forester who believed more in preserving nature than in fostering visitation. However, the revolution dramatically modified his intentions, making public recreation fundamental to conservation, as the case of Lagunas de Zempoala National Park attests. In this park,

forested lakes lured tourists to alternative uses of rural landscapes where the federal government promoted and legitimized recreation and leisure rather than agriculture (Wakild 2011). The situation in Argentina was quite different. Exequiel Bustillo, the lawyer who presided over the Dirección de Parques Nacionales until 1944, promoted the construction of Hotel Llao Llao in Nahuel Huapi, a colossal monument to the infrastructure necessary to support tourism. However, he was committed to a vision of elite tourism, which was questioned in the late 1940s, when President Juan Domingo Perón (1946–1955) advanced the idea that national parks should serve the urban working classes. Perón's government developed mass tourism and organized excursions to Nahuel Huapi and Iguazú, bringing thousands of workers into the parks. The popularization of tourism strengthened the nationalist appeal of parks as places to become Argentine (Scarzanella 2002).

The opening to popular classes of what had been a privilege of the elites indicates that parks appealed, in different ways, to a wide range of politicians and parties, stretching across various regimes. Beyond incorporation and inclusion, tourism opened another justification for national parks—a complement to industrial development to help the parks pay for themselves. The pragmatic tactic of creating a national resource out of a natural landscape formed a central part of the most conspicuous early parks.

From the start, tourism was part of how Latin American park creation harmonized with global conversations about national parks. Officials in Mexico and Argentina paid attention to developments in the United States, Canada, Switzerland, and elsewhere that suggested setting nature aside was a way for their countries to participate in a cosmopolitan club of nations (Carruthers 2012). Less relevant were the calls from the London Convention (1930) to hold on to colonial resources, and more appealing was the cultural prestige associated with celebrating valuable Argentine or Mexican landscapes (Booth 2008; Kupper 2014; Andermann 2018; Wakild 2018; Lekan 2020). In this way, establishing and maintaining parks was a process of legitimizing and growing state activity, which was neither homogeneous nor directly copied from a template (Kelly *et al.* 2018). Argentine and Mexican participation in the activities of the International Union for the Conservation of Nature, including the 1948 Lake Success conference, illustrates how national states expanded in tandem with international connections and circumstances. At this early juncture, Argentina advanced the furthest in carving out a separate sphere of state activity with a powerful agency in charge of its parks, which proved key for the unprecedented development of some of them. The professionalization of management and the creation of a suite of middle-class bureaucratic careers emerged as hidden benefits from national—rather than local or provincial—investments.

### Erratic expansion

Like Mexico and Argentina, Brazil and Chile established parks early on. The initial efforts in the two countries illustrate a factor that marked park creation across the region in the subsequent decades: a varied array of individuals and groups took the initiative, inspired by diverse motives, rather than a specialized state office being behind a cohesive effort. José Augusto Drummond (2016) made this argument for Brazil, showing how, until 1979, this country established parks without a common strategy in place to give them congruity. Venezuela, from the 1950s, and Colombia, Peru, and Costa Rica, in the 1960s, provide further examples of haphazard park creation. The absence of an institution in charge of conceiving, planning, and developing national parks also helps understand the unimpressive achievements in park building on the ground, despite some notable exceptions. Although there was no clear policy guiding the creation of parks before the 1970s, a few common motives can be identified in the cases of Brazil and Chile.

In Brazil, proposals for *parques nacionais* began in the nineteenth century, but the country established its first three parks only in the 1930s, during the populist government



of Getúlio Vargas (1934–1945). The first one, Itatiaia (1937), was proposed by natural scientists working at the Federal Botanical Garden in Rio de Janeiro, mainly Paulo Campos Porto. The park was established in a picturesque mountainous area near Rio and São Paulo (Casazza 2018; Drummond 1997). The other two parks, Iguaçu and Serra dos Órgãos (established in 1939), derived from local interest groups' efforts to preserve monumental landscapes (peaks and waterfalls) with touristic potential. In the case of Iguaçu, local policy makers in the state of Paraná convinced the Vargas government to enact a decree establishing the park (Freitas 2021a, 2021b). Following concerns about rampant deforestation associated with logging and coffee growing from the late 1800s, the universalized but overly general idea of forest protection was used in both cases to justify the creation of the parks.

From those early years, the establishment of national parks in Brazil had to overcome a series of problems. Besides the absence of institutional grounding and clearly set policy guidelines, park proponents had to deal with the lack of federal public lands. Since the late nineteenth century, most public land in Brazil was controlled by the states—the country was a federation, after all—which increased the political and financial bar for national park creation. Virtually no land remained in the public domain at the national level, such that potential parkland would have to be expropriated or purchased by the federal government before being turned into a protected area by presidential decree (Freitas 2021a; Dean 1997).

Despite all the hurdles, parks were established, and some of them developed into gems. Locations were chosen after the suggestion of well-connected players, but motives recur in the choice of places. Beginning with Iguaçu, and in a fashion similar to that of Argentina, Brazil created some of its parks in distant regions with the desire to use them to advance frontier colonization and development. Between 1959 and 1961, as the country established a new capital city, Brasília, in its central savanna, the federal government also created a series of national parks in this frontier region, all in 1961, including Emas and Chapada dos Veadeiros. Likewise, in the 1970s, as the Brazilian military dictatorship poured money and resources into colonizing the Amazon, Brazil established its first (and largest to date) national parks in the region as part of ambitious development programs (Foresta 1991; Freitas 2020). However, by the late 1970s, most national parks clustered along the coast, just as the Brazilian population did, and scenic value ran strong among the criteria leading to their enactment (Drummond 2016). Throughout this vast and varied country, each park situation varied enormously. There existed parks that had been entirely occupied by farmers and peasants on the one hand, Sete Quedas standing out among them, and parks fully implemented on the other, such as Iguaçu.

Chilean parks, as we will see in more detail, began as offshoots of the establishment of a series of forest reserves in the frontier area of southern Patagonia and as the result of lobbying by groups with interests in recreation and tourism (Cabaña, Benavides, and Pizzaro 2013; Booth 2008). For example, the Malleco Forest Reserve was created in 1907 on about thirty-three thousand hectares of forested land in the Araucanía region (Chile 1907), but in 1935, about a fifth of the reserve was used to create Tolhuaca National Park while other lands were moved into colonization projects (Chile 1935). Before that, the Vicuña Mackenna National Park, which lasted only four years (1925–1929), was enacted to promote tourism with the support of the local German immigrant community. Chile's second and now oldest park, Vicente Pérez Rosales (1926), involved another group of constituents—skiers and recreationists. Torres del Paine, today a crown jewel of the Chilean system, became a national park in 1959 at the request of a local tourism society, Club Andino (Wakild 2017).<sup>2</sup> Once enacted, many parks grew to occupy a greater area; Torres del Paine enlarged its

<sup>2</sup> “Convenio: Entre el Ministerio de Agricultura, El consejo de fomento e investigación agrícolas y El Club Andino de Punta Arenas,” n.d., Ministerio de Agricultura v. 1440, Archivo Nacional Chile—Santiago, Chile. The convenio is not dated but is in a bound volume for 1961. See also in the same bound volume Edwin Schmeisser Vásquez, “Proyecto de creación Parque Nacional ‘Torres del Paine,’” in *Magallanes*, August 18, 1961.

footprint four separate times with a more than forty-fold increase in size. The Chilean government expanded its variety of national parks, establishing units in the central and northern parts of the country and creating marine and island parks for their tourist potential. This was the case in 1935 with the Juan Fernández Islands, an archipelago located far into the Pacific Ocean. It attracted cruises with tourists eager to visit the islands, which served as the setting for Robinson Crusoe (Chant and Gándara Chacana 2023).

Unlike Argentina across the border, Chile lacked (until 1984) a centralized office to manage its parks. Before then, some Chilean reserves were started under the purview of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs or later, the Ministry of National Assets, Lands, and Colonization and managed by an Office of National Assets whose officials lacked the training, interest, and resources to focus on the management of the country's national parks (García and Mulrennan 2020). The lateness of the bureaucratic organization should not be mistaken for laggard conservation; between 1907 and 1972, Chile created twenty-two of the forty-six national parks that were existing in 2023 (Corporación Nacional Forestal 2023). And yet despite the proliferation of parks, before the 1970s, Chile lacked clear policy guidelines for park creation or management. Of the forty protected areas established until 1969, only about half had personnel, guard stations, or surveillance—which accounted for 387,000 of the 2,130,000 hectares of the preserved territory (Camus Gayán and Lazo Álvarez 2014).

Although most parks lacked adequate human or financial resources or appropriate technical management and, therefore, existed primarily on paper, much experimentation and creativity occurred through the first half of the twentieth century. For example, *guardabosques*, or forest guards, were trained to respond to forest fires, prevent illegal logging, and plant trees, whereas *guardaparques*, or park rangers, many of whom got their start as forest guards, added tourist support and the administration of facilities (picnic areas and trails) to their occupations. Funding was routinely short for these positions, and individuals who did this work in the 1940s chose to do so out of private interests, love of nature, or service to their communities (Camus Gayán and Lazo Álvarez 2014). The role of rangers as patrollers, educators, and protectors of parks became more professionalized as the bureaucratic structure slowly developed in the 1970s (Camus Gayán and Lazo Álvarez 2014). Broadly, then, Chilean parks existed in relation to forestry reserves and recreational initiatives, were sometimes reorganized and often expanded, and represented an assortment of special landscapes and attributes, with many of them being established in mountainous areas.

As was the case with Brazil and Chile, Colombia and Peru started haphazardly building protected areas, but they did so in the 1960s rather than the 1930s, with the exception of a Colombian reserve approved in 1948 (Leal 2019b). As the economic and state growth of the two countries lagged behind those of Argentina, Brazil, Chile, and Mexico, so did their development of national parks (Thorp 1998; Chasteen 2001). When state expansion picked up pace fueled by the postwar economic boom, it allowed for park creation, however erratic. In Colombia, for example, in the 1960s and 1970s, state institutions multiplied as never before: ministries and equivalent bureaus went from just eight in 1930 to fourteen in 1957 and twenty-six in 1980. Other indicators, such as public spending and the size of the bureaucracy, show a similar trend (Uricoechea 1986). State growth was coupled with a centralized administrative structure to facilitate park emergence. Unlike Brazil, these countries did not lack federal public land.

In this context, Colombia enacted its first *parque nacional natural* in 1960, Cueva de los Guácharos, which protected a cave where the oilbirds that gave it its name lived. A German professor of an elite boys' school in Bogota had the idea and managed to get it to the right ears at a time when the president himself was considering creating national parks (Leal 2019a). Curiously enough, Peru's first two national parks, dating from 1961 to 1965, also protected oilbirds. In these cases, it was a regional biologist and doctor-turned-senator

who were behind the initiatives (Dourojeanni 2018). Peru's most successful protected area, Pampa Galeras Natural Reserve, came a couple of years later, in 1967, to protect vicuñas in the puna. This reserve soon became an exception, along with the national parks Salamanca and Tayrona (1964) in the Colombian Caribbean, for infrastructure development. Recreation outlets for coastal cities in beautiful settings and endangered vicuñas and their praised wool provided the rationale for conservation in these areas (Barker 1980; Wakild 2020; Leal 2019a, 2017). Costa Rica reinforced the 1960s tendency of incipient park creation without much implementation by piloting the Departamento de Parques Nacionales, created in 1969, with only five guards and a vehicle (Evans 1999).

During the 1950s and 1960s, national parks were becoming a reality in various Latin American countries. Yet for the most part, they remained obscure territorial units, interpreted differently by those who had some stake in them. Despite their ubiquity and growing recognition, the limited development of the parks themselves and their weak institutional foundation meant that—with the notable exception of Argentina—caring for nature was a promising but still incipient state development that inspired little general enthusiasm or opposition.

### Forestry, a pervasive and influential pillar

Although the general public in most countries remained unaware of park development, foresters stood firmly behind it. Except in Argentina, these professionals and their science of forestry could be found at the forefront of using national parks as a form of state formation throughout Latin America. The pervasiveness of forests, as the region's most extensive natural vegetative cover, contributed to foresters' national prominence. Their science, developed to cut trees for productive use, cultivated an interest in utilitarian conservation in order to achieve sustainable yields; parks came as a by-product of that goal. Because timber extraction is easier in temperate forests, where a few species dominate, and because these forests are located in Chile and Mexico, countries with more developed states, it was there the influence of these professionals initially developed.

As mentioned earlier, the first Chilean parks stemmed from forest reserves, established in the country's southern and south-central regions between the 1910s and the 1930s and devised by foresters working for the government, notably Federico Albert. These scientists were concerned with the integrity of forests and the restoration of degraded lands, including through the introduction of species (Albert 1907, 1911). The first forest reserve, Malleco (1907), was used to create Tolhuaca National Park, and the first national park, Vicuña Mackenna (1925), was carved out of the forest reserve Villarrica (1913), which itself was formed from private land that had just been returned to the state after a failed colonization concession (Cabeza 1988; García and Mulrennan 2020). The government went on to create parks in forested areas unsuitable for logging and agriculture because of their high altitudes and poor soil or in areas that had been subject to forest clearing to grow wheat unsuccessfully (Wakild 2017). The Chilean conservationist and author Rafael Elizalde MacClure alerted the general public to threats facing the destruction of nature in his popular 1958 text, which advocated more careful stewardship of natural resources. As in Mexico, the legal apparatus for conservation in Chile was tied directly to forestry legislation, including a similar national forestry law, the Ley de Bosques, enacted as a presidential decree in 1931 (Chile 1931). Over time, various Chilean forestry services existed at the national level and had the somewhat contradictory role of both developing forests as a powerful economic industry and providing for conservation and national parks.

The importance of forestry can also be appreciated in the institutional development of park management, as mentioned for Mexico and as illustrated by the Brazilian case. The government of Getúlio Vargas (1930–1945) expanded the capacity of the central state to

control capital, labor, and the national territory as it replaced the loose federalist system with a strong, interventionist state equipped with new agencies and an expanded bureaucracy. The regime created numerous federal agencies whose range of responsibilities went from industrial to cultural policy, including two in charge of forestry, one for natural resources, and offices for mineral and water resources (Bethell 2008). The Serviço Florestal, initially established as an office for urban forests in Rio de Janeiro between 1921 and 1933, was re-created as a nationwide forestry agency by Vargas in 1938. It housed a small and understaffed office dedicated to national parks. The Iguaçú National Park was comanaged with another forestry agency, the Instituto Nacional do Pinho, established in 1941. Over time, these forestry agencies underwent name changes and eventually merged in 1967 into the powerful Instituto Brasileiro de Desenvolvimento Florestal (IBDF). The IBDF was responsible for managing protected areas, although its primary focus remained on commercial forestry (Dean 1997; Franco and Drummond 2013; Urban 1998; Hochstetler and Keck 2007; Freitas 2021a). In this way, national park management in Brazil followed the Mexican and Chilean models of subjection to forestry institutions.

Forestry expertise and influence in Peru and Colombia emerged later. Neither of the two countries, located in the tropics, had turned in a significant way to their very diverse and extensive forests (which covered more than two-thirds of the countries' national territories) to profit from timber. But they had extracted and exported rubber and other forest products; thus, in the 1950s, as economic development took priority, the extensive forests came to be considered stores of valuable resources in need of exploitation. After embryonic forestry sectors emerged, national parks developed in association with them. In Peru, conservation efforts emerged squarely from attempts to establish forestry: the Departamento de Protección y Conservación (1965), located in the Forestry Research Institute, was part of both the Forestry and Hunting Service of the Ministry of Agriculture and the Forestry School of the Agrarian University, created in 1961 and 1963, respectively (Dourojeanni, 2009). It resulted from a project funded by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) to strengthen the sector. Furthermore, in both countries, the legislation that laid the initial grounding for national parks was included in the first national forestry laws (from 1959 in Colombia and 1963 in Peru). Plus, foresters themselves played key roles. In Colombia, they presided over park development from the mid-1960s until the mid-1980s. However, their role, in Colombia and elsewhere, receded backstage in the decades to come.

### **Coherence through ecological representation**

Ecology as a basis for planning at a national level took park development to a new stage. The disjointed efforts to create parks from the 1920s through the 1960s acquired coherence in the 1970s around the principle of ecological representation, thanks to the development of stronger national park institutions and the support of an international conservation network. These institutions and the parks they fostered became essential components of the nature states that strengthened everywhere in those years. At the same time, international cooperation provided guidelines and facilitated resources that, among other things, produced a stricter and more homogeneous conception of national parks. In 1975, the IUCN published its List of National Parks and Equivalent Reserves, which defined the criteria that areas needed to meet to properly achieve such status. Regimes of various sorts adopted these criteria, including the authoritarian ones that predominated in Latin America at the time. However, more than bringing abrupt changes to this form of state formation, dictatorships provided a more extreme form of the presidential system that facilitated park creation across the region. Presidents had long been able to legislate by decree and used those powers mostly for matters unrelated to conservation (Cheibub, Elkins, and Ginsburg 2011; Leal 2017).

Argentina, with its pioneering park service, was also ahead in proposing and applying the principle of ecological representation. The idea of *formaciones fitogeográficas*, which referred to areas with similar vegetation ensembles, gave naturalists in the late 1940s and 1950s a way of reading the territory that also provided a scientific rationale for national park proposals (Dimitri 1954). Under this logic, the parks El Rey, Río Pilcomayo, Chaco, and Tierra del Fuego were created in montane semitropical forests and the Chaco region in the north, as well as in the forests of the southern tip of South America. However, many phytogeographical regions, notably the pampa, remained absent from the emerging national park map.

In Peru and Colombia, constructing such maps, which resulted in the establishing of national park systems in the 1970s, started later. Underlying this change were institutions that took care of protected areas' management and planning. In the mid-1960s, Peru established the tiny Conservation Department, while in Colombia, a small Sección de Parques was put in place within the Corporación Autónoma Regional de los Valles del Magdalena y del Sinú (CVM) to administer three Caribbean parks that had just been designated. This office became the División de Parques Nacionales y Vida Silvestre when, in 1968, it moved to the new National Institute of Natural Resources (INDERENA); it thus acquired jurisdiction over the entire country. These offices provided the institutional space for a few specialized and committed state officials who devised coherent national park systems at a time when planning became a highly valued tool for governments throughout Latin America (Dourojeanni 2018; Leal 2017).

At that moment, a global network promoting conservation through national parks was consolidated (de Bont, Schleper, and Schouwenburg 2017). The first and second world congresses of national parks took place in 1962 and 1972, with dozens of Latin Americans in attendance, while the first Latin American congress, sponsored by IUCN, was hosted by Argentina in 1968, in Bariloche, the city that developed in tandem with Nahuel Huapi National Park. Ninety-six of the 152 conference participants were based in Latin America, including four Peruvians who later spoke of the conference as essential to building networks among the countries (IUCN 1968). The UN Conference on Human Environment, which took place in 1972, further indicated the importance the environment and its conservation were acquiring at a global scale. That context was crucial for the enactment, in 1977, of laws in both Colombia and Peru devoted solely to regulating national parks (Dourojeanni 2018; Leal 2017).

The development of national science, as well as international cooperation, sustained these legal developments and planning efforts. The mastermind behind Colombia's national park system, Jorge Hernández, was a self-taught individual who learned about the country's nature by researching at the Natural Science Institute of the National University in Bogotá. In Peru's capital city, La Molina National Agrarian University and, similarly but to a lesser extent, the Forestry School of Universidad Distrital in Bogota, trained the personnel that studied vicuñas, demarcated newly created parks, and made conservation a way of living.

The professionals who took charge of national park planning followed the principle of ecological representation that resulted from efforts carried out over several decades to understand a nation's nature largely on the basis of plant associations. In Peru, twelve proposed areas strategically represented the three natural regions of the country: coast, sierra, and selva (Dourojeanni 1968). Stitching together the three distinct regions proved a political challenge, so national parks stood in as an appropriate symbol to highlight the country's strengths in its diversity. Furthermore, the thirty-something life zones that Joseph Tosi (an American forester and geographer who worked for eight years in Peru for the FAO) had identified in his *Zonas de vida natural del Perú* (1960), based on climate and vegetation, greatly aided planners in their task. In Colombia, this principle led Jorge Hernández to devise a map with dozens of areas. Economists at the National Planning

Department contributed to prioritizing some among these. *Páramos*, high Andean moorlands that store water, stood out within the twenty-something areas that were enacted in one swoop in 1977.

Transnational networks of cooperation, often including scientists such as Tosi, played a decisive role in planning and building national parks. The core team behind Peru's original national park proposal comprised three Peruvians and three foreigners (a Belgian, a British Kenyan, and a German). Several other professionals—from FAO, the World Wildlife Fund, the Nature Conservancy, the British and New Zealander cooperation services, and the US Peace Corps—also contributed in various capacities. Unlike Peru, Colombia did not have foreigners stationed and working for years in the country, but the country did receive consultants who left deep traces, especially the ubiquitous Kenton Miller, who first visited in 1967. At the time, he was stationed in Costa Rica at the FAO's Inter-American Institute for Agricultural Sciences, where he taught courses on wildland management (Dourojeanni 2023). The movement of some key players, like Miller, and the support from FAO and the US National Park Service, contributed to the formation of a Latin American network of cooperation that shared ideas, gave confidence, and strengthened the sense of mission in bureaucrats who had marginal positions within their national state apparatuses. By the end of the decade, Peru and Colombia had a sizable number of parks, infrastructure in many of them, dozens of rangers, and acquired knowledge that together formed national park systems that endure today.

Although Chile had designated parks early on, the formality of park administration also developed in the late 1960s. Hugo Trivelli, minister of Agriculture under Eduardo Frei Montalva's administration (1964–1970), made a decisive move after attending, in 1968, the Biosphere Conference, sponsored by UNESCO, the FAO, and the IUCN, and hearing about conservation, including reforestation on small and medium-sized landholdings. The following year, Trivelli established an office charged with managing national parks and other protected areas, the *División de Patrimonio Forestal*. The new office was housed within the Ministry of Agriculture's Forestry Office, the *Corporación Nacional Forestal*, and had Bernardo Zentilli as its first director (Pizarro 2012; Klubock 2014).

A significant step in establishing a national park system in Chile was the adoption of the model developed by Kenton Miller (Miller, Moseley, and Thelen 1974). His innovation was a systematic and nationwide approach to conservation based on field surveys and standardized park management plans. Another crucial aspect of Miller's approach was integrating protected areas into national development—it proposed parks should be part of territorial planning (Foresta 1991). In the early 1970s, Miller moved to Santiago, where the FAO office in Latin America was located, to head the program on wildland management, which put him in an advantageous position to influence conservation policy in the country. The FAO project became essential in structuring Chile's national park policy and a key conduit for connecting Chileans with a broader network of conservationists. It influenced the passing of a law in 1984, under Pinochet, that established the *Sistema Nacional de Áreas Silvestres Protegidas del Estado*, whose main goal was to promote the conservation of areas that were representative of the country's diverse ecosystems. The management of parks would be standardized, following the model developed by Miller, and new parks would be proposed as part of a nationwide network of protected areas (Pizarro 2012; Miller, Moseley, and Thelen 1974; Miller and Thelen 1975).

The timing and influence of the FAO can be seen in how it supported other domestic arrangements to coordinate park development. In Brazil, the military regime's renewed interest in developing the Amazon frontier opened a door in the 1970s for national parks and conservation because of the combination of scientific authority developed by outsiders (including Miller's team) and the nationalism implied in valuing this

once-forgotten landscape.<sup>3</sup> Maria Tereza Jorge Pádua, head of the small *Divisão de Proteção à Natureza* within the IBDF, tapped into resources made available for colonization projects in the Amazon to survey the region in search of conservation targets (Pádua and Quintão 1982; Drummond 2016).<sup>4</sup> Armed with the FAO-developed scientific model of park creation, Pádua managed not only to propose a substantial expansion in the area of national parks in the Brazilian Amazon but also to use that proposal as the basis for a national system of protected areas (Pádua and Lourenço 1981; Wetterberg 1978; Wetterberg and Pádua 1978; Wetterberg et al. 1976). In a single ceremony in 1979, Brazil's military president quadrupled the amount of land conserved in the country, including nine new parks and reserves in the Amazon (Freitas 2020; Drummond 2016). The development of such a system took twenty years to be completed, with the first legislation enacted in 1981, during the long waning of the military dictatorship, and a final version of the system passed by Congress in 2000.

## Epilogue

In the 1980s, a new scientific specialty—conservation biology—emerged. Using the newly coined term biodiversity to stress the tremendous variety of organisms living in certain tropical environments, conservation biologists called attention to their fragility and the need to protect them (Wilson 1988). Biologists from the United States, who had a long history of studying tropical nature in Latin America, made this global call (Raby 2017). This new activist science focused on tropical rain forests and promoted the conservation of expanses as large as possible to guarantee the persistence of processes and organisms with considerable spatial scope. Biodiversity, adopted all around the world, even to refer to landscapes and ecosystems with much simpler life arrangements than jungles, was particularly well suited for tropical countries. In 1998, the environmental nongovernmental organization Conservation International identified seventeen megadiverse countries, including Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, Mexico, Peru, and Venezuela, and it later added Bolivia, Costa Rica, and Guatemala to the list. Such honors contributed to the international standing of these countries and to the power of this scientific concept to guide new conservation efforts and legitimize previous ones.

As the concept of biodiversity gained force, conservation came under scrutiny for limiting poor peoples' access to natural resources, affecting their livelihoods, and curtailing their basic rights. Much of this criticism focused on Africa, a continent where colonial powers spearheaded conservation in the early twentieth century. These challenges expanded to other areas of the globe that included lightly inhabited places and those with dramatically different historical and political relationships to conservation. Such critiques reshaped how the history of global conservation was written and the way many practitioners conceived and undertook their mission (Jacoby 2001; Brockington 2002; Dowie 2011; Brockington, Duffy, and Igoe 2008; Agrawal and Redford 2009).

In Latin America, calls for more flexible conservation strategies often overlook the fact that human habitation inside parks has not historically been seen as a problem in various places. Settlement was even encouraged in a few national parks, particularly in frontiers and borderlands. However, the national park idea eventually came to exclude people, acceding to an international standard that became ever more fixed and influential. Nonetheless, there were certain exceptions: at least in Colombia and Peru, Indigenous peoples' lifeways were considered compatible with conservation. Although eviction

<sup>3</sup> Gary Wetterberg, phone interview with Frederico Freitas. Rockwood, PA, and Raleigh, NC, United States. May 31, 2017.

<sup>4</sup> Maria Tereza Jorge Pádua, WhatsApp interview with Frederico Freitas, Lima, Peru, and Raleigh, NC, March 16, 2020.

contributed to building the park ideal in a few places, most national park inhabitants remained and were joined by others, as the nature state proved incapable of constructing parks according to the ideal (Amend and Amend 1995; Freitas 2021a). However, these dwellers lost the right to own land or benefit from public services, such as roads and even schools, which effectively curtailed their citizenship.

Many critiques of conservation have failed to consider its history before biodiversity. Beginning in the 1920s, Latin American countries forged national parks for their own reasons and in tandem with the growth of their state apparatuses. Although the paths and the intentions varied, in all cases, parks contributed to highlighting and valuing nature and were fundamental in crafting the state's responsibility of caring for nature. This form of state formation contributed to shaping national territories and preparing the terrain for the advent of the biodiversity-based conservation era in the 1990s and beyond.

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