



COMMUNITY MOBILIZATION THEORIES

A review of the literature in the context of the Quijos
Valley in Napo, Ecuador

ABSTRACT

In a quiet valley in Ecuador, conflict persists among ranchers, scientists, bureaucrats, and entrepreneurs all sharing the same fragile soil. Inspired by a series of interviews, the author applies prevailing theories of common resource management and community mobilization to consider what barriers prevent better resource management in Napo.

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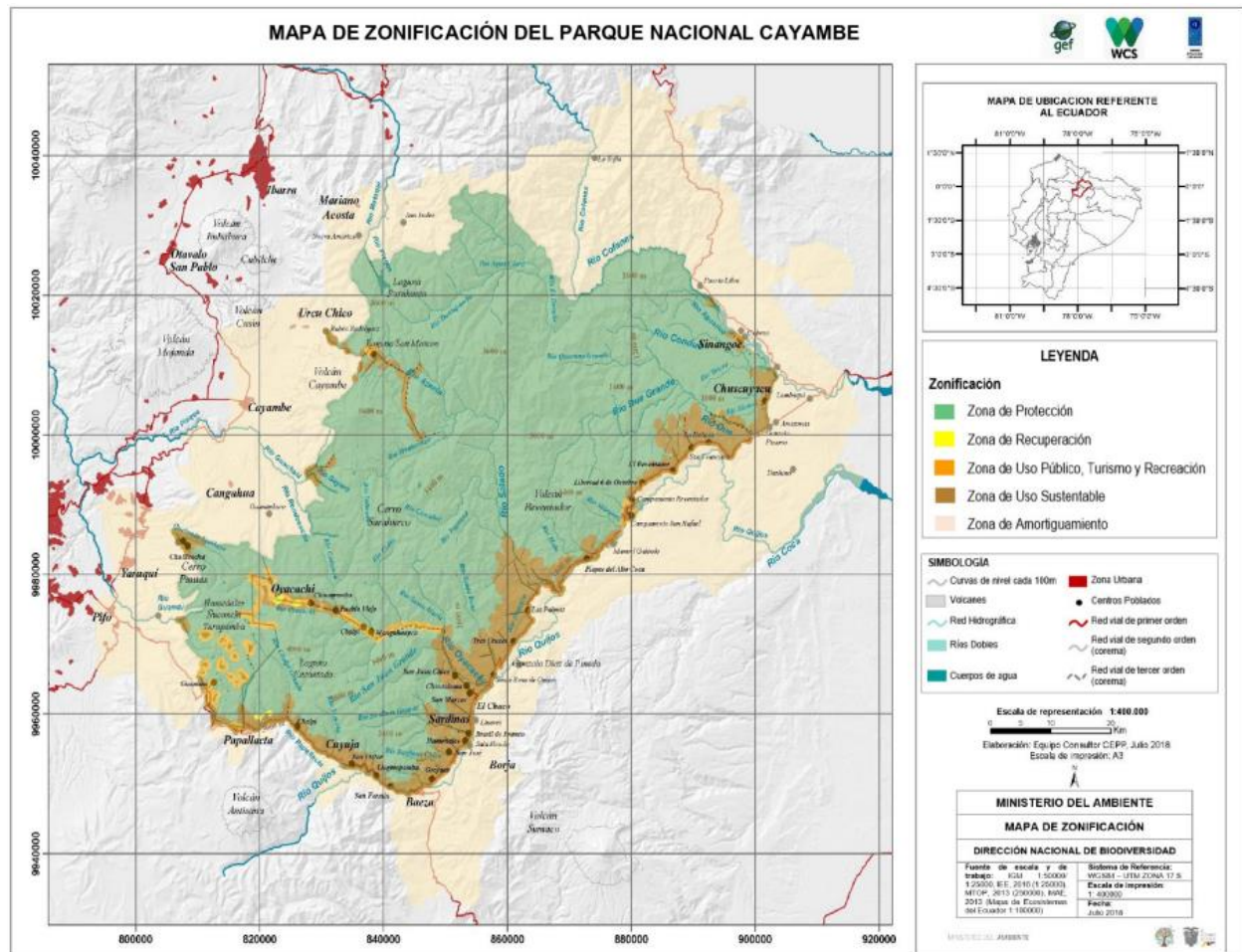
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¹ A sculpture at the entrance to San Francisco de Borja Parish honors the ranching economy of the valley.

The Case: One Valley, Many Goals



2

“This is an area with a lot of conflict,” Pablo Campaña informed me on my first day in Borja. He is the former president of the parish junta (a position akin to a local mayor,) and he was referring to the dilemma faced by the ranching community; their livelihoods are challenged both by the pressure to expand into protected parkland and the erosion of the mountainside.

² Map of Cayambe-Coca National Park, one of three parks which border the town of San Francisco de Borja. The distance between the center of town and the green “protected zone,” where no development is permitted, is just 12 kilometers. In practice, several families have already moved into the protected zone, due to the degradation of their land. Map courtesy of Walter Mejia, Ecuadorian Environmental Ministry.

San Francisco de Borja sits in the Quijos valley, a bucolic region nestled between the jagged Andes mountains and the Amazon rainforest, an hour and a half east of Quito, Ecuador. As Pablo gave me a tour, I was struck by how familiar the valley felt. Surrounded by lush green fields and baying cows, I could almost imagine I was in the foothills of southern Ohio. That is, until the ground trembled and ash from El Reventador drifted by on the breeze, or I caught a snatch of conversation about the illegal wildlife trade.

Quijos has boomed in the last few decades, to just over two thousand residents.³ Now, most ranchers produce milk for Nestle or Rey Leche, and the market plaza has gone quiet, replaced with chain groceries and corner stores. Slowly, farmers are getting access to high-tech equipment like automatic milkers and artificial insemination. The average age of the population of Borja- skewed slightly by the presence of a large high school- is 27. And the three national parks surrounding Borja, which once had a comfortable buffer between themselves and the town, are quickly falling to the pressures of grazing, poaching, and logging.

I spent three weeks in the Quijos valley interviewing ranchers, local government leaders, students, tourism entrepreneurs, and small business owners. I can't claim that my 25 interviews constitute an exhaustive study of the region, but it was enough time to learn a lot about the different conflicts that Pablo was referring to on my first day. Traditional, expansive cattle ranching has had devastating impacts on the thin volcanic soil of the region, resulting in the loss of more than 583 thousand tons of topsoil via erosion each year.⁴ That erosion threatens community infrastructure and water quality, affects the budding tourism industry and, ultimately, destroys the pasture needed to continue grazing.⁵ Ranchers then cut down more forest, to have

³ Gad Municipal de Quijos, 2019.

⁴ Villarreal and Villarreal, 2014.

⁵ Interviews with Carlos Villarreal and Pablo Campaña. (See citations for interview information).

fresh topsoil on which to plant feed for their cows. That doesn't fix the erosion problems, but it creates a new one; the encroachment of ranchers on protected land, and with it, the Andean spectacled bear. Usually a vegetarian, the spectacled bear has been turning to cattle lately: a new⁶ source of food that seems to have replaced its previously abundant forest habitat.⁷



These conflicts aren't mysteries. Many of my interviewees had strong opinions about what should be done. The local government is trying to invest in technical programs and a community processing center that would allow local dairy farmers to pivot to more value-added products, like cheese and yogurt, raising income and creating jobs to keep the young, educated population from moving to Quito.⁸ Local environmentalists want large-scale investment to reforest and restore unusable pasture, dig channels to divert water out of flooded fields, and

⁶ Two opposite-facing hillsides in Sumaco: one has been recently cleared, while the other was cleared and then collapsed in a landslide.

⁷ Interview with Mario Vinuesa

⁸ Interview with Brandon Aliaga

protect the watershed.⁹ Tourism entrepreneurs want to build an association that would allow them to market Borja as a tourist package, collaborating with lodging, rafting experiences, birdwatching sites, and agro-tourism farms to create a cohesive experience.¹⁰ Small business owners in town want the government to do more to promote tourism and bring more visitors to main street.¹¹

In theory, Borja could move forward with policies that would mechanize agriculture in a way that would increase profits and protect the soil, as well as create more space for tourism ventures. A cow bred with artificial insemination techniques, for example, can produce up to ten times as much raw milk as a naturally bred cow.¹² More productive cows mean fewer cows are required overall, and less pasture. And yet such policies have moved forward haltingly, if at all. “There is a lot of potential here,” the owner of a birdwatching site, Dilma Cadena, told me. “But it needs to be organized.”

“This is a very demobilized community, and that is its weakness,” said Carlos Villarreal, an agricultural researcher in Borja and the director of the ALTropico foundation.¹³

“This is the problem here,” Pablo told me, towards the end of my time in Borja. “Nobody wants to associate.”

I didn’t go to Borja to study community organizing; I was interested in the public’s perception of the national parks and conservation laws. But the frustration I found sparked curiosity. Why is it that so often, seemingly obvious solutions don’t accumulate enough political

⁹ Interview with Carlos Villarreal

¹⁰ Interview with Marina

¹¹ Interview with Paul Itas

¹² Interview with Dilma Cadena

¹³ Alternatives for the Tropics: ALTropico is an international NGO committed to local participation for solutions

will or public engagement to come to fruition? In the case of Borja, there seem to be remarkably few conflicts of interest, even between large corporations and smaller producers. Nestle, in this case, has provided grants to help ranchers consolidate and be more efficient; it is in their economic interest for the farmers to have more productive cows on healthier land.¹⁴ So, why the inertia?

It should be made clear that my experience conducting interviews in Borja serves as little more than colorful inspiration for a wider question of community mobilization and resource management. My 25 subjects cannot, and should not, be perceived as representatives for their whole community, let alone the world. However, the problem there felt familiar to me, someone who has tried to organize groups into actions in the U.S.; even when everyone agrees on what needs to be done, something else, a little *je ne sais quoi* is required for those people to actually do it.

Wendy Welford describes this challenge in succinct sociological terms in her paper on the Landless Workers' Movement in Brazil. "The aspatial and ethnographically thin question 'why do movements form?'" she writes, "is regularly privileged over the question, 'why do people choose to form movements in particular places and times?'"¹⁵ In other words, identifying the problem that motivates a movement is relatively simple. Identifying the conditions that cause a person to drop whatever else it is they are doing and try to address the problem is much more complex.

This is a basic human dilemma that could be applied to all sorts of problems. Welford's question describes the difference between social media activism and a street protest; it also

¹⁴ interview with Marino Vinuesa

¹⁵ Welford 2003.

describes the phenomenon of many people complaining about a full trash can but no one wanting to be the one to take it outside. What I want to do here is connect this issue of mobilization with another classic sociological conundrum; the tragedy of the commons. In Quijos, as in many places around the world, a lack of community mobilization intersects with the steady degradation of an essential shared resource: soil. I suspect that examining the patterns that might be at play in Borja could bring wider conclusions about the climate movement and why, even when solutions are so tangible, we consistently fail to bring them to fruition.

Managing Common Resources: A review of the literature

Anyone even slightly familiar with environmental political scholarship has probably heard the names Elinor Ostrom and Garrett Hardin. Hardin, a biologist, became famous for his controversial paper “The Tragedy of the Commons,” in which he warned that overpopulation was leading to the exhaustion of Earth’s resources and needed to be managed. His basic theory is the opposite of Adam Smith’s invisible hand: that each individual acting in his own self-interest, rather than advancing the common good, in fact damages both his own interest and everyone else’s. There is a temptation to wait for *others* to begin conserving resources, and use as much as one can for as long as one can get away with it. In the original essay, Hardin acknowledges that this dilemma could theoretically be solved either by privatizing all natural resources or by regulating their use through governance- but, he says, “we must choose, or acquiesce in the destruction of the commons.”¹⁶

Ostrom was an American political economist and Nobel-Prize laureate for her analysis of how the commons are governed. Ostrom developed polycentric theory, arguing that rather than expand large, centralized efforts to manage shared resources, states would do better to delegate

¹⁶ Hardin 1968.

the management of the commons to smaller political bodies. In the U.S. context, that would mean state and local policies are more effective than large federal spending bills. While the existence of shared resources might seem to intuitively called for a shared set of rules and regulations, Ostrom argued that individuals and groups can manage the consumption of resources on their own, while centralized impositions “disempower” them.¹⁷

Ostrom also argued that a piecemeal approach is preferable as communities figure out what works best, because it allows for trial-and-error learning that can improve outcomes with lower risk. In addition to giving local communities more agency over the management of their own resources, Ostrom writes that a polycentric (or, to use plainer language, a locally-led) approach is often more effective because the local community has a better understanding of the needs of their environment. Localized efforts can adapt more quickly to changing conditions than centralized ones, and in the post-colonial world, community-led projects are often better received than top-down policies.

More recently, other writers have expanded on Ostrom’s ideas, stressing that public participation is an essential element of the polycentric approach. In 2020, environmental scientist D.L. Coppock argued that the top-down approach “has often led to the wrong research questions being addressed, wasting of limited resources, loss of valuable time, and lack of trust-building between communities and change agents.”¹⁸ One proposed solution is the agricultural extension model used in the United States to connect scientific research with the public. In theory, agricultural extension empowers the beneficiary to take an active role in planning out resource management, while still including the input of experts in decision making. The UN Food and

¹⁷ Ostrom et al. 1999.

¹⁸ Coppock 2019.

Agriculture Organization, which operates many extension programs in developing countries around the world, argues that extension programs with local associations allow for more organized and meaningful engagement between rural populations and the FAO, than can exist between rural individuals and the FAO.¹⁹ The FAO's Farmer Field School approach (FFS) is meant to be a more equal exchange of knowledge between extension agents and local producers, and the FAO claims that FFS programs have strengthened participating communities.²⁰

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency has its own theories on public participation. In its "Public Participation Guide", the EPA warns that "it is rarely appropriate or useful to simply ask the public 'what do you want.' Such broad questions will only raise expectations and likely direct input to areas where no influence is actually possible."²¹ Instead, the agency suggests that scientists and policymakers seek public input strategically, restricting input to specific issues where the community members might have particularly useful knowledge or particularly strong opinions.

However, extension programs and public comment periods are only a limited form of participation, and usually complement an otherwise centralized approach. A truer form of polycentric or grassroots decision-making is what has been called "commoning" by scholars such as Johannes Euler and Sonja Heldt. They criticize EPA-style participation as performative, fulfilling the desire for consultation without actually relinquishing any power to the community affected by the resource management scheme. The authors write:

¹⁹ FAO 2001.

²⁰ FAO 2022.

²¹ EPA 2022.

“Commons projects are characterized by creating a social fabric based on cooperation rather than competition, emphasizing connectedness instead of separation, and understanding exactly who makes the decisions within the management process.”²² In 1969, social worker Sherry Arnstein proposed a theoretical “ladder of citizen participation” with which to describe just how much influence individual citizens actually have over a decision-making process.²³ “Citizen participation is citizen power,” she wrote. If power is not redistributed, any participatory process is “empty ritual”. Arnstein categorized eight types of participation into three groups: “Nonparticipation”, “Degrees of tokenism,” and “Degrees of citizen power”. In the first group are placating practices such as cooptation of movement leaders. In the second, consultation practices such as those described by the EPA, in which the movement of information is one way, from the state to the citizens.

The third category is broken into partnerships, delegated power, and citizen control. A partnership requires the primary power holder to provide incentives that enable others to share power more feasibly. Arnstein uses an example case in which the City of Philadelphia not only established a new development association with council seats set aside for the residents’ association (which would only satisfy consultation), it also paid those resident representatives \$7 for each council meeting they attended, to lower the barriers to participation.

In sum, environmental political theorists are in some agreement that decentralized, polycentric models are best for managing common-pool resources and limiting community conflict over natural wealth. However, less scholarship has been devoted to the factors that encourage individuals to take an active role in those decentralized systems. What creates an

²² Euler and Heldt 2018.

²³ Arnstein 1969.

environment of trust more conducive to cooperation than to competition? Distribution of power among the people is only useful if the people decide to exercise that power. What is missing that could drive individuals to be more invested in the efficient and fair management of resources for all?

How To Move People



²⁴ Another oft-cited voice in the study of collective action and the tragedy of the commons is the economist Mancur Olson. Olson pointed out that just because individuals act in self-interest, and many individuals might share a common group interest, it does not follow that the

²⁴ Volunteers from Birdwatchers Quijos, a recently-formed organization based in Borja, plant saplings in unused pasture in December 2021.

group will act on that interest because it is *also* in each individual's best interest to wait and allow others to incur the cost of action.²⁵ This phenomenon has since been referred to as the "free-rider problem" by Garrett Hardin, Elinor Ostrom and others.²⁶ Olson proposed that this was more of a problem in large groups, for which the cost of organizing is higher and the individual benefits are smaller. For example, a labor union representing the interests of a single factory can also serve as a social club, or a community lending institution, but a union representing workers across the nation will have less social capital with which to encourage its members to act.

In 1971, Elinor Ostrom introduced the term "public entrepreneur" to this debate. The term can be summarized as follows: an imaginative individual without a large stake in the establishment way of doing things will, much like an entrepreneur in the economic sphere, be the first to take on the cost of implementing or advocating for a new solution, and will therefore mobilize and encourage others to accept that ever-shrinking cost of participation.²⁷ Ostrom was building off the writings of Max Weber and Joseph Schumpeter. Schumpeter, an economist, borrowed Adam Smith's analogy of an invisible hand to describe the way in which the interests of an individual could unintentionally further the interests of a group. But not all individuals are likely to spark change. The public entrepreneur can be contrasted with what Schumpeter refers to as a "static administrator". The static administrator is comfortable within the system and satisfied with the already-available options.

Also following Schumpeter, Olson argued that public entrepreneurs needed to mobilize others to join their cause through the use of selective incentives: material benefits which would help to overcome the cost of participation (such as the \$7 paid to Philadelphia residents who

²⁵ Olson 1965.

²⁶ Hardin 1968.

²⁷ Kuhnert 2001.

attended city council meetings in Arnstein's example). However, this theory of material incentives has been challenged by a number of scholars who argue that, as an economist, Olson has overestimated the influence of rational-decision making on social mobilization. Rather than weighing the material costs of participation versus the material incentives, other sociological works have found that social norms and community solidarity are more significant factors in transforming passive citizens into activists.²⁸ Of the intangible, non-material incentives, it is important to distinguish between "purposive" incentives (those relating directly to the goal of the group) and "solidary" incentives, which are the fun, social benefits that do not relate directly to the stated goal of the group but can be crucial to achieving its ends.²⁹

People are more likely to take an active role when community bonds are strong, but what strengthens those bonds? Simply sharing a zip code or a county identity does not make a community, and community identities change and adjust over time to meet political needs.³⁰ Most discussions of resource management stress the competitive and individualistic nature of humanity, assuming that everyone will pursue their own self-interest to destructive ends unless their self-interests shift.³¹ The political scientist Robert Putnam challenged that assumption in his 1993 book *Making Democracy Work*, in which he examined the existence of civil society and the concept of "civic virtue". His research found that democracies whose populations had strong civil society organizations were more likely to succeed. In addition to associations, Putnam stresses the importance of political equality and solidarity between citizens (even when disagreeing over certain matters) for a functioning democratic process.

²⁸ Lamothe and Lavastida, 2020.

²⁹ Clark and Wilson, 1961.

³⁰ Figueroa 2014.

³¹ Hardin 1968.

For the purpose of resource management, community solidarity and trust are even more effective when partnered with what environmental psychologists call place-attachment. This term refers to the emotional connection between a person and their land or home.³² Research based in the U.S. context has found correlations between place-attachment and support for environmental policies.³³ In the rural context, resource management in communities with strong place-attachment can be presented in terms of “stewardship” and caring for the legacy of a shared home.

Unfortunately, in the case of Latin America (as well as many regions of the world,) building trust within communities is hampered by high rates of perceived corruption. In Transparency International’s 2021 report, Ecuador was ranked 108 out of 180 countries, with a score of 36 out of 100.³⁴ Different types of corruption have different effects on communities. Experienced petty corruption (like being asked to pay a bribe during a traffic stop) has the potential to galvanize the people who experience it into action.³⁵ But perceived corruption, like suspecting that your local union leader is stealing money from the dues, or reading about a money laundering scandal within the national government, has a tendency to make citizens cynical and less likely to take an active role in what they see as a rigged system.

Communities are maintained by bonds of social trust, political equality, and in many cases, place-attachment. Globally, scholars have found that when any of these ingredients are missing, citizens are less likely to sacrifice their own time and convenience to take an active role in managing the commons. Anything that frays social bonds, like perceived corruption, makes

³² Wolf et. al. 2014.

³³ Diamond et al., 2020.

³⁴ Transparency International

³⁵ Neshkova and Kalesnikaite, 2019.

citizens less likely to do this. But of course, every community is unique. The next section will examine more thoroughly the Ecuadorian context and how it has affected sustainable management of community resources.

Identity in Context: Indigeneity and Reciprocity



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On the outskirts of Borja proper, Galo Vega showed me around his “local Machu Picchu”. With wealth from a career as a lawyer and published writer, Galo retired to Borja and set to work terracing his land, planting trees and sugarcane in the hopes of stabilizing the soil and

³⁶ Vega’s terraced orchard model, while better suited to the fragile volcanic soil of the valley, is prohibitively expensive for most local producers to implement without help.

providing a model to his neighbors for an agricultural model less destructive than ranching. His methods are more intensive than traditional ranching in both labor and capital, but far better suited to the thin volcanic soil of the region.³⁷ He claims he has worked hard to convince his community to take advantage of the markets in Quito and develop an economy of domestic trade, but that there wasn't enough interest.

"I don't see a future here," he told me, when I asked about the prospects for the next generation. "The people are defeated; their hearts are completely defeated."³⁸ Galo's outlook was particularly pessimistic, but many interviewees expressed similar frustrations and disappointments. Nor was Galo the only one to describe demobilization as a generational problem.³⁹ He believes that the growth and modernization of Borja—the development of the highway, the growth of international markets—has changed the community dynamic. Galo described his generation as "los de la minga," referring to a Quechua word which translates roughly to reciprocity and community effort. These words identify two of the aspects missing from Quijos that may partially account for its lack of mobilization: Quechua identity and community responsibility.

Part of the reason I was so surprised to hear Galo and others describe Borja as demobilized is because some regions of Ecuador (particularly the eastern Amazon and certain Quechua-speaking regions) have a long and celebrated history of community mobilization and strong social ties, thanks largely to the influence of its many indigenous nationalities.⁴⁰ Most residents of Borja, however, don't identify as indigenous.⁴¹ This is due both to the passive

³⁷ Villarreal C. & Villarreal T, 2014.

³⁸ Interview with Galo Fernando Vega.

³⁹ Interviews with Hector Ballesteros, and students from Juan Bautista Montini High School.

⁴⁰ Korovkin 2001.

⁴¹ GAD Parroquial 2015.

influence of Spanish colonization as well as a deliberate campaign of genocide and assimilation which encouraged Ecuadorians to embrace “mestizaje” (light-skinned, mixed-race identity) and imposed high costs on those who held onto indigenous heritage (until the agrarian reform law of 1964, hundreds of thousands of indigenous peasants continued to work as indebted laborers on large haciendas). Nonetheless, multiple indigenous cultures⁴² continue to influence the broader Ecuadorian society, from borrowed language (Ecuadorians say “achachay” when they’re cold, and “wawa” to describe a baby) to traditional medicine and festivals.

On paper, the 2008 Constitution of Ecuador is one of the most progressive in the world, and even seems to embrace the Quechua concept of “sumak kawsay,” or “the good way of living.” Traditionally, this is a difficult-to-translate concept that encompasses reciprocity and harmony with nature.⁴³ But some scholars have criticized its use in Ecuadorian politics, arguing that it has been coopted to describe the opposite: increased consumption at the expense of community identity and sovereignty.⁴⁴ In an analysis of the Constitution, Patricio Benalcázar describes how since the early 20th century, the international pressure to homogenize export markets (via structural adjustment policies that encourage specialization) is a continuation of a colonial pattern that has caused the deterioration of rural identity:

“With European cultural colonization there was planted a pattern of life, a new way which separated the subject from his identity, in a trick of collective historical alienation that caused [the colonized] to think and to act not for the purpose of our own perspectives and well-being as

⁴² Ecuador’s 2008 constitution recognizes 14 distinct nationalities

⁴³ Espinosa 2008.

⁴⁴ Benalcázar, 2009.

people, communities and society, but always for the purposes of an external entity, whose concrete and subliminal power has permeated our consciousness.”⁴⁵

I suspect one reason that Borja is demobilized is because its residents do not share a strong collective identity the way some indigenous communities in Ecuador do. Borja was settled in the 1960s, by colonizers from Quito and Tena arriving in search of cheap land. In a departure from regional trends towards urbanization, the population has grown rapidly in the last twenty years, as jobs in the cities become scarce and the pandemic creates demand for more open-air living.⁴⁶ Many of my interviewees did not describe themselves as being from the Quijos Valley: they were from Quito, or Tena, or Imbabura, or Guayaquil. That matters for collective resource management because of the concept of place-attachment mentioned in the previous section. Tepid personal connections to the valley imply weak place-attachment. It would be disingenuous to claim with certainty that the lost indigenous culture of the Quijos⁴⁷ would have automatically been better stewards of the soil in the 21st century. However, it is clear that the colonial project of the 1964 Agrarian Reform Law and the deliberate homogenization of Ecuador’s many nationalities have done their part to erode both the soil of Quijos valley and the fabric of communities that depend upon it.

One indigenous concept that has nonetheless permeated Ecuadorian culture is that of *minka* (spelled “minga” in Spanish) a Quechua word that describes a shared community effort.⁴⁸ Usually, *minka* refers to events in which the community comes together to perform labor, such as a community trash pickup or tree-planting, but it has also been used in a more metaphorical

⁴⁵ Benalcázar 2009, translation mine- Benalcázar wrote [us] referring to people of the underdeveloped world

⁴⁶ Interviews with Pablo Campaña, Paul Itas, Dilma Cadena, and Marina Vinuesa.

⁴⁷ The Quijos people were only recognized recently as a distinct historical group, having been assimilated into Quechua-speaking neighbor groups by missionaries during the colonial period. (Cuéllar 2011)

⁴⁸ Faas 2017.

way to refer to community initiatives (“educating our children is a shared minga”) and even mass protests.⁴⁹ In some cases, minga has filled in for the state where it has failed to provide a service, such as when communities work to fix a road.

The language of minga, along with a similar reciprocal concept called *ayni*, has been adopted by both domestic and international NGOs to describe development and conservation projects.⁵⁰ Research in nearby Bolivia found that this appropriation both strengthened the tradition of minga, by expanding its use, while also risking some loss of legitimacy due to a history of suspicion towards outside NGOs. While there has been some international NGO activity in Quijos, it is minimal.⁵¹ Instead, some individuals have chosen to participate in development grant programs created by Nestle, with the purpose of improving milk quality and the side-benefit of advancing conservation. For example, Nestle will provide grants to farmers to help access mechanized milking equipment, artificial insemination, and posts for rotational grazing.⁵² These grants are useful to farmers because they can apply for them individually. In Ecuador, in order to apply for government funding, farmers must be part of an association.⁵³ Private grants are more convenient, but often inaccessible to the smallest scale farmers and ranchers who would most benefit (but don’t have the production capacity to provide product to Nestle).

⁴⁹ Peralta 2020.

⁵⁰ Faas 2017.

⁵¹ Valencia 2010, Villarreal and Villarreal 2014.

⁵² Interview with Marino Vinuesa.

⁵³ Interview with Brandon Aliaga (President of the Parish of San Francisco de Borja).



⁵⁴Perhaps the most effective example of civil society in Borja (that was visible to me as a visitor) is Sandra Morocho's birdwatching group, Birdwatchers Quijos. Birdwatchers Quijos is a textbook example of one of Olson's small, mobilized associations. First and foremost a social group that enjoys looking for birds, the group bought a small city plot last year and constructed a tree nursery. They meet twice a week for "mingas" to tend to the nascent trees (all native species good for reforestation, plus some shrubs that attract birds and a few rows of vegetables for the participants) and as often as they can, plant the seedlings on unused or degraded farmland. Birdwatchers Quijos is an exception in the valley which encompasses many of the tactics propelled by scholars for better common-resource management: it is small and decentralized, it is focused on its own local area, and it provides secondary benefits of community (a group of like-minded friends) as well as an opportunity to plant trees.

⁵⁴ Marino Vinuesa, one of the largest producers of the valley. His investments in rotational grazing and genetic improvements to herd have resulted in his winning most agricultural competitions in the valley in the last decade.

In an interview, Sandra Morochó pointed out that her group could get more done than other conservation efforts because of their grassroots nature.

“This organization is different because it isn’t propelled by the government,” she said. “Often one finds organizations that are run by the parish government or the ministry, and they always have to be pushed to be successful; but this is from civil society, we push it ourselves.”⁵⁵



Sandra’s attitude towards the bureaucracy is personal (she used to work in the Ministry of the Environment) but it is also typical of what has been called the “rancher mentality” in the valley. Since Quijos was settled in the 20th century by migrants taking advantage of agricultural

⁵⁵ Birdwatchers Quijos care for their tree nursery in San Francisco de Borja.

reforms,⁵⁶ cultivated land has been associated with food sovereignty and family security⁵⁷, and people generally prefer to have their own businesses (be it a small farm or a shop) than depend on a salary. In short, the general population is not overly friendly to centralized management. This attitude is criticized by some community members as an impediment to progress, but it reflects the valley's history as a place where, just two generations ago, colonists arrived seeking independence and self-sufficiency.

The Ecuadorian Ministry of Environment, in a document detailing its attempts to reduce the number of ranchers trespassing onto Cayambe-Coca National Park, noted this suspicion of state-led action. "Community and social actors... do not favor [park] management of the area, given that for these organizations the Park Rangers and Administrators in the area represent the State in its organizational field and, therefore, it is to [the Park Rangers] that [the community] directs its complaints and demands for solutions to its problems."⁵⁸ In other words, when the government tries to lead the solutions, they are hampered by the public's lack of trust.

Civil society, then, is the primary foundation of mobilization. If people aren't invested in their community, there is no individual incentive to take action for the group. However, civil society should not be mistaken as the *only* ingredient for change. In imperfect democracies (which is all of them,) it is possible to have large mobilizations of civil society that result in little meaningful action. And when it comes to resource management, no single group can provide the solution. As Carlos Villarreal put it, "no one person can do all that needs to be done." Crucially, Birdwatchers Quijos didn't start their project on its own. In order to build a hoop house to protect

⁵⁶ Izurieta et. al., 2014.

⁵⁷ Interviews with Dilma-Cadena, Pablo Campaña.

⁵⁸ Ministerio del Ambiente 2020.

the trees, they received a grant from the Korean embassy⁵⁹, and they do collaborate with the local government to buy soil and sand for the nursery. Besides, as Sandra Morocho pointed out without legislation, every five hundred trees her volunteers can plant hardly stem the five thousand hectares that can be felled in a weekend. “Have you seen salmon; the way they swim upstream?” she quipped. “That’s how we are.”

Civil society works not because it solves problems of resource-management all on its own, but because it builds a strong foundation on which a decentralized government can establish localized, efficient solutions. Unfortunately, local governments in Latin America are historically associated with elite colonial power structures such as the Catholic Church and large landowners.⁶⁰ This perceived corruption, based on centuries of experienced corruption and exploitation, can make smaller landowners wary of participation in civic life.

“It’s always the small producers who suffer the most from the system,” explained Omar Muñoz, one of my interviewees and the former public veterinarian for Borja.⁶¹ Despite agricultural reforms that attempted to redistribute land, small producers still do not have the economic power to negotiate in the official ranching association in Borja, nor do they have the resources or time to organize their own association. And as soon as one administration seems to be paying attention and trying to help, the government changes.

Participation takes time, energy, and resources. When Pablo Campaña attempted to form an association for small-scale producers during his time as Borja’s president, he found willing participants, but none who wanted to lead the group, partly due to the unremunerated time

⁵⁹ Interview with Sandra Morocho

⁶⁰ Korovkin 2001.

⁶¹ Interview with Omar Muñoz.

required.⁶² The successful establishment of an organization for small producers would have moved them further up Arnstein's Ladder of representation, but the community lacked a leader or policy which would provide secondary incentives sufficient to offset the stress and expense of participation.

Conclusion

Reviewing notes from my interviews in the valley, I identified 4 main civil society groups: ecologists, tourism entrepreneurs, small business owners in town, and ranchers. Also involved in the management of the soil are the Ministry of Environment officials (park rangers) and the local government. With a little bit of organization, everyone could benefit: the ranchers could have more productive cows and not need to spend time cutting forest; the rangers could avoid conflict with people and animals; the tourism entrepreneurs could have more business from the national parks; the business owners in town could welcome the tourists without fear of damaging mudslides.

However, there are no easy answers for the Quijos Valley. This classic tragedy-of-the-commons conflict is made complicated by low levels of place attachment and an apparent lack of community trust. The later observation could be confirmed by a future study more focused on relations within the community fabric. My study revealed a pattern in that interviewees expressed a lack of faith in each other, but my interview questions weren't designed to study social conflict, they were designed to collect knowledge about the conflict between ranchers and the parks.

⁶² Interviews with Pablo Campaña, Oscar Muñoz.

Sandra Morocho's birdwatching group isn't going to solve the problem of erosion without extensive coordination with the local government, ranching associations, and business owners. Still, Birdwatchers Quijos is exemplary of the ways that friendship and place-attachment (in this case, via a love for birds and their habitat) can drive a movement to action.

I chose to frame this article around Quijos because it is such a tangible example of a common-pool resource. It isn't nearly as abstract or long-term as something like the climate crisis. Like the climate crisis, however, the potential damage is virtually irreversible- perhaps even more so in the Quijos case, as a good layer of topsoil can take 10,000 years to form.⁶³

I don't believe it is a stretch to say that the factors which limit mobilization in Quijos are comparable to those that limit mobilization in many parts of the world. The trauma of colonialism, the ongoing exploitation of people by their governments, and the globalization of every aspect of our lives have the potential to damage place-attachment and reduce the likelihood of public entrepreneurship. That provides a window for hope. By naming the forces that keep us apart and making an effort to come together- not just as citizens in an election, or even protesters on the street, but as neighbors, friends and support systems- we create an opportunity to re-establish our roots and hold on to our soil.

⁶³ Villarreal and Villarreal 2014.

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LIST OF INFORMANTS

PABLO CAMPAÑA, ex-President of San Francisco de Borja Parish and my primary contact

- 13 November 2021
- 1 December 2021
- 3 December 2021

MARINA ARRELLANO, tourism entrepreneur and rancher in Sumaco

- 14 November 2021
- 1 December 2021

PAUL ITAS, restaurant owner in Borja

- 15 November 2021

GALO FERNANDO VEGA, Borja resident

- 19 November 2021
- 29 November 2021

CARLOS VILLARREAL, Economist and Borja resident

- 18 November 2021
- 21 November 2021

OMAR MUÑOZ, Vet technician and birdwatcher

- 22 November 2021
- 30 November 2021

SANDRA MOROCHO, tourism entrepreneur and birdwatcher

- 22 November 2021

DILMA CADENA, tourism entrepreneur in Sumaco

- 23 November 2021
- 29 November 2021

MARTHA HURTADO, resident and rancher in Borja

- 24 November 2021

HÉCTOR BALLESTEROS, resident and rancher in Borja

- 16 November 2021

BRANDON ALIAGA, current President of San Francisco de Borja Parish

- 25 November 2021

MARINO VINUEZA, rancher in Sumaco

- 29 November 2021

MARIO MEJÍA, ranger in Cayambe-Coca National Park, El Chaco

- 2 December 2021

- 4 December 2021

CRISTÓBAL ACERO, ranger in Cayambe-Coca National Park, El Chaco

- 2 December 2021