

National Parks of the southern Meta/Colombia in Post-acuerdo – A conflict- and actor-oriented analysis of the public debate

YVONNE LAUDIEN (BIELEFELD UNIVERSITY, GERMANY)

Abstract

This article is based on a more detailed study which examines the role of three national parks and their associated buffer zones in the southern Meta region of Colombia during a period that involves attempts at peace consolidation. A conflict- and actor-oriented analysis of the public debate on the role of national parks in southern Meta in the post-acuerdo offers an insight into multilateral areas of conflict. It shows that the current national park territories do not provide all-encompassing answers to the complex social and historically-constructed real spatial interdependencies in the region. That is why in many places the national parks become “paper parks.” In the context of global phenomena, this work underlines the diverging views and demands on environmental protected areas in post-FARC zones at different scales and levels. This site-specific consideration, which is based on an analysis of a nationwide debate, thereby contributes to further critical interpretations of global and Western-influenced environmental protection instruments. The knowledge about the symbolic power of national parks at the international level also demonstrates the opportunities offered by the national park concept. The following considerations of the various roles of the national park in post-acuerdo times in post-FARC regions provide a valuable basis for further in-depth studies on the resolution of socio-ecological conflicts between environmental protection and local populations in Meta, Colombia and around the world.

Keywords: National Park, territories, post-conflict, post-acuerdo, peace consolidation, Colombia, environmental protection, ecological conflicts, post-FARC

Introduction: The Role of National Parks in Post-acuerdo

In times of old and new conflicts and increasing right-wing populism, human rights, and the environment are jeopardized in many locations in the Americas. In northern South America, Colombian ecosystems and rural populations are suffering from the pressures of extractivism, colonialization, and new territorial dynamics caused by the peace agreement between FARC-EP and the former government of President Santos. While the Colombian peace agreement remains, in many places, peace on paper only, national parks in post-FARC zones are likewise no more than “paper parks” (Leal 8).

In the public debate about Colombia’s ecosystems, the discourses of the global environmental crisis and the farmer/agricultural crisis are intertwined in the broader context of the dynamics of globalization (Betancourt 15

ff). In times of the so called post-acuerdo [1], the post-FARC zones - in many cases, places of rich biodiversity - are dealing with the clash between social and ecological rights, differing economic, regional and national interests, power claims, the establishment of state sovereignty, and the problematic of resolving historical land conflicts. How can Colombia’s social and ecological peace be implemented in times of post-acuerdo? A post-FARC zone in the heart of Colombia - in the south of the state of Meta - is the subject of multiple discussions. In this former FARC-EP epicenter, three connected national parks and their buffer zones should protect a biogeographic region designated as unique. However, currently the parks *Cordillera de los Picachos*, *Sierra de La Macarena*, and *Tinigua* are threatened by deforestation waves. The dilemma within national parks between human rights and environmental protections becomes apparent with the existence of complex dynamics

of colonialization of a constantly victimized part of the Colombian population, in informal as well as formal economies, and the pressure on peace consolidation to reach the periphery with basic public services. The establishment of an environmental management in harmony with the agreements for a lasting and stable social peace poses a challenge for the responsible environmental protection authorities.

The current situation and the future of the parks and their inhabitants or ‘illegal occupiers’ are discussed publicly. The role of national parks in post-FARC zones is problematized here. Various interest groups - actors - appear in the debate at regional, national, and international levels. [2] The shortcomings in environmental protection in post-acuerdo times illuminate deficits and potentials of the territorial environmental protection concept. Based on the public debate, the controversial national park concept should be assessed here in terms of its functionality in a temporally and spatially complex region in the context of multilateral conflict fields.

The critical site-specific study of the role of the regional environmental protection zones follows other debates and critical studies about the global territorial environmental protection instrument.

1. State Territories: National Parks

The subjects of investigation are national parks – a western environmental protection concept. According to Gissibl et al., the territorial concept of national parks is to be understood as a form of land use (3). The national park is a form of land use that involves the protection of ecosystems considered to be valuable and/or unique. In contrast to other forms of land use, territorial environmental protection is about the desire to not use the territory (Gissibl et al. 4). The ecological and aesthetic quality assurance of natural phenomena and ecosystems is first of all consumed in a socio-cultural human sense, i.e. with science, education, recovery and tourism (EUROPARC 21).

The western concept of in situ environmental protection and the idea of “pristine” nature – of *wilderness* – are not congruent with the social and ecological reality of many biodiverse regions in

different countries. In *Civilizing Nature*, Gissibl et al. describe the national park as an imperialistic concept. The appropriation of nature implicit within the concept also includes the paternalism and disempowerment of the local population. It is no secret that the establishment of national parks in many biodiverse countries is usually carried out by top-down practices of state authorities and their scientific advisors (Gissibl et al. 6). Socio-ecological conflicts caused by expropriations and the violations of human rights are the consequences of these practices.

The global popularity of national parks can be attributed to their political message rather than to their protective functions: Arisen from, and inspired by, the concept of the modern democratic nation, the national park concept transports western values and norms as well as the idea of civilized, cultivated, and territorialized control (Gissibl et al. 2). In this respect, the term *national park* becomes a label for international diplomacy and state modernity.

2. Colombia: Territories and Environmental Protection in Post-acuerdo

A “territorial kaleidoscope” and “a total of fragmented spaces” [3] is how Montañez-Gómez (13) and Heidrun Zinecker (8) characterize the megadiverse Colombian state. The high ethnic diversity in the country holds cultural wealth but also a high conflict potential (Bejarano Vargas). The lack of possibilities for political participation, historical distributional injustice [4], resulting poverty, and a weak state are reasons for the Colombian armed conflict that followed the *Violencia*. Violent expulsions on a massive scale make Colombia, after Syria, the country with the highest number of internally displaced persons in the world and a place of territorial fragmentation (Norwegian Refugee Council).

In the Colombian nation-state, territories with special usage management overlap. These territories with differing constitutional regulations are often located in peripheral regions with high biodiversity. While ethnic collective territories are established on a large scale, however, the high concentration of land is hardly counteracted. The smallholders are those who suffer the consequences of this. In comparison to ethnic

collective territories, the number of territorial entities of Peasant Reserves (ZRC) is low. Informal land ownership and informal economies are the consequence of the situation in which Colombian peasants find themselves in.

3. Post-acuerdo

The post-FARC zones are at the center of the peacebuilding efforts. The 2016 theoretically concluded 'peace' has not yet arrived in many post-FARC zones. According to Fritsch (14), there is a huge gap between the promises of development plans and court rulings and reality. The Foundation for Peace and Reconciliation (Pares) sees new sources of conflict in the power vacuums that have arisen in post-FARC zones. Various actors such as FARC dissident groups, ELN, and criminal groups (BACRIM) claim the structures left behind by the FARC.

Besides the absence of social peace, biodiversity ecosystems are also increasingly becoming targets of new territorial dynamics. The main deforestation drivers which threaten Colombia's valuable ecosystems are activities such as illegal mining, extractivist industries, the expansion of industrial agriculture, and the cultivation of illegal crops (e.g. coca cultivation) (Valencia Agudelo et al. 36). [5]

Various state planning and control instruments aim to solve the historic conflicts between environmental protection and rural social needs. The *Ordenamiento Territorial* –a collective land management– aims to contribute to social and ecological peace, taking into account different cultural areas (Ruiz Soto). The integral land reform (RRI) aims to counteract the unfair distribution of land ownership, while the *Programa Nacional Integral de Sustitución de Cultivos de Uso Ilícito* (PNIS) and the *Planes integrals comunitarios y municipales de sustitución y desarrollo alternativo* (PISDA), at the regional level, aim to promote the voluntary substitution of illegal crops and sustainable economic alternatives (Presidencia de la República, "Efecto paz"). However, environmental prioritization and zoning plans to protect valuable ecosystems provoke new socio-ecological conflicts in regions that have remained stateless for years (Valencia Agudelo et al. 257).

4. Environmental Protection in Colombia

In Colombia's case, the socio-ecological conflict is a historical one. International pressure has always been considerably high on this mega-diverse country, which accounts for ten percent of global biodiversity (CBD).

The legal term *national park* has been entrenched in Colombian law since 1959. The Colombian Constitution of 1991 defines national parks merely as territories of ethnic groups, as "untranscribable, inalienable, and not attachable". [6] In 1997, the Colombian Court ruled that the removal of areas from the national park system was unconstitutional (Corte Constitucional, Sentencia C-649). Meanwhile 59 protected areas exist in Colombia, including 43 national parks with a total national area of 142,682 km² (land and sea) (Parques Nacionales Naturales, "Sistema de Parques Nacionales"). Further protected areas are planned.

The founding of the Ministry of the Environment in 1993 divided the state's responsibility for environmental protection and economic development into different ministries. This political reorganization caused, on the one hand, the independence of environmental protection from economic development; on the other hand, it diminished the influence of environmental protection in development issues (Rojas 168). Since 2011, the autonomously administered *Unidad Administrativa Especial Parques Nacionales Naturales de Colombia* (UAESPNN) – today called *Parques Nacionales Naturales* (PNN) – has been subordinate to the Ministry of the Environment.

5. Post-FARC and biodiverse: The southern Meta

Located in Colombia's geographical center and sharing a border in the North with Bogotá D.C., the Colombian state Meta is home to the Macarena region, which was one of the FARC's most important bases and is now one of the post-acuerdo prioritized regions. This is where the ecosystems of the Andes, Orinoco, and Amazon meet, making the region a unique strategic biogeographical location. The region's natural resources are coveted for economic activities

such as the expansion of palm, oil extraction, mining, informal economic activities, or for the cultivation of illegal crops (e.g. coca).

For the protection of these unique ecosystems, the national park *Cordillera de los Picachos* was founded in 1977 and the national parks *Sierra de la Macarena* and *Tinigua* in 1989. The *Área de Manejo Especial La Macarena* (AMEM) was established in 1989 with the aim of regulating land use in this ecologically sensitive region, in the national parks as well as in their buffer zones (GIZ). The territorial order aims to guarantee the preservation of ecosystems and improve the living conditions of local residents. [7]

However, the protected areas' terms of land use do not stop the "spontaneous, disorderly colonization" of the zone (GIZ). [8] Meta is regarded as a state of colonization, which since the *Violencia* in the 40s and 50s has been a place of refuge for internally displaced persons (González 203). The peasants, farm workers, and settlers (*colonos*) there, who settled in the currently protected area before and after its designation as a protected area, are counted among the poorest populations of the country (Lastra Romero 56). The regional society is diverse and consists of (landless, informally, or formally occupying land) farmers/peasants, indigenous people, informal workers, former FARC fighters, FARC dissidents, and members of various BACRIM.

In 1964, the region's historical social isolation favored the FARC's rise in power whereby a parallel state was established with territorial land use terms that deviated from those of the state. The remaining inadequate state presence in the current times of post-acuerdo and the emerging lack of basic services, territorial power struggles and political and economic pressure from external actors are currently feeding both new and old conflicts in the post-FARC zones. Environmental destruction and crime as well as a constant flaring up of territorial power struggles are in many places consequences of the power vacuum created by the demobilization of the FARC.

The lack of a state and the voluntary and forced dynamics of migration due to the high concentration of land are reasons for the general informality of land ownership. This informality of

land ownership is also directed against state-established zones such as national parks, where human activities of land use are constitutionally prohibited or strongly limited. The discontent surrounding curtailed territorial rights leads to social mobilization in some places. This results in territorial conflicts between population and environmental authorities.

The precarious human rights situation and the endangered ecosystems are at the center of the debate surrounding this region of national strategic interest.

6. *Parques sin gente*

In my investigation on the role of national parks in post-acuerdo in southern Meta/Colombia, I identify three areas of conflict which can be seen in connection with the AMEM – the regional environmental management:

1. Area of conflict: *Parques sin gente* (parks without people)
 - a. Dynamics of settlement
 - b. Informal economic activities
2. Area of conflict: state-controlled economic development
3. Area of conflict: situation of human rights and basic care

These areas of conflict can by no means be sharply separated from each other. However, due to the scope of limitations, this article focuses exclusively on the first field of conflict: *Parques sin gente*.

The lack of acceptance or ignorance of local environmental zoning demonstrates the conflict regarding the environmental boundaries in the south of Meta: uncontrolled agricultural activities, which lead to the expansion of the agricultural border, contradict the norms of the land-use guidelines in zones with specific environmental protection management. Alongside the dynamics of settlement, access to land for informal, illegal economies, such as coca cultivation, plays a central role in this area of conflict. The area of conflict *Parques sin gente* is therefore divided into two sub-areas of conflict: dynamics of settlement and informal economic activities. This distinction is important for examining

territorial interdependencies with organized crime and security policy interests separately from phenomena of general colonisation. In fact, there is no clear separation between these two sub-areas of conflict. The differentiation serves mainly for the representation and examination of a complex area of interest and conflicts.

The peace treaty, which is to resolve historic conflicts, describes approaches to solving the socio-ecological conflicts regarding the protected areas. The debate on resolving these conflicts relates mainly to point 1 – the agreement for an integral rural reform (RRI) and, in particular, the closure of the agricultural border and the protection of protected areas (1.1.10.), as well as point 4 – the agreement on illegal drugs and coca cultivation, particularly in protected areas (Alto Comisionado para la Paz 10, 98).

The uncontrolled colonization, with its degrading environmental consequences in the South of Meta, is a subject of considerable public debate. This thus triggers a fundamental debate which questions the legitimacy of exclusive territorial environmental protection: parks with people vs. parks without people.

7. The Dynamics of Settlement

In March 2018, the IDEAM reported an alarming increase in deforestation in the *Tinigua* national park. The palpable increase in deforestation can be explained by slash-and-burn techniques for agricultural activities, land ownership, and the establishment of an informal infrastructure. These colonization activities are connected and driven by the high concentration of land ownership and the lack of alternatives for peasant communities. Besides the peasants' hope for land ownership and a better life, the deforestation in and around the national park territories is exacerbated by an informal land market involving FARC dissidents, financial donors, and non-place-based speculators. [9]

As mentioned before, there is a socio-ecological conflict between national park administration and the population, due to the discrepancy between legal environmental protection figures and real conditions of settlement. The ecological monetary as well as ideological value of the region is defended

by environmentalists, environmental protection organizations, PNN and, at the regional level, by CAR CORMACARENA. Limited access to land and the human rights situation also play a role in the debate. Among other things, the debate asks the question of who was first – the settlers or protected areas? In the south of Meta, as in other regions in Colombia, settlers and farmers settled in the areas of today's national park before the declaration of nature conservation zones (Borda León). However, according to the Colombian government, the vast majority of the park population moved into the environmental protection territories later, within the framework of numerous and uncontrolled settlement processes (Pardo Rueda 4). In 2017, the national parks *Sierra de la Macarena* and *Tinigua* were two of 38 'occupied' territories of the SPNN. The historically low state presence and consequent lack of integrity of the state's environmental authorities are held responsible for the vulnerability of protected areas against illegal agricultural and industrial activities (Ibid.).

To solve these multiple territorial conflicts between the rural population and state environmental protection, the peace treaty specifies the following crucial points in this regard:

(1) The RRI aims to ensure that social, economic, and political integration and recognition of peripheral populations are guaranteed, poverty is combated, and sustainable development supported, and equality and civil rights are promoted. Therefore, the *Zona de Reserva Campesina* (ZRC) is to be recognized and supported as agricultural initiatives (Alto Comisionado para la Paz 11).

(2) The regulation of land ownership and access to land should prioritize compensation for victims of displacement. The *Unidad de Restitución de Tierras* (URT) is charged with restoring the original land to victims of displacement.

(3) The closure of the agricultural border and the protection of protected areas should be ensured, taking into account balanced alternatives for the inhabitants of the region (ibid. 20). In this context, a *zonificación ambiental*, *programas de reasentamientos* and the

recuperación comunitaria de bosques y medio ambiente are mentioned as possible solutions to the problem of human settlements in protected areas (ibid. 20).

In the attempt to establish a democratic environmental protection policy, farmers' organizations, state national park administrations, and international NGOs discuss the territorial conflicts of land use in protected areas at national level (ANZORC et al). However, the dialogue at the *Mesa de Concertación Nacional* (MCN) did not always lead to a solution to the territorial conflicts between peasants and PNN. In 2017, both parties faced each other with two contradictory decrees and environmental protection perspectives in the *Comisión de Seguimiento, Impulso y Verificación a la Implementación* -- CSIVI.

In the public debate, multiple oppositional interests emerge, including those of the peasant communities, companies, speculators, FARC dissidents, BACRIM, NGOs, and state regional and national environmental protection entities, as well as interests of the United States. The different territorial interests of the respective groups and their claims to power over the territories are in the foreground of the debate. The legality behind the various claims to power is questioned.

The peasant communities of southern Meta have a high level of social mobilization and resistance. They demand the realization of the transformation of the post-FARC zones as announced in the *Acuerdo Final* (The Environmental Justice Atlas). On a national scale, the peasant communities demand participatory solutions for the socio-ecological conflicts in protected areas. They demand the implementation of *Parques con campesinos desde un enfoque intercultural*, which reduces territorial tensions and establishes a broad participatory environmental protections; a reorientation of the national parks and a subsequent withdrawal of national park land that already shows a high level of human invention; as well as the establishment of ZRCs and their territorial compatibility with buffer zones of the parks (Jerez). Moreover, the peasantry of the region demands the abolition of new sanctions against "illegal activities" by the state (ANZORC).

Above all, the generally rigid bilateral solution approach of the environmental protection authorities in post-acuerdo is criticized, because it represents only two possibilities for the park population: either the collaboration of restoring the ecosystems or the relocation of the population groups to land outside protected areas (Monsalve).

As mentioned above, the peasantry is by no means exclusively responsible for the transformation of the ecological valuable region. According to various sources, extensive regional land grabbing is carried out by external stakeholders with high capital - speculators, such as businessmen, cattle ranchers, drug dealers or politicians (García). As these power brokers operate in an informal background, they do not actively participate in the public debate, but are nevertheless important actors in the national park territories. The prospect of financial gain or the absence of legal economic equivalent alternatives drives informal activities of non-place-based and place-based actors and thus rejects regional environmental guidelines.

While the present FARC party is committed to peasants' rights, the former FARC guerrillas are held responsible for damaging the ecosystems in which they resided but also for an environmentally friendly territorial management (Carrizosa Umaña). However, in present times FARC dissidents are held responsible for disregarding the guidelines within the national park territories. Thus, an informal land market is reported, which Botero interprets as a "proceso de recolonización armada en La Macarena" (Calle). In this way, the FARC dissidents still have considerable influence on the population, whilst their presence weakens the state's influence and thus the state's land use management. The interests of FARC dissidents and BACRIM are linked to the recovery of territorial control. It can be suggested that this territorial interest is also linked to securing financial sources such as coca cultivation.

Three international NGOs are also taking part in the discussion. Together with the European Union, the FAO is supporting the peace building process and the dissolution of territorial conflicts in protected areas in post-acuerdo (Parques Nacionales Naturales,

Gobernanza). The FAO provides technical support to peasants' delegations in the MCN in order to counteract asymmetric relations in dialogue with state institutions (Lastra Romero 6). In the final agreement between FAO and *Asociación Nacional de Zonas de Reserva Campesina* (ANZORC), these two allies declare the ideal of untouched nature to be harmful and plead for inclusive environmental protection: "Contra esta idea se puede decir que conservar y producir no son dos procesos distintos sino complementarios" (Betancourt Santiago et al. 2). Alongside the FAO, and together with the *Fundación Mario Santo Domingo* and PNN, the WWF and WCS form an alliance for environmental and biodiversity protection. The aim of the alliance is the establishment and the extension of Colombia's present protected areas. The biological value and important ecosystem services are associated with social interest by the WWF [10]. The WCS underlines the importance of realistic and site-specific management plans in response to the current specific situation of the protected territories (WCS Colombia).

In post-acuerdo, the state's environmental protection functionaries mainly represent the guarantee of nature conservation. The environmental protection functionaries defend the national park territories with the general social argumentation of "conservación de los recursos de vida" (PNN, *Acuerdo de voluntades*). The value of nature for society and economy goes beyond the social local benefit (Chavarro Vásquez et al. 35). The functionaries also argue that the ecosystems as well as the environmental functionaries became victims of the conflict and are therefore entitled to reparation (PNN, *Retos del Postacuerdo*). Nevertheless, PNN also acknowledges a social responsibility in addition to its ecological responsibility in post-acuerdo. In order to start or revive the work with the communities in the protected areas, the "restauración" is an instrument that can be used to intervene in the territories. According to PNN, environmental protection should be achieved through dialogue, for example carried out by local, regional, and national MCNs (ibid.). Regarding a policy of social participation in protected areas, the PNN's concept of "parques

con la gente" is subject to strict guidelines (PNN, *Apoyo presupuestario*). Mainly "modelos culturales de profunda relación con la naturaleza practicados por pueblos indígenas, comunidades afrocolombianas y algunas comunidades locales campesinas" are considered important allies for park management (MinAmbiente).

The environmental protection entities demonstrate a clear rejection of the demands of the farming communities. The possibility of recategorizing the protected areas or even withdrawing land from the national park territories for the purpose of returning land to farmers and *Colonos* seems non-negotiable for PNN, as it is unconstitutional (Verdad Abierta, "Tensión por posesión de tierras"). Instead, PNN argues that common regional recognition of the protected areas and their borders should be enforced through "educación ambiental," precision and the visualization of borders ("Piden acompañamiento militar"). The model of parks with people - parks inhabited by farmers - is not considered sustainable. The necessary establishment of state utility services, such as infrastructure, health care, etc., would have an additional negative effect on biodiversity and ecosystems. According to the PNN environmentalists, however, the protected areas should not become the "banco de tierras" of a new agricultural reform in times of post-acuerdo (Verdad Abierta, "Tensión por posesión de tierras"). For this reason, from an environmental protection standpoint, the only conceivable solution for inhabited or "occupied" parks is the relocation of residents to bordering areas outside of the national parks' boundaries. In order to combat illegal activities in the national park territories, the regional population has been controlled with the support of the police authorities since April 2018.

8. Informal economic Activities

„Los municipios que durante décadas han tenido presencia de las Farc [...], son territorios donde la mayor parte de su actividad económica es movida por rentas ilegales, donde los actores armados son quienes regulan y administran el mercado.“ (Ávila)

In southern Meta – the Macarena Region – parallel power structures go hand in hand with informal parallel economic structures, which

have still not been abolished up to the present post-acuerdo. The state's environmental protection and national security policies are therefore limited.

Pares claims that the increasing violence observed in Meta's southern post-FARC zones can be explained by a criminal takeover by various groups (Conflicto, paz y postconflicto - Pares). In addition to agricultural activities that contravene the rules of regional land use management, coca cultivation and illegal mining inside the protected areas are special cases of informal activities. They are directly linked to organized crime and the transnational problem of drug trafficking. The phenomenon of the cultivation of illegal crops in the biodiverse region combines environmental protection interests with national and international security policy. Yet the fight against the cultivation of illegal crops is a sensitive one and presents a major challenge in the Macarena region in post-acuerdo times.

Firstly, the cultivation of illegal crops is a prominent problem: The peace treaty deals with the issue of drugs at a national level and security policy at the international level, as well as at a social and ecological level. The ecological problem of coca cultivation is described in point "4.1.4. Implementación del Programa Nacional Integral de Sustitución de Cultivos de Uso Ilícito en Parques Nacionales Naturales – PNN" (Alto Comisionado para la Paz 115). It states that in order to guarantee the effective control, restoration and protection of the affected areas in the parks, agreements between the parties of conflict should be reached through direct dialogue with the population and without restricting the "bienestar" and "buen vivir" of the communities. Coca cultivation in the protected areas should therefore in theory be combated by "erradicación manual," dialogue, resettlement of the park residents, and new economic alternatives, rather than by the much criticized eradication of illegal crop cultivation by aerial herbicide spraying.

The reality however is somewhat different. In September 2017, the former President Santos declared that the method of forced coca destruction is necessary to achieve coca-free national parks. From the perspective of the farming communities however, this approach

continues to be an affront to the population of the post-FARC region. As all economic activities in the national park system are forbidden, the park residents can hope for neither substitution nor for a compensatory resettlement to lands outside the protected area due to both the lack of land available and the lack of budget of the responsible institutions (Sánchez). Furthermore, parallel power structures pose a problem to the establishment of government programs in the region: Government programs, such as PNIS, make the population cooperating with state regulations once again targets of new and old illegal actors and current regional territorial powers (Vélez and Duque). Thus, in the post-FARC zones, individual social leaders, who stand up for environmental rights or the rights of the peasants, are murdered time and again (Verdad Abierta, "¡No más muertes!"). Riots and the demand for a guarantee of security follow as a consequence (ibid.).

In order to find a sustainable solution to the problem of informal economic activities and lack of security and to safeguard human rights, the population suffering from these problems calls for realistic economic alternatives within the territories and for a new regional environmental protection management based on the concept of "Parques con campesinos."

In the current public debate, FARC dissidents are often singled out as the reason for the unstable security situation and the rise in coca cultivation (McDermott 20). According to Veléz and Duque, the southern Meta FARC dissident group's intention is to organize into a southern block to regain control over the territory and the population as a new-old power and thereby prevent the destruction of the coca fields. This ambition of the FARC dissidents to regain territorial power in southern Meta and thus maintain the established drug routes complicates the consolidation of peace between state and population. The territorial power struggles delay and complicate not only the development of economic alternatives, but also the implementation of an organized regional environmental management policy.

The task of the police authorities, the military, and the special anti-drug unit is not only to take legal actions against prohibited activities,

criminal groups, and the destruction of coca fields, but also to guarantee the safety of threatened social leaders and environmental officials. The Ministry of Defense set itself the ambitious goal of freeing the Colombian national parks from coca cultivation. That is why the regional police authorities often continue to rely on “erradicación manual forzosa” to fight the cultivation of illegal crops within the protected areas, for example in the national park *Sierra de la Macarena*. This form of crop eradication is to be used as a complementary measure to voluntary substitution, resulting in the achievement of ambitious targets. In 2017, 100,000 hectares of coca fields were destroyed, while 2018 saw the destruction of 65,000 coca fields (23,000 under the PNIS and 40,000 through forced destruction) (Presidencia de la República, “Meta de erradicación forzada”). The fight against organized crime and drug trafficking is prioritized above the safeguarding of human rights for the rural population which were negotiated within the peace treaty (EFE).

The prioritization of the war against drugs rather than the safeguarding of human rights can be explained by the considerable international pressure surrounding the former: The pressure at the national level for the fight against coca is intensified by international pressure led by the USA (Majub Avendaño 13). According to Käufer, President Trump criticized the former Colombian president Santo’s course of reconciliation, which has led to another sharp rise in the country’s cocaine exports. In post-acuerdo, the banned crop eradication strategy of aerial herbicide spraying, the frequent re-seeding and a boomerang effect of the PNIS are held responsible for the increase of coca cultivation. This increase of coca in post-acuerdo is the reason for Trump’s call for a return to a hard anti-cocaine course by more drastic military means (Käufer). Consequently, the new Plan Quinquenal 2018-2023 between the USA and Colombia adopts another coca eradication pact, in which the Colombian Ministry of Defense gives the national police authorities an annual coca eradication target of 70,000 hectares (Redacción Judicial).

The state’s environmental protection actors see coca cultivation as a threat to Colombia’s

biological diversity: “Estamos dando una batalla contra la ilegalidad,” said PNN Director Julia Miranda Londoño in early 2018 (Jiménez Morales). Security is not only a problem for local populations. PNN officials throughout the country are directly threatened by illegal groups which make it difficult for PNN to regain access to the national parks, including *Sierra de La Macarena*, *Cordillera de Los Picachos*, and *Tinigua* (Correa). In order to safeguard state environmental protection authorities and to better monitor and control prohibited activities in national park territories, PNN/the Environmental Protection Ministry cooperates with police forces and the Military/Defense Ministry (ibid.). However, the necessary cooperation between environmental authorities, the Public Prosecutor’s Office and the Ministry of Defense are described as insufficient (Rojas Hernández). The Ministry of Defense and the Public Prosecutor’s Office are accused of doing little to hold those responsible for environmental destruction in the various national parks (ibid.).

9. National Parks in Post-acuerdo in southern Meta

The tensions revealed from the public debate and the areas of conflict demonstrate that the southern AMEM region, and thus the national parks *Tinigua*, *Sierra de la Macarena*, and *Cordillera de los Picachos* are not only confronted with the classic ecological need for the protection of ecosystems in post-acuerdo. In other words, as the only regionally established state authority, the responsible environmental functionaries are confronted with the needs of a multi-layered population, the development of statehood, economic perspectives, and political participation. Throughout and across these debates, the national parks are perceived as state spaces which aim to fulfill various roles in relation to these differing and often conflicting needs. Therefore, it is more accurate to speak of role requirements for environmental protection zones.

In the public negotiation to overcome the historical territorial conflicts, a “politicization of the environment” and thus the political and partisan nature of the national park territories

can be extracted. It thereby becomes clear that in the debate, the state environmental protection authorities position themselves differently to the various interest groups and parties of conflict. The environmental protection zones are therefore by no means to be understood as impartial spaces. In the power struggles of the dynamic territories in southern Meta, the environmental protection administration is described as the only local government authority that claims supremacy in the territories. The Colombian *Nature State* is supported and financed by international protection organizations and states. The existence of the Colombian environmental institutions and the national park system is closely linked to the international image of the megadiverse state. In other words, the state's environmental efforts and national parks have a global modernist symbolic power. In times of post-acuerdo, the environmental efforts reach their limits on regional and local level. With the implementation of the land use directives in Meta's national parks, PNN and CORMACARENA defend first and foremost the ecological rights on national and regional level. At the MCN, PNN forms the opposition to the demands of the peasants in the debate on fundamental environmental policy principles regarding *Parques con gente*. As the national park administration authority, PNN becomes a player itself in the regional territorial land use conflicts, instead of being an impartial mediator (Agronegocios e Industria de Alimentos). The environmental protection concept "national park" itself, as well as the associated AMEM, are to be understood as being both political in nature and as a state-organized form of land use. In the context of the state's efforts to exert renewed influence in the post-FARC zone, the national park complex in southern Meta can be understood as a reactivated form of relationship by the state. The state institutions limited territorial influence however reduces the environmental protection authorities' options for action on a regional and local level and thus the ecological protective function of the protected areas.

In addition to the obvious interest in environmental protection within nationally strategically important ecosystems, the

international and highly political fight against drugs also plays a role in the three national parks that are examined here. The liberation of the national parks from coca cultivation is closely linked to international anti-drug policies –especially under pressure on the part of the USA– and the ecological role of the national parks. With the alliance between military and environmental protection in the context of international interests however, the state is once again targeting a part of the peasant population who has been repeatedly criminalized and displaced.

The precarious regional security situation in southern Meta is caused by the population's mistrust of the state, the existence of BACRIM and FARC dissidents and territorial power struggles. There are three regional (environmental) authorities: (1) One on the part of the "place-based-actors," who seek to fill old FARC structures with threats and armed force and who possess allocative regional resources enabling them to promise the populations land and economic prospects; (2) One weak and paralyzed "place-based" environmental authority (CORMACARENA and PNN) which does not provide all-encompassing territorial solutions for regional conflicts and which is partially denied access to the territories (i.e. has few allocative resources); and (3) one state "non-place-based" player (PNN, MinAmbiente and the Colombian state) which possesses authoritative resources but has disappointed the regional population in the past through an exclusionary top-down environmental protection strategy whilst repeatedly failing to keep promises, which therefore does not find broad political backing in regional society. This complex situation paralyzes the establishment of the sovereignty of state environmental protection in the post-FARC region.

It becomes clear that the *ecological* aspect of the territorial relationship type is closely connected with other relationship types within the territories. National parks therefore cannot do justice to the complex reality of the territories in their basic ecological concept. The national parks in Meta are confronted with a considerable social and economic regional crisis of the peasantry. AMEM and the national parks cannot

solve the fundamental historical conflict regarding rights and access to land in their restricted ecological role. The territorial environmental protection instruments are in fact the reason for the place-based actors' limited scope of action. It is precisely the lack of economic prospects caused by the land use restrictions that provide a breeding ground for informal economies with illegal interdependencies which cause uncontrolled deforestation and the pollution of rivers and soils within the protected ecosystems. The state environmental institutions are not in a position to, for example, guarantee the cocaleros economic perspectives and security and thus free them from the sphere of influence of, and dependence on, drug gangs. Instead, PNN is conducting a "fight against illegality" and thus also a fight against the rural population and potential strategic allies themselves (Jiménez Morales). [11]

Although biased, the AMEM paradoxically becomes an active space of negotiation for environmental protection and positive prospects for a better life in post-acuerdo. The national parks in the post-FARC zones are also assigned a social role. In its function as the provider of environmental protection and as an actor negotiating between environmental protection and social needs, PNN is therefore interpreted as state service provider (Agronegocios e Industria de Alimentos). However, due to ecological goals, international anti-drug policy interests, the lack of complementary projects, resources, and implementation of the peace agreement, the social role requirements for the protected areas cannot be fulfilled in a satisfactory manner. While it is true that the environmental protection authorities are attempting to do justice to Colombia's social diversity through the selected integration of some park inhabitants, a large part of the population nevertheless remains excluded (Ojeda 358). This suggests a division of the regional population, which is split between AMEM allies and opponents of the state's land use restrictions with regards to environmental protection.

At a regional level, the national parks are "paper parks" in many places (Leal 8). They are thus currently exerting more influence at the national level than at regional and local levels. However,

it is interesting that in the public debate, the national parks in southern Meta are becoming an instrument for the state's exercise of power guided by the media through environmental and security policy agendas. Consequently, and in the context of claims of power, the environmental protection instrument *national park* in southern Meta can be interpreted as a strategic spatial image consciously produced by the state.

Conclusion

The public debate reflects the varying roles that the three national parks *Cordillera de los Picachos*, *Tinigua*, and *Sierra de la Macarena* are expected to play in post-acuerdo. It is clear that the current environmental management plays a controversial role in the debate on peacebuilding in the southern Meta region. Interest and spatial images diverge on different scales and levels. On the national level, national parks lend prestige to the Colombian *Nature State* with regard to the global environmental crisis. The international importance and thus influence of the national parks mean that these parks themselves become an instrument of political power.

This analysis demonstrates that the regional national park administration in southern Meta must not only meet demands to fulfill the traditional ecological function of the national parks but must also make a contribution to overcome historical conflicts in the region (PNN, *Retos del Postacuerdo*). Ambivalent role requirements, such as the participatory, economic role of regional environmental management, collide with an ecological protective function and restrictive use of national park territories and their buffer zones. The regional environmental protection authorities are both co-founders of these conflicts and yet also lack the necessary resources to provide sufficient economic and social solutions for ongoing regional land conflicts. In addition, the national park administration holds an oppositional view to the majority of place-based actors. Due to their partisan nature, the national park territories studied in this paper cannot be interpreted as national peace parks.

Without social peace, there can be no ecological peace. A future for national parks

can only be guaranteed if the local population can benefit from these parks (Germán Andrade qtd. in Rojas Hernández). The link in post-acuerdo between various social, cultural, political, economic relationships and interests, and the environmental protection territories requires an appropriate response from the Colombian *Nature State*. Environmental authorities already seem to have understood that the multidimensional territorial chaos of the post-FARC zones cannot be solved from a unilateral ecological perspective. The existence of the national parks in southern Meta offers the possibility of finding sustainable solutions for an ongoing conflict between the population and territorial environmental protection concepts. However, the task of balancing social and ecological needs in the region goes far beyond the competence and authority of the current Colombian environmental protection institutions. The multidimensional pacification of the former FARC territories and the establishment of a new state order requires close cooperation between national environmental authorities, CAR, the Ministries of Agriculture, Infrastructure, Justice and Defense, the Agencia Nacional de Licencias Ambientales (ANLA), and, last but not least, the population.

The territorial conflicts in Meta illustrate the complications of the *national park* as a territorial environmental protection instrument and demonstrate the need to consider environmental protection within the context of the consequences of the global economic system. Taking these 'glocal' entanglements into account would help inspire new and more successful future alternatives to the top-down and heavily conflicted implementation of national park management which has been witnessed so far. These alternatives should ideally involve areas free of extractivism, in which social and ecological needs are balanced by the use of regional traditional economies under site-specific and autonomous conditions. This involves the imperative to learn from environmental history and misguided global interpretations of the relationship between man and nature which, according to Radkau (18), demonstrates that "(t)he balance between man and the environment that has developed over many generations is

disturbed by external influences: by invasions and by the loss of autonomy." [12]

Endnotes

[1] For the reason of a not yet real existing peace in Colombia, the term *post-acuerdo* is used instead of *post-conflict*. See, for example, Jiménez Patiño 2016.

[2] The study of the role of national parks in the southern Meta is based on the analysis of the public debate in the post-acuerdo phase between 2016 and the end of the Santos government in mid-2018. See my complete study: *Die Rolle von Nationalparks im Post-acuerdo im südlichen Meta/Kolumbien - Eine konflikt- und akteursorientierte Analyse der öffentlichen Debatte*. Bielefeld University, 2019.

[3] My translation, original text: „Der kolumbianische *Staat* stellt eine Summe „fragmentierter“ Räume dar, die durch parallele Strukturen zwischen lokalen oder segmentären Gewalten gekennzeichnet sind.“

[4] According to World Bank data, Colombia's GINI coefficient is 50.8 in 2016 and 58.7 in 2000.

[5] The World Conservation Union (IUCN) has listed Colombia in its Red List of Endangered Ecosystems since 2014, as almost half of the ecosystems studied have been classified as endangered by human activity.

[6] My translation, original text: Constitución Política de Colombia (1991), Artículo 72. See, <http://www.constitucioncolombia.com/titulo-2/capitulo-2/articulo-72>.

[7] See IDEAM 2018.

[8] My translation, original text: „Seit 50 Jahren leidet das Gebiet unter spontaner, ungeordneter Kolonialisierung und ist zudem Sitz illegaler bewaffneter Gruppen wie der FARC, Paramilitärs und Banden von Rauschgifthändlern.“

[9] See IDEAM 2018.

[10] See WWF 2018.

[11] My translation, original text: “‘Estamos dando una batalla contra la ilegalidad,’ enfatizó la funcionaria, quien, no obstante, reconoció que esos actores ilegales han amenazado a los guardabosques de los 17 parques, como lo denunció el fin de semana el ministro de Ambiente, Luis Gilberto Murillo.”

[12] My translation.

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both ecological and social terms, and has been shaped by a complex social-ecological history and related conflicts. Against this backdrop, the intention of her work is to investigate solutions to find a balance between ecological and social peace.

Author's biography

Yvonne Laudien graduated from Bielefeld University with a BA in Linguistics and Romanic Cultures as well as an MA in InterAmerican Studies. Because of journalistic activities, her fields of interest include critical perspectives on global social phenomena in general and "the fourth state" in particular. The motivation for her research focus on Colombia is two-fold: First, the increasing climate crisis and biodiversity-loss are urgent global problems, which have to be solved. Second, along with her own local experience, Colombia is a diverse country, in