Nature enclosures: historic peasants versus public and private conservation units of the Paraguay River in the Pantanal wetlands of western Brazil

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Consuming “nature” and ethnic-class cleansing

The Pantanal of western Brazil is the largest wetlands complex in the world and is of such importance that the World Wildlife Fund considers it to be one its thirty-five global priority areas (WWF, 2016). The biome is spectacularly beautiful and presents exuberant flora and fauna which attract foreign and domestic tourists and in recent decades has been the object of GO and NGO environmental agencies. Based on field research undertaken in the swampliest low-lying part of the Pantanal in 2015 the plight of the historic fisher-farmers of the Paraguay River is treated. The local people are classic riverine peasants who are mixed descendents of Amerindians and settlers from other...
parts of Brazil, Bolivia and Paraguay, who have lived in the wetlands for generations and
are now being forced to leave areas deemed important for full nature conservation.

Two theoretical perspectives are used to interpret the case study:

1. global critical political ecology, which denounces carbon colonialism involved in neo-liberal
   trade-off agreements permitting continued pollution in exchange for conservation projects
   in less developed countries as well as the green washing of unsustainable and socially
   inequitable activities such as tourism (Hoefle, 2013a, 2016; Forsyth, 2003; Peet et al., 2011;
   Singer, 2015; Taylor, 2015)

2. radical environmental history, which questions the intentions of upper-class Western
   environmentalists whose dualistic vision of society/culture separated from an essentialised
   Nature causes the removal of the rural poor from conservation units, which once duly
   cleansed of this offending visual pollution are then consumed in the form of eco-tourism
   benefiting wealthy individuals from metropolitan areas (Adams and Mulligan, 2003; Dowie,
   2009; Jacoby, 2014 [2001]).

In 2015 field work was undertaken along the Paraguay River in the part between the city
of Corumbá and the state boundary with Mato Grosso, which was part of broader, long-
term research on Pantanal ranching done in cooperation with researchers from local
universities since 2002 (Figure 1). The research team interviewed eighteen fish-farmers
(in a universe of 111) and the last remaining small rancher and medium rancher. In
addition, the manager and four workers on one of the three private ranch-nature
reserves were interviewed as well as the caretaker of a former ranch which is now a
fishing camp. The field work ended with participation in the public hearing which
determined the fate of the local fisher-farmers.

Figure 1. Private and public conservations units in the Pantanal.

The Pantanal wetlands

The Pantanal is an important nature area in Brazil located in a depression surrounded by mountains and plateaus. It occupies an area of 192,600 km$^2$ on the border between Brazil, Paraguay and Bolivia, of which 150,000 km$^2$ are located in Brazil. The depression is a Quaternary sedimentary basin located within the Upper Paraguay River Basin. The Pantanal has a semi-humid tropical climate with well defined monsoon seasons. During the rainy season between October and March, large quantities of water pour off the Brazilian Central Plateau into the Pantanal depression and form alluvial fans subject to extensive flooding. The Paraguay River overspills up to twenty kilometres from its margins, invades low-laying land, blocks the outflow of tributaries and so increases the area flooded (Assine, 2004).

According to how much land goes under water during the wet season local people identify three general landscapes: low Pantanal, high Pantanal and plateau. Seasonally flooded prairie and permanent lakes and rivers are found in the low Pantanal, sedimentary prairie with limited flooding is encountered in the high Pantanal and savannah on the surrounding plateaus and forest in the mountains dominate terrain above the Pantanal flood plain.

Cattle raising was introduced during the colonial period in order to exploit the lush native pasture which appears seasonally on the floodplain. The Pantanal was only effectively colonised in the 19th Century by ranchers who arrived from the South-east, set up enormous estates and intermarried forming clans which spread out over the countryside (Sodré, 1941). To work the ranches peons of Amerindian and mestizo origin were recruited from both sides of the border with Bolivia and Paraguay. The remaining Amerindians who insisted on hunting cattle like any other animal of the chase were confined to reservations located outside the Pantanal, which became slums in the countryside where alcoholism and suicide rates reached alarming levels (Oliveira, 1976).

The Pantanal has always been sparsely populated and this has intensified in recent decades with population leaving the countryside to live in regional cities. Corumbá is the most important city of the Pantanal and had an urban population of 93,452 inhabitants in 2010. The part of the Pantanal treated here is located in this municipality which in 2010 only had another 10,251 inhabitants spread over an area of 64,931 km$^2$ with a population density of 0.6 inhabitants per km$^2$ (IBGE, 2010). Many of the people who left the countryside were drawn to better educational and health services available in the city but employment opportunity was limited given the depressed state of the local economy which is a shadow of its glorious past when it was the port through which salted beef exports went to Argentina. During the course of the 20th Century roadways and highways connecting the Pantanal to eastern Brazil progressively got closer and cattle were driven to rail and road heads from where they were taken to processing plants for fresh and canned beef for the expanding markets of the industrial cities of South-east Brazil (Pereira, 1949; Sousa, 1949). Salted beef no longer went to the River Plate countries located downstream and Corumbá turned into a depressed backwater city.

Today the economy of Corumbá is based on providing regional social services, nature tourism and legal and illegal transactions across the border with the Bolivian city of Puerto Suárez, the only significant Bolivian port on the Paraguay River. However, not
even free-port transactions are important like they are in Brazilian cities located further downriver on the Paraguay border. Corumbá is a four to five hour drive from the booming state capital of Campo Grande which is too far to be convenient so that commercial establishments attending to Brazilian customers located just across the Bolivian border in Puerto Suárez are of modest dimensions.

9 A climatic event in the early 1970s further depressed the economy of Corumbá. Two successive years of abnormally high rainfall clogged the outflow of water and changed the course of alluvial fans so that most of the municipality remained permanently flooded after the event. The road from Corumbá to Cuiabá, the state capital of Mato Grosso, never came out of the water and was abandoned. The traditional large ranches went bankrupt and the peon workers lost their jobs. Those who remained in the countryside squatted on land located in public domain along river embankments and mixed with the historic peasants treated in this study. This area became the swamiest part of the Pantanal and is spectacularly beautiful from the tourist point of view but historic activities languished (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Low Panantal in north Corumbá municipality.

Source: Field research (2015)

Conflict between peasants and conservation units

10 Riverine peasants have always moved up and down the rivers according to annual variation in fishing conditions and channel movements but this has been curtailed by the conservation units. In 1981 an important federal national park for the Pantanal biome was set up in Mato Grosso state, just north of the study area and peasants came under pressure to cease fishing in the park and in the buffer areas located around it. At the same time, enormous areas of land on the western and eastern sides of the Paraguay River on the Mato Grosso do Sul side of the state boundary have been purchased by wealthy investors of urban origin in order to set up hobby ranches, fishing camps or
merely to engage in land speculation masquerading as private conservation units. They take advantage of neo-liberal conservation legislation introduced in the 1990s which encouraged the private sector to establish conservation units. An important mining corporation also bought land as a nature reserve to offset environmental degradation caused in other parts of the region. The alleged purpose of the reserve was conservation but it is located in similar mountainous terrain to that which yielded enormous amounts of iron ore near Corumbá. Public and private conservation reserves straddling the state line between Mato Grosso and Mato Grosso do Sul now occupy 3,364,131 hectares. As the squatters could become involved in land ownership disputes with the new owners the peasants have been removed pre-emptively and this set the stage for the class-action suit treated here.

Conservation officials are trained biologists who hold the erroneous view that peasants deplete stocks because they sell fish and forbid their presence in the park and only tolerate their presence in buffer area if fishing is limited to subsistence needs. In fact, our research showed that the peasants fish on a semi-subsistence basis which includes selling small amounts of fish in order to meet basic needs which they do not produce themselves. Of the interviewed independent fisher-farmers, 50% do not sell fish at all and only 35% of all fish caught is sold. Produce from all other cropping and raising pigs and chickens are almost exclusively for self-provisioning. This is squarely within the “semi-subsistence” category in Symon’s 1972 classification of degrees of market orientation, i.e. between 25% to 49% sold.

Not only is a small proportion of fish sold but also few fish are caught in absolute terms, which is to say that their scale of capture is modest. A comparatively small number of fisher families, 111 according to ECOA (2014-15), caught an average of 842 kilos each in 2014 according to our investigation, for a total of 93,462 kilos that year. Against this, a large number of sports fishermen, 52,045 hailed out of the port of Corumbá in 2015 (Prefeitura de Corumbá, 2015), caught approximately 25 kilos apiece per trip (Moraes and Seidl, 2000), summing over 1.3 million kilos of prime fish that year. Some fish are eaten locally, some are released during three months of the year when fish are spawning and the rest are taken home in Styrofoam coolers and eaten throughout the year. The municipal government reports that the tourist sector benefits about 990 workers based in town (Prefeitura de Corumbá, 2015), which is welcome in a city with chronic unemployment, but is just as hard to justify environmentally as working in unsustainable timber extraction and frontier peasant farming in the Amazon (Hoefle, 2013a, 2013b).

Peasant farming activities are even more limited than their scale of fishing. About a half of hectare of manioc and maize may be planted on the few areas of ground located above the high water level of annual floods. Some pigs and chickens are raised, many of which fall prey to alligators, jaguars and other predators. A few peasants have a couple heads of cattle which together with pigs can be a nuisance when they eat neighbours’ crops and so cause conflict in more compact communities like in Barra do São Lourenço. Houses are also located on high ground and surrounded by fruit trees which provide shade in a climate where temperatures above 40º C and humidity above 90% are common during most of the year (Figure 3).
Figure 3. An old house surrounded by mango trees.

Fisher families also earn income selling crabs as bait to sports fishermen as well as some fish, honey, charcoal, chicken and pork, which show that direct conflict does not exist between craft and sports fishers. Half of the interviewed families earned income from these sources and 20% of the fishers who do not sell fish commercially sell bait. This income represented 16% of the average total income of fishers in 2014. Of the other sources of income, government transfer payments in the form of pensions and family support are by far the most important, representing 55% of all income and two and a half times that earned from fishing (Figure 4). As occurs in the Amazon (Bicalho and Hoefle, 2015), government family support payments can function like payments for environmental services because the peasants do not need to fish more intensely and so pressure natural resources less.
A study of sports fishing showed that the tourists are 99% male and are liberal professionals and merchants who come from the South and South-east of Brazil (Moraes and Seidl, 2000). These men book a cruise on a fishing boat where they take meals and spend the night in air conditioned cabins, which is the only way to avoid mosquitoes and other biting insects which come out in swarms after dark. They pass their days fishing in small aluminium boats, covered from head to foot in protective gear and drink large amounts of beer (Figure 5). The drinking continues into the night in a mosquito-proof dining room below deck or in a screened-in observatory deck on the stern where they tell tall tales of the big fish that got way.
Local fishers complain that the cruise boats moor just outside the National Park and small craft take the sports fishermen into areas off limits to them. This may occur because the park officials do not have the means to control entry in such a large area but may also be due to the wildly over optimistic view held by park officials of the value of eco-tourism as a substitute for predatory fishing undertaken by ignorant peasants (see Hoefle, 2016 for a critique of rural and eco-tourism in the Amazon, in a similar Brazilian wetland biome and remote region).

From Traditional Ranches to Private Nature Reserves

Before the climatic event of the 1970s large ranches of between 15,000 to 30,000 hectares dominated the study area. The owners were descendan ts of the original settlers of the Pantanal who arrived in the area after the Paraguay War (1864-1870) in which Brazil gained territory and after the War of the Pacific (1879-1883) when Brazil agreed to an exit to the sea via the Paraguay River for Bolivia after it lost its western coast to Chile. In the early 20th Century the far west of Brazil also attracted British capital which invested in enormous ranches producing salted beef for Argentina. The most famous British ranch was the Estância Miranda, today located midway on the road between Campo Grande and Corumbá. This trend provoked a nationalist reaction in Brazil during the 1930s, the ranches were expropriated and resold to Brazilian owners at favourable prices (Benevides and Leonzo, 2001; Sodré, 1941).

Sodré (1941) stressed the fact that as judged by the modest scale of the ranch houses the large estates of the Pantanal did not generate the income that sugarcane or coffee estates did in the eastern part of Brazil. This was due to the environmental limitations of the Pantanal with a nature area landscape full of jaguars and alligators which attacked cattle and so limited the size of herds. While large opulent estate houses were once common in the export activities of eastern Brazil, ranch houses of the Pantanal were relatively simple wooden structures.

This was further emphasised when the study area was permanently flooded during the 1970s. Almost all of the ranchers went bankrupt and dispensed their workers. One remaining rancher was interviewed and his quality of life today is a shadow of the past. The man now owns 6,000 hectares which were inherited from his parents. Over time the original land grant that his great grandparents received was successively subdivided between numerous heirs in families with over ten children. When the man was studying to become an engineer at a university on the east coast his father died suddenly and he had to abandon his studies and assume control of the ranch.

This was an unfortunate life path decision because the climatic event of the 1970s flooded most of his land and that of neighbouring ranches. The latter were abandoned by their owners but the man insisted on staying. He was able to maintain about 200 hectares of pasture using sandbags to keep out water. However, the changed natural landscape from seasonally flooded prairie to permanently flooded swamp emptied the land of medium-sized mammals, which were substituted by fish, alligators and other aquatic fauna. This made jaguar attacks on his cattle more frequent and increased the number of alligators regularly taking his smaller animals. As his neighbours and workers left the only remaining farm animals in the vicinity were his and the attacks became even worse. Of a herd of 120 head of cattle in 2014 he lost 16 to predators and of 80 sheep he lost 30. His
work force fell over time and he let go his last worker in 2013 so that he now works the land alone. In 2014 the rancher earned US$11,368 selling 25 immature steers which he took directly to an electronic-auction ranch in Corumbá and received double the price that local middlemen offer. He also earned US$3,947 selling sheep and another US$1,628 from selling watermelons grown on a hectare of crop land. Small animals and watermelons are sold to the local riverine fisher-farmers, who are not exactly affluent consumers. The income earned by the rancher is considerably higher than that earned by the latter but is a fraction of what he earned in the past. The rancher lives isolated in a house located an hour’s trip by aluminium boat up a creek clogged with vegetation.

As the value of the ranches plummeted they were purchased by wealthy outsiders for recreational purposes who declare the land to be private nature reserves so as to avoid paying taxes. One huge flooded ranch was acquired by a doctor from São Paulo who refurbished the old ranch house located on a knoll on the only remaining land out of water, which now serves as his private fishing camp. Another large ranch with 23,000 hectares was bought by a woman from the São Paulo metro area in 2005. In succeeding years she bought three neighbouring ranches and today has 63,291 hectares. About 1.3% of the area is utilised for 800 hectares of planted pasture and another 18 hectares in farm structures surrounded by grass. The pasture is located on high land, which occupies 31% of the ranch, an exceptionally large proportion of land that is not seasonally flooded. This area is composed of rock outcroppings and forest, part of which was cleared in the past to plant pasture. Another 9,000 hectares of pasture become available during the dry season in the high Pantanal (9%) and low Pantanal (37%) areas. Permanent rivers and lakes without economic use make up the rest of the property.

The planted pasture is leased to the owner’s nephew and the rent pays the expenses of maintaining the property. Through the sale of immature and nearly mature steers the nephew earned a gross income of nearly US$300,000 in 2014 which shows the potential for earning income from cattle raising in the Pantanal when it is not permanently flooded. However, his aunt only uses the property for recreation purposes. On weekends and vacations she flies in on her private airplane decorated with jaguar spots.

Employees grow organic vegetables for the owner, take care of her hobby horses and the grounds in general. A manager who was originally from the plateau was brought in to look after the place. He earned US$14,967 in 2015 and another eight permanent employees earned the minimum wage of US$3,609 a year. They are also outsiders. Three are caretakers who live in houses situated at strategic points along the river where peasants were removed and might be tempted to return.

Resisting Removal from the Conservation Refugee Camps of the East Bank

As the new owners of the private nature reserves are worried about fisher-farmers claiming squatter rights peasants have been removed from the whole west bank of the Paraguay River and have settled in squalid communities like Barra do São Lourenço located on the east bank of the river (Figure 6). However, the new owners of the land on the east bank, in turn, have tried to remove the communities from that side of the river. The past and present attempts to remove the historic population is of dubious legality because fisher communities have always been located along the river bank, which
according to Brazilian legislation is public domain up to fifteen metres from the high water mark and not private property.

Figure 6. Conservation refugee camps of the east bank of the Paraguay River.

This became the legal basis for the class-action of the riverine peasants against the reserve owners mounted with the help of the socially-conscious environmentalist NGO.
On one side, the private reserves were represented by Ângelo Robalo, head of the Man of the Pantanal Institute (IHP). This NGO was established in Corumbá in 2002 and its stated purpose is preserving the Pantanal biome and local culture (IHP, 2016). Robalo is a retired police cornel who led the fight against illegal alligator hunting for shoe leather in the 1980s which had decimated alligator populations of the Pantanal in the past (OECO, 2008). As such, the man has an honourable past in conservation action. The problem is the bio-centric emphasis of the NGO and his ideas concerning local culture which exclude the rural poor. Indeed, the NGO has distinctly paramilitary overtones and the annual reports are full of photographs of uniformed members in strange poses. Robalo appeared at the public hearing dressed in a military camouflage uniform.

The Brazilian Parks Service Instituto Chico Mendes de Conservação da Biodiversidade (ICMBio) was also aligned with this side in the hearing because its representative considered the riverine population to be a menace. The Barra do São Lourenço community in particular was criticised for using its location at the junction of the Paraguay and São Lourenço Rivers to fish in the buffer areas of the National Park. The representative displayed a bio-centric attitude categorically stating that only those who fish strictly for “subsistence” should be permitted to stay in the areas, not the peasants who sell fish.

The consortium of private natural reserves offered to resettle the peasants without cost in a housing development in Corumbá. This kind of subdivision in Corumbá has poorly constructed little houses that quickly fall apart and which are located close to one another along an unpaved street without a tree in sight (Figure 7). This would place the peasants in a city with chronic problems with unemployment in the middle of the worst economic depression in Brazilian history, the same sort of callous attitude displayed by US conservationists who promoted hillbilly removal to make way for full conservation units of the Appalachians during the 1930s (cf. Hoeple, 2017). In fact, 45% of the interviewed riverine peasants have already lived in Corumbá at one point in their lives and returned because they “did not like the place” or had “no friends there”. They conceded that better health services and mains electricity were available in town but this was outweighed by problems with little employment being available for individuals with low educational attainment, with urban violence and drugs, and with solitude.
The NGO ECOA was on the side of the local riverine population and has a history of working with the peasants in sustainable fishing practice and community development. The NGO was created in 1989 by biologists, architects, engineers, social scientists and educators in the state capital and works with water conservation in rural and urban settings (ECOA, 2016). A number of university professors and their students from the Corumbá campus were also present at the meeting to support the local population and they along with members of the press outnumbered the local people at the meeting. The presence of a Navy frigate and the Federal Police in high-speed narc boats, which were present to avoid violent confrontation, added the final touch of circus to what was perhaps the most important event that ever happened in this part of the Pantanal (Figure 8). Indeed, the title of Erickson’s book *Small Places, Large Issues* comes to mind.
After hours of preparation the judge officially opened the hearing by removing her shoes, standing up with her bare feet on the dusty ground and giving a speech clearly in favour of the local people. The latter were portrayed as descendants of Amerindians, Brazilians, Bolivians and Paraguayans, who have suffered centuries of discrimination. Dismissing any pretense of impartiality, the outcome was a foregone conclusion. Then each group present gave testimony and the clinching arguments were made by the Quató Amerindian “chief” and his wife when they played the race card in the name of traditional rights.
their testimony the two argued that because there are Amerindians mixed in the local population they should have the same rights to a territory which the Quató did in their indigenous lands to the north. The meeting finally ended about 8 p.m. when swarms of mosquitoes became unbearable.

31 The appeal to ethnicity and to being Amerindians in particular has become a common strategy for poor rural people to resist expropriation by environmental agencies and by outside investors, both present in this case. However, this route is increasingly causing conflict in an ethnically complex society like Brazil. Imitating U.S. affirmative action politics, territories have been set aside for Native and Afro-descendants in Brazil, which is a good thing for these marginalised groups but are incredibly difficult to implement when a highly mestizo population must be fit into only three essentialised categories: “white”, “black”, or “Indian”. This is a serious problem because the categories are used to determine who can stay in segregated territories and who cannot. In ethnically ambiguous situations like the Amazon, this has caused serious conflict between neighbours and even within families, between individuals who choose to declare themselves to be indigenous or Afro-Brazil and those do not want to assume these identities (see Bicalho and Hoefle, 2015).

32 In remote areas located in important nature areas the rural poor have increasingly opted to be recognised as indigenes in order to come under the jurisdiction of the Brazilian Indian Protection Agency FUNAI (Fundação Nacional do Índio). This has the advantage of removing nature areas from the jurisdiction of the Parks Service and so freeing the inhabitants of bio-centric conservation restrictions. FUNAI also provides schools and health care and quotas for entering public universities. In the study area education is no longer the problem it once was because good quality schools exist as well as free public transport to take children to school everyday.

**Nature Enclosures**

33 The riverine peasants of the Pantanal have been victimised by the application of simplistic categories. They are not subsistence-minded peasants who produce only their food necessities like bio-centric park officials think they should. Social reproduction involves rural activities undertaken on a semi-subsistence basis which includes a surplus used to buy the necessities which they do not produce locally. Similarly, their environmental ethics are homo-ecocentric in which they reach a balance between what is good for humanity and good for the ecosystem and not just for the latter according to the biological worldview of park officials. Finally, they may still fall victim to racial essentialism inappropriately applied to an ethnically complex society.

34 The case treated here is not unique in Brazil and the rural poor across the country are increasingly being pressured by self-serving urban-based environmentalist GOs and NGOs. Local people suffer nature enclosures, react and politically mobilise to avoid becoming conservation refugees. This occurs in remote regions like the Pantanal as well as near Brazilian metropolitan regions in mountainous areas of the coastal Atlantic Forest (Hoefle, 2017). The case here showed that the riverine peasants did not accept their fate without a struggle and built alliances with more socially conscious environmental movements like the ECOA.
The Amazon is perhaps the most important laboratory for alternative environmental movements in Brazil and points the way forward away from class-biased, bio-centric conservationism. In addition to Amerindian movements there, over the last forty years mestizo riverine peasants have also resisted expropriation and transformed regional environmental governance in the process. In addition to conventional full conservation units, an array of conservation units with sustainable use by historic populations have emerged as the result of the constructive interaction of local people with GO and NGOs and environmental ethics have shifted from purely eco-centric to a homo-ecocentric balance. Interesting experiments with community-based timber and non-timber forestry within this kind of reserve have served as examples for people living within and near conservation units across the region in which ecological preservation is conciliated with social justice (Bicalho and Hoefle, 2010, 2015; Hajjar, 2014) and is part of a worldwide struggle of traditional peoples to decolonise nature conservation (Adams and Mulligan, 2003; Dowie, 2009; Larson et al., 2010; Molnar, 2011).

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ABSTRACTS

Conservation policy which discriminates against historic fisher-farmers of the Paraguay River of western Brazil is questioned using radical environmental history and critical global political ecology perspectives. Over the last three decades enormous areas located along the Paraguay River in the Pantanal wetlands biome have been transformed into public and private nature reserves. Reserve officials are usually trained biologists who hold erroneous views concerning pristine nature and peasant subsistence production. Research results show that the fishers do not deplete stocks while the sport fishers do, which goes against notions concerning the value of eco-tourism for conservation held by park officials. The private reserves are shown to occult hobby ranches, fishing camps or mere land speculation. The resulting conflict with local people gave rise to a classic class action pitting the conservationists and pseudo-conservationists on one side and the peasants, concerned social scientists and public defenders on the other, with the courts siding with the latter.

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Mots-clés: réserves naturelles, réfugiés des politiques de conservation, marais du Pantanal, Brésil occidental
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