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PHYSICAL FENCES AND SOCIAL BOUNDARIES: THE HUMAN IMPLICATIONS OF PRIVATIZING NATURE IN PATAGONIA PARK

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INTRODUCTION

Patagonia Park has undergone a huge shift in the last decade. Monetary investments made by American entrepreneurs, Doug and Kris Tompkins, have transformed the property from the fenced-in cattle ranch that stood for over a century into an international ecotourism destination with remarkable and inspiring landscapes. Although its founders and followers forged the park's vision with good intentions, there are clear social implications related to the creation of the park. The fences might have been taken down physically, but new ones were put up socially. This poster discusses how environmentalism constructs social boundaries by analyzing how park patrons and locals perceive Patagonia Park and its mission.

BACKGROUND

- Critical geographers have argued that park spaces frequently operate as separate entities that have a fixed, rather than fluid, socio-spatial and socio-economic relationship with surrounding areas (Gobster, 1998; Sundberg & Kaserman, 2006).
- The cultural politics of parks forge certain American ideals of natural history and heritage and reproduce inequality (Byrne, 2009).
- Pre-existing communities can be excluded on the grounds that they don't understand how to appreciate nature or know ways to protect it (Sundberg & Kaserman, 2006).
- The history of wilderness is a concept that is thought of in conjunction with a sublime experience. This cultural ideal was conceived during the American frontier (Cronon, 1995).

METHODS

- Two weeks of observations and interviews in and around Patagonia Park in Patagonia, Chile from January 4-16, 2017 to explore the park's transformation and to learn more about its purpose and its impact on the local communities.
- Nine structured and semi-structured interviews with park staff (n=4), locals (n=3), and tourists (n=2)
- Ethnographic observation in neighboring towns of Coyhaique and Cochrane, as well as in Patagonia Park.
- Activities observed include: tourist interactions with park staff and trails, park staff's use of perimeters of the park, maintenance and upkeep of trails in the park, availability of park staff, daily routines of locals, and leisure activities by locals.



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RESULTS

Perception of the Park by Locals

- Locals feel like they can contribute to the park, but are uninvited.

"It's probably the feeling of everyone else that's from the area that we feel like an outsider to the park right now.... We do not feel invited to the park and a lot of people from here has a lot to say in terms to be um like to add value to what they are doing at the park."
- Local conceptions of nature do not always match the white pristine ideal. Locals live their daily life within the landscape and do not seek to "escape" to be with nature.
- The park can only be accessed by a long, unmaintained gravel road, which limits transportation options and accessibility.
- Park amenities, such as the lodge and restaurant are too expensive for working class farmers, who are the majority of locals.

Perception of the Locals by Conservationists

- Repetitive use of "us" and "them" unintentionally used as a discourse that excludes locals.

"What [do] the people in Cochrane think? They're clueless. I don't think they understand what the park is."
- Discrediting local ways of life

"It's like [the Tompkins] bought a [cattle ranch] where a whole community was living on. And living it is between. It's not really living."
- Only like minded people can be part of the unity the natural landscape offers.

"Just tell the correct people to come and the ones that won't understand this don't say anything. Zip it and keep it for yourself. *[laughs all around]* We don't want to share the trails."

CONCLUSION

The conservation of nature may seem apolitical. However, when the displacement of people is enforced to create more natural landscape, it is political. There are politics embedded in nature. The design and vision of Patagonia Park are conveyed through a particular conception of nature. In this case, nature is conveyed through white American ideals. Therefore, it is important to recognize the socio-cultural barriers in park design. There are multitudes of interconnected factors of exclusion that point to larger cultural dynamics.