

Olaf Kaltmeier

National Parks from North to South

An Entangled History of Conservation and Colonization in Argentina

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National Parks from North to South

The impressive waterfalls of the Iguazú, the picturesque seascapes around the Nahuel Huapi in northern Patagonia, the iconic volcano Lanín, lined by araucaria forests and the glacier shear edge of the endless ice of the Perito Moreno characterise our landscape imaginaries of Argentina and attract thousands of visitors to their national parks every year. In 2017 alone, 3.7 million tourists visited these parks, a five-fold increase between 1990 and 2017 (Herman 2018).

The genealogy of nature reserves in Argentina is remarkable, being the first national parks to be established in Latin America. The question arises as to why the national park idea was able to establish itself so sustainably in Argentina. The geographical imagination of the nation, which is based on these mostly aesthetically presented natural landscapes and natural wonders in the national parks, was hardly foreseeable at the end of the 19th century. Here, intellectuals who followed Domingo Faustino Sarmiento positioned themselves along the dividing line between civilization and barbarism, the desert or the pampas against urban, European-oriented Argentina. The national parks that emerged at the beginning of the 20th century – above all the National Park of the South established in 1922 (from 1934: Nahuel Huapi) and the planned National Park of the North (from 1934: Iguazú) – had a decisive influence on making peripheral landscapes an integral part of the nation. (Silvestri 2011) With the moral imperative “Becoming acquainted with the fatherland is a duty” (Conocer la patria es un deber) as its motto, the National Park Authority, established in 1934, persuaded the Argentinians to get to know their nation and at the same time to attract foreign tourists to the country.

In the conventional narrative, the establishment of national parks sounds as follows. In 1903, the first National Park was founded at Lake Nahuel Huapi, thanks to a donation by the famous geographer and explorer Francisco P. Moreno. After that, the national parks existed for decades only on paper. The true history of the national parks in Argentina only began with the passing of a national park law and the associated establishment of a national park authority. This story was also stylized into a myth by Exequiel Bustillo, the founding director of the National Park Authority, in his autobiographical writing *El despertar de Bariloche*. But on closer examination, this narrative has many gaps and ig-

nores both the locally and globally entangled dynamics that were of the highest relevance in the Argentine national park debate.

For a critical, transnational interweaving of the genealogy of the national parks in Argentina, three fundamental changes of perspective are therefore undertaken in this book. First, the history of national parks in Argentina is analyzed in a transnational space of entanglement. For semantic reasons alone, a prominent approach usually tells the history of national parks in a national research framework. Parallel to this national narrative, another narrative has also established itself in the inter-American context, which we would like to call an inter-American transfer narrative. The idea of the National Parks is generally regarded as an original U.S.-American invention that is entirely in the spirit of the paradigm of a genuine and unique U.S.-American exceptionalism. And indeed, the first national parks – like the Yellowstone National Park in 1872 – were also established in the USA. From an inter-American perspective, it might be obvious to regard the subsequent establishment of national parks in Latin America as a simple export of the American model.

But both approaches – the national and the inter-American narrative – fall short insofar as they do not focus on the complex transnational circulation of ideas on nature conservation and park concepts, the exchange of experts, and the adaptation of biota and other artefacts. The national parks and protected areas that were established in the Cono Sur at the beginning of the 20th century show, however, that the transfer thesis is too simple. Not all debates can be reduced to unilateral, inter-American flows. Instead, the establishment of national parks is an open process in a transnational force field in which there are different influences. These range from French landscape architecture and Belgian park ideas to Prussian sustainable forestry and the German model of natural monuments. Carl Curt Hosseus, one of the lesser known protagonists of the National Park Movement in Argentina, explicitly refers in a 1916 brochure on the National Park of the South, nowadays the Nahuel Huapi National Park, to European experiences from Germany, Belgium, Denmark, France, England, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, Austria-Hungary, Russia, Sweden and Switzerland. In addition, the USA, Canada, Japan and the Dutch colony Java are mentioned as contributors of key concepts of the national park idea in Argentina (1916: 34-35).