

## Human-animal relations in El Impenetrable National Park, an area of confluence of environmental conservation, tourism and livestock

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**Abstract:** Since 2011, in the area currently known as *El Impenetrable* National Park (Chaco, Argentina), certain animals were "protected" and became part of the attractions offered to tourists. This article aims to describe and analyze the relationships between humans and animals in the mentioned area, where environmental conservation and tourism converge with family livestock production. It is an ethnographic research carried out between 2021 and 2023 that encourages us to think about ways to reconcile conservation with human presence in the environment. The physical space of the park underwent changes linked to the productive activities' humans carried out there. The environmental conservation promoted seeks to eradicate the harmful hunting of "wild animals". Although such animal condition (wild) reflects separation between humans and nature, it is relative (it does not apply to all humans or to all animals) and permeable (through the physical movement of animals and humans across park borders and through the similar treatment that locals give to animals). Finally, the promotion of experiences with animals within the park prioritizes the presence of some to the detriment of others. The criteria of animal differentiation reveal a territorial and animal strategy aimed at transforming sources of income generation.

**Keywords:** Chaco, tourism, hunting, *La Fidelidad*, Parque Nacional *El Impenetrable*, wild.

### 1. Introduction

In Argentina, the creation of Areas Naturales Protegidas [Natural Protected Areas] began at the end of the nineteenth century and aimed at: 1) making effective the presence of the state in regions marginal to the agricultural and livestock model and 2) promoting development through settlement and tourism (Ferrero and Arach, 2019). Thus, with the conservation of nature, two problems were revealed:

- 1) borders between humans and nature were consolidated, "establishing the difficulty of their coexistence, and an ontological distinction that not only separates, but also forges in the territory distinctions of the category of nature versus society (translation by the author of this article)", and
- 2) local populations were excluded, they "became threats to nature and the cause of biodiversity loss" (translation by the author of this article) (Ferrero and Arach, 2019: 22-23).

This article is based on those problems. It aims to describe and analyze the relationships between humans and animals in Parque Nacional *El Impenetrable* [*El Impenetrable* National Park] (PNEI), an area of confluence of promotion of environmental conservation and of tourism and family livestock production. Its objectives are: 1) to analyze the relationships between conservation and hunting; 2) to study the measures taken by locals to remedy puma attacks on their livestock and 3) to review the impact of tourism on animal management.

### 2. Literature review "Humans stand a part or stand apart?"

The border between humans and nature that Ferrero and Arach (2019) talk about goes back to Aristotle and Christianity. The philosopher takes the term *physis* used in The Odyssey<sup>1</sup> to refer to the

<sup>1</sup> The Odyssey: written by Homer, it narrates the return of Ulysses to Ithaca, after the Trojan War.

particular “nature” that produces the development of a plant and constructs a “system of nature in which species are disconnected from their particular habitats and stripped of the symbolic meanings associated with them, so as to exist only as complex organs and functions inserted in a framework of coordinates that encompass the whole of the known world” (translation by the author of this article) ([Descola, 2012: 114](#)). In the Middle Ages, this understanding of beings combined with Christianity, and so humans came to be thought of as external and superior to nature ([Descola, 2012](#)). This dualism between humans and nature placed the animal within nature and the human transcending it ([Ingold 2000](#)). That is, humans have since been conceived as creatures divided between a physical condition of animality (biological taxon: *homo sapiens*) and a moral condition (people with minds) ([Ingold, 1994, 2000](#)).

Conservation promoted by environmental protection agencies is based on the separation between humans and nature ([Ingold, 2000](#)). This is how the problem raised by Ferrero and Arach (2019) is understood: the creation of protected natural areas often leads to the exclusion of local populations who, despite having lived in the environments in question for generations, are perceived as threats to nature. Thus, the supposed separation implies the following: protection requires separation, that is, humans separated from nature.

In contrast to what has been pointed out so far, Ingold ([2000](#)) draws attention to the understanding of conservation based on the direct commitment of humans to the environment. For the Cree hunters of northeastern Canada, the author says, animals have an agency that leads them to give themselves to them, as long as humans are careful and prudent in the use of resources and as long as they avoid waste. In this case, the relationship between humans and animals is one of trust: “To trust someone is to act with that person in mind, in the hope and expectation that she will do likewise – responding in ways favourable to you – so long as you do nothing to curb her autonomy to act otherwise. Although you depend on a favourable response, that response comes entirely on the initiative and volition of the other party. Any attempt to impose a response, to lay down conditions or obligations that the other is bound to follow, would represent a betrayal of trust and a negation of the relationship.” ([Ingold, 2000: 69-70](#)).

In the framework of relationships of trust, conservation is compatible with human participation because each being is both autonomous and dependent on others. In this way, hunting in itself is not necessarily contrary to conservation.

In his study of hunting in England and Spain, social anthropologist Gary Marvin ([2010](#)) distinguishes three types of hunting: utilitarian (aimed at obtaining meat to consume), sporting (aimed at demonstrating human superiority over the animal) and recreational (the hunter seeks to experience being part of nature). It likens the hunting of the Cree ([Ingold, 2000](#)) to recreational hunting. Following this author, Sordi ([2020](#)), who studied wild boar hunting in Brazil, distinguishes sport and defensive hunting. The latter is promoted by conservation agencies to limit the presence of wild boars due to their negative effect on the environment ([Sordi, 2020](#)). To do this, they recruit sheep producers, who otherwise embark on bloody sport hunts driven by their hatred of livestock predators ([Sordi, 2020](#)). Similarly, also in Brazil, former Pantanal hunters are recruited by conservation agencies to capture jaguars to be identified with collars in the framework of scientific studies ([Susekind, 2017](#)).

Note in those studies the attempts to reconcile hunting, knowledge associated with environmental conservation and management of small livestock (in the case of sheep production).

### **3. Study area**

One of the “access portals” to *El Impenetrable* National Park is located in Paraje La Armonía (General Güemes Department, province of Chaco, Argentina)<sup>2</sup> (Figure 1). A camp of scientists and members of

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<sup>2</sup> Paraje La Armonía is located at about 60 kilometers from Miraflores and approximately 390 kilometers from Resistencia, capital of the province of Chaco.

non-governmental organizations was set up there in 2011, which has led to the creation of the PNEI in 2014 (Tiddi et al., 2014).



Figure 1. Location of Paraje La Armonía. Source: adapted from Tiddi et al., 2014.

In Paraje La Armonía live 14 creole families whose members, to a large extent and in relation to governmental and non-governmental organizations, promote tourism in the area (Barrios, Monsalvo and Pérez, 2021). Since the PNEI was formed, they have attended training that prepared them to receive tourists, a completely new activity in the area. They learned how to prepare and decorate the physical space to offer gastronomic services and to use visual and auditory support material during guided tours. They studied about “wild” animals in the area and listened to teachers discourage their hunting. In relation to the latter, the protection of the puma (*Puma concolor*) stresses the production of small livestock, an activity to which several of the locals have been dedicated since before the formation of the park. Thus, the production of goats (*Capra aegagrus hircus*), intended both for family and tourists’ consumption, suffers the growing onslaught of felines.

#### 4. Methods of research

This article is part of a research initiated in 2012, in the General Güemes Department (Chaco Province, Argentina); on commodification processes involving small-scale local producers, NGOs, state agencies and companies.

It is an ethnographic research (Guber, 2005, 2016) that comprised the development of in-depth interviews and observations carried out between 2021 and 2023. Interviews conducted in Paraje La Armonía with an ex-hunter, four locals (three men and one woman) and an employee of an NGO working in the area are analyzed. In addition, an interview conducted in Mirafloros with a civil servant of the state agency Parques Nacionales<sup>3</sup> [National Parks] is analyzed. The participants are coded with fake names and, in brackets, *h.* for ex-hunter, *l.* for locals, *ngo* for employee of the NGO and *pn* for the civil servant of Parques Nacionales. Prior to the interview, all participants were informed of the ongoing research. The recording was made in writing, with images and through audio files. The information was systematized and consolidated in a single document. The classification proceeded in

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.argentina.gob.ar/interior/parquesnacionales>

line with bibliographic and advertising material (prepared by organizations that promote tourism in the area) review.

## **5. Results and discussions**

### **5.1 Pumas YES, goats NO**

In April 2023, on the road from Misión Nueva Pompeya to Miraflores (55 kilometers of distance, approximately, between these towns), passing through PNEI, the owner and driver of the vehicle in which I traveled, Pedro (h.), said that he used to participate in hunting expeditions in the area, formerly known as *La Fidelidad* ranch. He told the following:

“Several people were traveling from Tres Isletas to *La Fidelidad* (approximately 100 kilometers separate the towns). They set up tents for several days, ‘hunting for the sake of hunting’. On one occasion, while sailing along the Bermejo River in a small boat, a hunter shot in the direction of the head of a caiman (*Caiman latirostris chacoensis*). The animal managed to escape, although wounded. A new shot hit another reptile, killing it. The hunters then detached the animal’s tail with a knife and abandoned the rest of the body without the slightest care. ‘All that was very harmful’.

The “hunting for the sake of hunting”, with the waste generated, contrasts strikingly with the hunt of the Cree described by Tim Ingold (2000). In this context, the separation between humans and nature is conducive to conservation insofar as the relationship between humans and animals in the hunt of “hunting for the sake of hunting” is not like hunting for the Cree. In other words, the separation or participation of humans in conservation is linked to the usual relationships between humans and animals in hunting. If hunting in the area had been like that practiced by the Cree in Canada, would an environmental conservation scheme based on the separation between human and nature have made sense?

Since 1890, the 128,000 hectares located between the Teuco-Bermejo and Bermejito rivers, which currently belong to the PNEI, were part of *La Fidelidad* ranch whose history dates back to the attempts to navigate the Bermejito River. Since 1780, there have been expeditions, many of which failed, that is, the ships did not reach their destination, either because of attacks by indigenous people or because they sank (Gordillo, 2015, 2018). Natalio Roldán navigated the river on numerous occasions, with varying degrees of success, employing indigenous people in canalization and maintenance works, until in 1875 the torrent dried up (it began to run along the Teuco-Bermejo River) making navigation impossible (Jacob, 1997, Gordillo, 2015). For this work, Roldán was awarded the title of ownership of the 250,000 hectares of *La Fidelidad* that he soon lost in the hands of Villanueva who, in turn, between 1910 and 1912, sold to Bunge y Born company (Jacob, 1997, Gobelli, 1913) (Figure 2).



*Figure 2. Old house of *La Fidelidad* ranch, April 2023. Photo by author.*

The company used the property for cattle breeding with some success until the end of 1950 when it put up for sale (Jacob, 1997). Some reasons that led to this decision were: environmental degradation, the invasion of the vinal (*Prosopis ruscifolia*) and the ineffective modality of livestock exploitation (Jacob n.d.). This was largely based on the hunting of feral cows by *corredores*<sup>4</sup> [runners] (Jacob, 1997) (Figure 3). In 1974 it was acquired by the Roseo brothers who gave continuity to the livestock exploitation and began to exploit the wood until the death of Manuel Roseo in 2011 (Jacob, 1997, Tiddi et al., 2014). At that time, environmental organizations and the Parques Nacionales [National Parks] proposed the creation of a National Park, which took place in 2014 in the Chaco portion occupied by *La Fidelidad* (Barrios, Monsalvo and Pérez, 2021, Quevedo and Giordano, 2021, Ley [Law] 26.996 and Tiddi et al., 2014).



Figure 3. Villager from Las Hacheras (located at approximate 27 kilometres from Paraje La Armonía) demonstrates how a *corredor* proceeds to capture cows. Source: adapted from *El Corredor y los Copleros v c*<sup>5</sup>

One of the “access portals” to the former *La Fidelidad*, currently PNEI is located in Paraje La Armonía. Over time, several locals participated in training to become tour guides. Others were trained to offer gastronomic services. Currently a few alternate tourist activities with small livestock breeding (for example, goats, pigs).

For instance, Ricardo (l.) offers visitors a guided tour around the vicinity of the Bermejito River and breeds goats that he uses either for self-consumption or for sale. He complains about pumas that are “harmful” because they periodically attack and eat the goats he raises. He was told in one of those trainings that pumas should not be killed. He wonders: “How am I not going to kill [the puma], how am I going to buy meat?” If the puma eats his goats, Ricardo will have no choice but to buy meat, but how will he get money to do it? He lamented: “in the end I raise goats to feed the puma.”

Emilio (l.), who with his wife alternates the offer of tourist services (gastronomy and accommodation) with the breeding of pigs, said: “[They tell us that] we don't have to kill the

<sup>4</sup> A task that was made difficult because of the expansion of the vinal, which complicated circulation on horseback (Jacob, 1997).

<sup>5</sup> The audiovisual was made by the Institute of Culture of the Province of Chaco within the framework of the Community Days on Memory and Heritage. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ceXgfpdJyKI>

puma, if [the puma] eats the pig, who loses, who pays me, if the guy [the puma] is hurting me, what am I going to subsist on?"

Both Ricardo (l.) and Emilio (l.) clearly stated the following: if the puma eats the goat/pig, what will they eat? While, from the point of view of conservation agencies that promote tourism, the puma should not be hunted, from the point of view of livestock producers who raise animals for the sustenance of families, the puma "is harmful", that is, it causes losses that would outweigh the benefits, in economic terms, linked to tourism in the area.

By annihilating the feline, the producers of goats and pigs in Paraje La Armonía protect their animals. This is an action also detected by Micaela Camino et al. (2018) and Verónica Quiroga et al. (2016) in other parts of Chaco. They found that the creoles hunt pumas, described as bad, ungrateful and miserable, in retaliation for the losses of livestock (goats, pigs, etc.). In particular, goat hunting is frequently carried out by female pumas when they teach their young to hunt (Quiroga et al., 2016). Similarly, by wiping out wild boar, sheep farmers in Brazil defend their lambs (Sordi, 2020, Sordi and Lewgoy, 2017). Killing takes the form of exemplary punishment as it aims to demotivate similar behaviors in animals of the same species (Sordi, 2020). Following Luciano Bornholdt (2010), Cetano Sordi (2020) states that an analogy is established between savagery and betrayal that replicates towards the animal world logics of trust and distrust experienced by employers and employees.

It is interesting that death as an exemplary punishment is also applied to sheepdogs and sheep in Brazil and Argentina respectively (Pazzafari, 2018, Sordi, 2020, Sordi and Lewgoy, 2017). The former are slaughtered when they attack the flock they are supposed to protect (Sordi, 2020, Sordi and Lewgoy, 2017). The latter are sacrificed when they become *chúcaros*, that is, when "they do not conform to the orders of the shepherds in the hills and need greater control" (Pazzafari, 2018: 174). For their part, in Paraje La Armonía the locals describe chickens and pigs that do not behave as they should as *mañeros*.

Emilio (l.) and Virginia (l.) pointed out that a characteristic behavior of a hen that has become *mañera* is that it stings and eats the egg of others of the same species or even, and this is the last straw, it stings and eats its own eggs. A pig becomes *mañero*, for example, when it gets used to eating meat, perhaps found among the family leftovers. Then the animal looks for meat and can even kill to get it. With sadness Virginia remembered that time when one of her pigs devoured a calf, which had been easy prey because it was wounded.

As indicated by Sordi (2020), Caetano Sordi and Bernardo Lewgoy (2017) and Francisco Pazzafari (2018) for wild boars, sheepdogs and sheep, *mañero* hens and pigs must be slaughtered so that other animals of the same species do not learn to behave in the same way. In the case of pumas, the effectiveness of exemplary punishment should be investigated, as Quiroga et al., (2016) report that, despite the great danger that felines run from being hunted by producers, they continue to look for their prey in livestock establishments.

Exemplary punishment is a way to reduce the repetition of unwanted animal behaviors. Another way to achieve this is by preventing the event that leads to that instance.

David (l.) "from Paraje La Armonía, who alternates tourist services (tourist guide and gastronomic services) with the raising of goats; pointed out that a pig attacks a goat when, on the one hand, the latter is in a vulnerable situation (for example, a female about to give birth) and, on the other hand, when weather conditions are extreme (for example, drought). So, if the pig eats the goat, it will be as a result of the negligence of the producer in the management of the cattle". David explained that in times of drought the animals desperately look for water and food, knowing this, the producer should be careful to keep vulnerable goats away from pigs.

Negligence such as the mentioned in animal farm management, is evidenced in the controversy between producers and veterinarians in Brazil (Sordi, 2020). Unlike sheep producers, who directly blame wild boars for the reduction in lamb numbers, veterinarians downplay their role, instead, they argue that the deaths would be caused by negligence in livestock management (Sordi, 2020).

Returning to the relationship between pumas and producers of goats, pigs, etc. in Chaco, Camino et al. (2018) and Quiroga et al. (2016) state that it would improve with the strengthening of local knowledge regarding livestock management (e.g., the use of shepherd dogs and the confinement of cattle at night). It also involves the implementation of educational programs that point out the ecological role of the puma, the granting of economic compensation for losses suffered by ranchers, and the improvement of the quality of life of producers (Camino et al, 2018, Quiroga et al., 2016). In this regard, when their ability to earn sustenance improves, puma hunting decreases (Camino et al., 2018).

## 5.2 From hunters to tourists

The hunting of the puma would be like that of wild boars described by Sordi (2020) and Sordi and Lewgoy (2017), insofar as it is carried out in retaliation for the damage that producers perceive the felines cause them. This type of hunting, together with that of the “hunting for the sake of hunting” of the time of the *La Fidelidad* ranch, described in the previous section, is the one that conservation agencies seek to eradicate from the PNEI.

“On August 21, 2021, I went to the facilities of an NGO that was working in the area. Maximiliano (ngo) received me kindly, showed me the surroundings, including the banks of the Bermejito River. From there I noticed the tents, with a beautiful view of the river, in which tourists were staying. Maximiliano commented that visitors arrive hoping to see animals, although they are not always ‘lucky’ enough to see them. In this regard, he took out his cell phone and showed me a video, recently filmed by himself, in which the calf of a tapir (*Tapirus terrestris*) was seen. The animal was sleeping under a wooden platform, supporting one of the three glamping tents”.

The tapir, previously hunted for its flesh and leather, now slept peacefully near humans who could photograph it. Thus, the shot of the gun transformed into the shot of the camera. At the same time, the relationship between humans and (certain) animals was transformed: the tapir went from being hunted to being photographed; humans turned from hunters to tourists. As a result, wild animals show confidence and appear easily to humans (Figure 4).



Figure 4: A man and a tapir observe each other. Source: adapted from Tiddi et al. (2014).

In the publicitary material entitled “Parque Nacional El Impenetrable. Participación y Aportes para su Creación” [The Impenetrable National Park. Participation and Contributions for its Creation], edited by The Conservation Land Trust Argentina and published in 2014, reads as follows:

“Within this scenario of ecotourism and productive reconversion, one of the main attractions – possibly the most important – will be to guarantee the visitor the sighting of wild animals. It is proven that the elusive behavior of the fauna is the product of hunting and the dogs that accompany man when he travels the area; On the contrary, if it is not pursued, the fauna quickly becomes accustomed to human presence and even the most timid animals are encouraged to stay close to people or their vehicles, if a minimum distance is respected and no sudden or intimidating movements are made” (translation by the author) (Tiddi et al., 2014: 49).

Thus, the change in human behaviors leads to changes in the behaviors of animals. However, some wild animals do not suffer the same fate as the tapir.

On September 14, 2022, Evaristo (pn) explained that

“employees from Parques Nacionales developed cages to capture alligators in the vicinity of the PNEI. These were offered as prey to the recently born jaguar cubs in the place”.

How does this human behavior affect animals? Does it inspire confidence or fear? We don't know. However, we can analyze human behavior in the light of the contrast that Ingold (2000) establishes between hunting and herding as ways of relating to animals.

While in both cases humans depend on the animals they raise or hunt, grazing and hunting differ in the ability attributed to animals to correspond to human behavior (Ingold, 2000). While the human-animal relationship that is manifested in the hunt carried out by the Cree is based on trust, which implies autonomy and dependence; the human-animal relationship revealed with pastoralism is based on domination, that is, human control over animal life and death.

Decisions about animals allowed and not allowed in the PNEI, for example, tapir allowed, cow not allowed; puma allowed, goat not allowed, and even the alligator can be hunted to feed the jaguar, bring human behavior closer to that of those shepherds. In this context is understood the intention to turn the area into “a natural ‘farm’ for wild animal husbandry” stated in the publicity material of the PNEI ( ). What makes this farm “natural”? how is it different from the management of livestock (e.g., cows, goats, pigs)?

## 6. Conclusion

The physical space currently known as *El Impenetrable* National Park underwent changes linked to the productive activities carried out there. From approximately 1910 to 2011, the human owners of the territory took advantage of it for cattle and forestry and the development of hunting expeditions. It was a time when cows, tapirs and alligators lived together in the area and humans were interested in keeping the species' reproductive capacity in order to secure food, goods and entertainment.

With the change of owners due to the setting up of the National Park, livestock, forestry and hunting activities within the park were suspended. The tapir and puma became protected animals and cows and goats were banned to enter the “conservation area.” Thus, the locals of Paraje La Armonía began to add tourist services to the production of small livestock.

The analysis of the relationship between conservation and hunting shows that the hunting sought to be eradicated from the PNEI is not based on trust and careful and prudent use of resources made by humans. Instead, it is a harmful hunt, which produces fear in animals and unnecessary waste.

The notion of “wild animal” promoted by conservation reflects the separation between nature and human, traced since Aristotle. It conceives the animal as a self-contained being, detached from the environment, as if it were in itself, disconnected from the breeding environment. This is clearly evident with the conception of the park as “a natural ‘farm’ for wild animal husbandry”, that is, the animals are

wild and at the same time are raised in human establishments such as farms. However, a) the separation is not absolute but relative and b) it permeabilizes in multiples occasions.

Separation between humans and wild animals is relative because, on the one hand, certain humans can access while others cannot, for example, tourists are welcome while hunters are barred from access. On the other hand, certain animals can access while others cannot, for example, the puma can access freely while the presence of goats and cows is unwanted.

Separation is permeable, on the one hand, by the circulation of humans and animals between internal and external areas of the park. Although there are "access portals" to PNEI, since there are no physical boundaries (for example, barbed wire or walls), humans on foot and animals can move through the space with relative ease. On the other hand, because of the similar treatment that the locals give to wild and domestic animals. Both with exemplary punishment and with livestock management strategies, the locals reveal a way of treating the puma as if it were a goat or a pig.

Finally, the intention of promoting experiences with animals within the park prioritizes the presence of some, for example, pumas and tapirs, to the detriment of others, for example, goats and cows. It is a territorial and animal management strategy that aspires to transform the sources of income generation of the locals. In this way, the new economic and labor opportunities linked to tourism place felines in the sight of the camera instead of on the sight of the gun.

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