
ECOTOURISM, ENVIRONMENTAL PRESERVATION AND CONFLICTS OVER NATURAL RESOURCES*

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Abstract: *Ecotourism has profound social impacts through the transformations it generates in the distribution of access to natural resources. At the heart of this transformation stands the paradox of ecotourism: it exploits natural environments while at the same time depending on their preservation. As a result, ecotourism has increasingly become articulated with environmental policies, in particular the creation of protected areas. Such policies have privileged those environments that are of interest to the ecotourism industry. They have also served to restrict competing forms of resource use. Local populations in particular have seen their access to natural resources diminished. This paper explores interest conflicts between local and external user groups in an ecotourism destination in Southern Bahia. Its focus is on strategies through which external groups related to ecotourism and environmental preservation have sought to appropriate control over natural resources.*

Keywords: *ecotourism, environmental policy, natural resources, social conflicts.*

Resumo: *O ecoturismo tem implicações sociais de longo alcance devido às transformações que ele gera na distribuição do acesso a recursos naturais. O paradoxo do ecoturismo está no cerne dessas transformações: ao mesmo tempo em que o ecoturismo explora habitats naturais, ele depende da preservação destes. Conseqüentemente, cada vez mais o ecoturismo se associa a políticas ambientais, especialmente aquelas que dizem respeito à criação de reservas naturais. Tais políticas têm privilegiado os habitats que interessam à indústria de ecoturismo e têm restringido outras formas de se fazer uso daqueles recursos naturais. Quem tem cada vez menos acesso, em particular, a esses recursos são as populações nativas. O presente artigo examina os conflitos de interesse entre grupos locais e exte-*

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res de usuários em uma região de ecoturismo no Sul da Bahia. O foco do artigo está nas estratégias relativas ao ecoturismo e à preservação ambiental, acionadas por não-nativos, para ganhar controle sobre recursos naturais.

Palavras-chave: *conflitos sociais, ecoturismo, políticas ambientais, recursos naturais.*

September 1998. A large and noisy crowd filled the Municipal Council of Canoas¹, Bahia. Reason for this excitement was that the Municipal Council had summoned Onda Verde, an environmental NGO. The members of Onda Verde consisted of tourism entrepreneurs, academics and other liberal professionals that had migrated in preceding years to Canoas from Sao Paulo, Salvador and other cities. They were summoned by the Municipal Council to give explanations about a proposed environmental education programme. This project was part of the Government of Bahia's strategy to establish Canoas as a leading ecotourism destination. This strategy had already resulted in the construction of an asphalt road and the creation of an *Área de Proteção Ambiental*² (APA), a conservation unit of direct resource use.

Largely represented during the session of the Municipal Council was the population of the Miranda, an illegal settlement at the entrance of Canoas, on a hill overlooking the town and ocean. The Miranda was referred to by people in Canoas as a *favela*³. Its residents were engaged in a conflict with Onda Verde, whose members lobbied for its removal, considering the settlement a danger to the environment. Onda Verde was supported by the tourism sector, fearing for Canoas' image as an *ecological paradise*. The Governor of Bahia had also summoned Canoas' mayor to move the settlement elsewhere.

During this session, the members of Onda Verde were severely questioned. The Municipal Council demanded more transparency and local

¹ Canoas is a pseudonym. As conflicts are an important part of this paper, all names of local places, people and organisations have been replaced by pseudonyms, in order not to cause damage to anyone. In the bibliographic references, the original name of Canoas has been replaced by XXX.

² Area of Environmental Protection.

³ *Favela* is the Brazilian term for slum.

participation in the elaboration of the environmental education programme. Various councillors and other speakers that took the floor also criticised the Onda Verde's attitude towards the local population, which they defined as *ill-intentioned* or *authoritarian*. A resolution was even proposed – and rejected – to declare its leader *persona non grata*. Furthermore, councillors affiliated with the mayor held discourses in favour of the occupation of the Miranda. People involved in the conflict around the Miranda interpreted this as a green light to pursue the appropriation of land. The same day, a multitude invaded the contested area, cut the remaining vegetation and demarcated plots. By the end of the week, the size of the settlement had tripled. Members of Onda Verde claim that this was a well-orchestrated move by Canoas' mayor in order to break the intervention power of the environmental movement and to settle his debt with people whose vote he had received in exchange for the promise of land.

Ecotourism

This event forms a powerful illustration of the entwinements between environmental policies, conflicts over access to land and local–external antagonisms in the context of ecotourism development. At the heart of the matter stands the paradox of ecotourism: it claims to support the preservation of natural environments in the very act of transforming them. Changes do not occur only through direct impacts of tourism development. They also take place more subtly, through socio-political and economic transformations that profoundly alter the balance of power, in particular regarding the access to natural resources.

Ecotourism functions as a clear catalyst of change, in the sense that it incorporates new environments into market economies. It entails a commodification and symbolic reshaping of a variety of natural characteristics, in order to extract use or exchange value from them. In the process, the quality of environments can deteriorate through the construction of tourism infrastructure and over-exploitation of attractions. Still, ecotourism has the pretension of contributing to the preservation of *pristine landscapes* or *fragile ecosystems*, in other words to secure environmental continuity. Moreover, the auto-definition and marketing strategy of the ecotourism sector evolves precisely around this pretension. Simultaneously, it is also a

basic necessity of ecotourism that the environments it exploits remain unchanged, in order to preserve the direct resource base on which it depends and to secure long term profitability of investments. As a result of this paradox, ecotourism has often come hand in hand with new environmental legislation, the establishment of protected areas or the regulation of access to natural resources through environmental management plans. Such interventions are aimed at mitigating the environmental impacts of tourism. However, in practice they also serve to restrict competing forms of natural resource use that might deteriorate them. These consequences of ecotourism's paradox are the subject of this paper.

Ecotourism has received many advocates within the social sciences (Boo, 1990; Eppler-Wood, 1991; Honey, 1999; Khan, 1997; Place, 1991). It has become an economic justification for the preservation of the natural environment (Mowforth; Munt, 1998, p. 168). There is evidence that tourism is one of the most effective strategies to convert use and non-use values of protected areas into concrete economic benefits (Dharmaratne; Sang; Walling, 2000). In the social sciences, "now the tendency seems to be to applaud tourism as a panacea for achieving a wide array of social, economic and environmental goals" (Stronza; 2001, p. 274). Still, as the scene in the Municipal Council illustrates, not all is sunshine in ecotourism paradise. At best, ecotourism is a double edged sword.

One reason for this blind spot in ecotourism literature is that it is "filled with guidelines and 'best practices' for achieving success [...] The ideas are generally prescriptive" (Stronza, 2001, p. 275). Although such an approach may be useful in guiding policy making, it is only of limited analytic value, as it does not allow for a processual perspective to be developed (Galani-Moutafi, 2001, p. 808). Also, much tourism analysis has played down relationships of power, which remain implicit or are absent (Mowforth; Munt, 1998, p. 38, 85-90). However, power is present everywhere in tourism (Cheong; Miller, 2000, p. 372). Ecotourism evolves in a context of great inequality of wealth and power (Rao apud Mowforth; Munt, 1998, p. 38). Its costs and benefits are also distributed unevenly between the various social groups involved. Therefore relationships of power must lie at the heart of the inquiry.

The objective of this paper is to explore interest conflicts between local and external user groups evolving around the development of ecotourism and

the use of the natural environment. The town of Canoas has been chosen as a case study for a variety of reasons. It is increasingly establishing its reputation as an ecotourism destination; it is subject to environmental regulation through its incorporation in an APA; it has a strong external ecotourism sector and an active environmental movement; and serious conflicts have emerged between local and external interest groups over the use of the natural environment. Fieldwork took place from April to August of 1999. Participant observation, semi-structured interviews – individual and collective – and the analysis of documents have been the principal methods of data collection. First, Canoas and its social context will be briefly introduced.

Ethnographic context

Canoas is a small town with approximately seven thousand inhabitants, on the southern coast of Bahia, Brazil. It is the capital of the district with the same name. Until recently, Canoas' economy was fully depending on the cocoa industry. Land use in the region of Canoas, however, has become subject to an intense process of transformation (SCT, 1996a, p 100). Since the end of the 1980's, the cultivation of cocoa has largely become abandoned due to the fall of prices on the world market and a disease that decimated the plantations in all southern Bahia. The economic consequences were devastating, causing large-scale unemployment (SCT, 1996a, p. 118). The ecological impact has also been profound. Other forms of land usage took the place of cocoa, such as cattle-breeding and commercial wood extraction, leading to large scale deforestation. In 1990, 91% of VAT collection in the municipality of Canoas was related to wood extraction (SCT, 1996a, p. 107). Unemployed former workers of the cocoa industry massively resorted to subsistence agriculture on illegally occupied land, in particular the production of manioc. Slash and burn became a common practice, adding to environmental destruction. Migration to the urban zone of Canoas and to Salvador – Bahia's capital – was also a common response to the crisis. In the urban zone, public service and fishing remained the only significant sources of employment.

In response, since 1991 the Government of Bahia has promoted ecotourism as a solution to economic and environmental problems. In 1993 it decreed Canoas and its surroundings a State Área de Proteção Ambiental

(APA). In all South America, the creation of protected areas has been a central part of the response to environmental destruction (Painter, 1995, p. 15). The APA of Canoas embraces thirty kilometres of coast, with a total surface of 149 km². APA is a unit of conservation that permits the continued direct use of natural resources. Its aim is to reconcile environmental preservation with economic development. For this purpose, a management is established that divides the APA into various zones. For each zone specific uses are defined.

According to a former administrator of the APA of Canoas, its creation was required as a mitigating measure by the Inter-American Development Bank (IADB) for financing the asphaltisation of the access road to Canoas. The management plan of the APA was ratified as municipal law by the local government of Canoas in 1997. There is evidence to argue that this APA was created for the purpose of tourism. Simultaneously with its creation, the Government of Bahia's Office of Culture and Tourism launched a tourism programme for the APA with the objective to achieve a capacity of ten thousand beds (CODETUR, [s.d.], p. 11.2). As stated in the APA's management plan, the government's priority motive for its creation was *the development of low-density tourism projects* (SCT, 1996b, p. 80). Furthermore, the administration of the APA and the implementation of its environmental regulations were initially assigned to the Office of Culture and Tourism (SCT, 1996a, p. 94). Only in 1999, responsibility was transferred to the Centre for Environmental Resources in Rio Claro, the main town in the region. At the time of fieldwork, this Centre was being restructured and in practice had not yet factually assumed responsibility. Another actor of major importance in Rio Claro has been the IBAMA – the Brazilian Institute for the Environment, the country's main environmental authority – which has acted upon denunciations of environmental infringements within the APA.

The most important public investment has been the construction of an asphalt road, connecting Canoas to Rio Claro. Inaugurated in 1998, the costs of 16 million US\$ were provided by the IADB. One of the IADB's conditions was that an Environmental Education Programme (EEP) would be executed, to mitigate the road's negative effects on the environment. This programme started in February of 1999. It is beyond the scope of this paper to explore the processes leading to the various interventions described above. This brief introduction will suffice as a background for understanding conflicts occurring at the time of fieldwork.

The 1990's have witnessed a rapid expansion of the tourism industry in Canoas and its surroundings. This expansion has resulted in the establishment of a new, and relatively affluent, community of immigrant tourism entrepreneurs and liberal professionals, originating mostly from the large urban centra of Brazil and from Europe. Most owners of tourism businesses in Canoas – in particular of the more upper-scale ones – are part of this migrant community. As a result, a disproportionate share of direct benefits derived from tourism flow to non-locals. The bulk of the local population are left with unskilled and badly paid jobs. Most of these jobs, furthermore, are only seasonal or episodic. However, given the high level of unemployment many locals still perceived this situation as favourable.

Environmental movement

Approximately ten members of the migrant community are involved in environmental activism. With few exceptions, they have recently migrated from Brazil's large urban centra, have an academic degree and are between 30 and 50 years in age. Half are tourism entrepreneurs, the others hold liberal professions, such as architect or lawyer. Canoas' environmental movement consists of two platforms, an NGO called *Onda Verde*, and the executing team of the Environmental Education Programme (EEP). No local people are represented in these platforms.

Onda Verde was created in 1987 by local people from the town of Canoas, to take care of a shoal of dolphins that had washed ashore. After the group had become non-active due to internal problems a few years later, its administration was taken over in 1996 by several recent immigrants. Since then, *Onda Verde* has known a very active period. Its most significant accomplishment came in 1996, when it prevented through juridical action the parcelling and inhabitation of the land adjacent to one of Canoas' urban beaches. *Onda Verde* initially opposed the construction of the asphalt road. Soon, however, it traded its resistance for an advisory function during the road's construction process. Another of the group's spearheads is the relocation of the Miranda settlement. In 1997, the status of *Onda Verde* was changed from *Movement of Ecological Resistance* to *Environmental Institute*, making it possible to undertake remunerated projects. It entered a partnership with the major environmental NGO in Rio Claro, in its turn affiliated to the US-based Conservation International and supported by the Ford Foundation. The actions of *Onda Verde* have lead to conflicts with the

local population and their leaders. Onda Verde suffered a significant blow when it was publicly discredited during the already described session of the Municipal Council. Its activities have remained suspended since then.

After this setback, Oscar – the key figure of Onda Verde – concentrated on acquiring the execution of the EEP. When the Government of Bahia allocated the project to Onda Verde's partner NGO in Rio Claro, these contracted Oscar as co-ordinator. The three other remunerated members of the project also consisted of immigrants. The entire staff were members of Onda Verde, three out of four were also owners of tourism facilities. Some locals of Canoas became involved in the project, but they all worked as volunteers. Remunerated activities were without exception sub-contracted to other members of the migrant community.

The main component of the EEP is environmental education, with the local population of Canoas as the formal target group. Activities include the organisation of informative meetings, as well as the production of written and audio-visual informative material. A second component focuses on ecotourism. Its objective is to make an inventory of potential ecotourism attractions and to develop a limited number of these. The EEP is another example of how tourism and environmental preservation measures have become entwined in the case of Canoas.

The environmental movement may be small numerically, but it receives considerable support from a number of immigrant tourism entrepreneurs. Both groups seem united in their project to establish ecotourism as the dominant economic activity in the region, and to restrict other forms of land use. The power base of the migrant tourism sector resides mainly in its economic capital and employment generating capacity. The largest tourism business in Canoas, Praias de São Jorge, employs an estimated 120 people, making it the second largest employer of the district, behind the municipality. An important difference between the two is that Praias de São Jorge paid its employees on time, while the municipality at times lagged more than a year behind in payment. Partly sharing the same power base, this makes the tourism sector a serious threat to the local political elite.

The environmental movement is also vested with power in other ways than its alliance with the affluent ecotourism sector. It is backed by formal interventions, such as the establishment of the APA and its regulation; measures of IBAMA against violators of this regulation; the attribution of the EEP; and pressure of the governor of Bahia for the displacement of the Miranda settlement.

Also, its members have more efficient external networks and access to higher levels of decision making than the local population have. An example is Onda Verde's partnership with the NGO in Rio Claro, which makes it part of Conservation International's global network. According to the APA's former administrator, the management plan of the APA and the terms of reference of the EEP have been established in close consultation with Onda Verde and the NGO in Rio Claro. This enabled Onda Verde to incorporate its agenda in these interventions. Examples are the definition of the already urbanised part of the Miranda as an area to be reforested and the addition of an ecotourism component to the EEP, which was not part of the original terms of reference. Through its external networks, Onda Verde also succeeded in appropriating the execution of the EEP without prior public tender. The strong contacts of one member of Onda Verde with regional and national media has helped to mobilise public opinion outside Canoas for its main causes. These outside networks have enabled Onda Verde to influence the course of local events, for example by impeding the aforementioned development of a tourist project on an urban beach and by altering the planned course of the asphalt road to Canoas.

Finally, environmentalism is mainly professed in Canoas by actors with a greater economic and cultural capital. There is a relation of mutual benefit between environmentalism and its advocates. The latter's capital, on the one hand, enhances the status of the environmentalist ideal. On the other hand, adhering to environmentalism has proven to be an effective strategy to gain access to funds, in particular for the development of socio-environmental projects. It also increases cultural capital, by creating a social distinction between adherents and non-adherents. This distinction is hierarchically structured as it implies the necessity of transmitting the environmentalist ideal upon non-adherents.

In sum, a new power group is currently establishing itself in Canoas, consisting mostly of recent immigrants engaged in tourism and environmentalism. More and more of Canoas' physical, social and political space is now being claimed and occupied by this new group. In particular, it has succeeded in appropriating control over the use of natural resources. Unsurprisingly, this has resulted in resource conflicts with the local population. These will be discussed in the following paragraph.

Resource conflicts

Some changes have taken place in the urban zone of Canoas. As often happens in tourism destinations, the centre and seaside are increasingly being occupied by immigrants. They buy houses from locals, usually in order to convert them into tourism facilities.

User conflicts have centred around the Miranda settlement. In 1992, the municipality of Canoas bought 10 hectares for urbanisation, in order to cope with increased migration. The land was deforested by the municipality, in spite of fines from IBAMA. Little by little, settlers moved in. A few years later, however, the then mayor took juridical steps for the eviction of all settlers. The eviction was sentenced by court, but only after the 1996 elections, which saw the election of the same mayor that had initially bought the land. He withdrew the demand. By that time, the settlement consisted of approximately 100 dwellings, sheltering an estimated 500 people. After the session of the Municipal Council described at the start of this paper, the size of the settlement tripled to over 300 dwellings. This means it represents approximately 20% of the total urban population.

Environmentalists and tourism entrepreneurs struggle to have the settlement displaced. Their principal argument is that the settlement – right at the entrance of town – is disastrous for Canoas' image as an ecotourism destination. Onda Verde successfully lobbied to have the area designed as an *Agro-Florestal Zone* in the APA's management plan, with the creation of a *Horto Florestal* – a forest garden – as specific use. This legally prohibits its urbanisation. The adjacent area was designed a *Zone of Permanent Preservation*. Based on this categorisation, Canoas' environmentalists have consistently denounced the residents with IBAMA for environmental infringements, in particular the cutting of trees within the Zone of Permanent Preservation and the pollution of the river flowing by the Miranda. Other interests are also at stake. Onda Verde has proposed a project for the conversion of the area into a Horto Florestal. If the settlers were evicted and the management of the APA would approve this project, it would mean an important financial boost for Onda Verde. A significant detail is that Roberto – key figure of Canoas' environmental movement – owns a pousada⁴ on top of the hill overlooking the Miranda. If the area were reforested, this would significantly increase the value of his pousada.

⁴ Pousada is the Brazilian term for dormitory facilities that range in quality from low budget to reasonably classy; the more up scale accommodations are called hotels.

A plan was elaborated by URBIS – an entity specialised in urbanisation plans – to displace the settlers to an area three kilometres outside Canoas. However, the mayor shows no intention to impose the plan. The alternative location is also rejected by the settlers. According to Milton, president of the Residents' Association of the Miranda settlement, it is too far away from Canoas. Most residents are depending on Canoas for employment and schooling. Another argument is of an ecological nature. The alternative is located close to the main source supplying Canoas with potable water, making its inhabitation a considerable environmental hazard.

The Miranda case suggests that what is at stake is not to maximise the outcome of preservation efforts, but to preserve those areas which are of major tourism interest. Standing at the entrance of Canoas, the Miranda is part of the direct resource base of ecotourism. As expressed by Milton, *it is all about hiding the poor from the eyes of the tourist*. This case also exemplifies how environmental laws are strategically activated in the regulation of other than environmental conflicts. In Brazil, other cases have been documented in which environmental laws were used to settle conflicts around land (Menezes, 2002) and favelas (Fuks, 2001).

It is, however, in the rural zone that the most significant transformations have taken place, leading to conflicts between the migrant community and the local population. There are multiple interests regarding the natural environment of Canoas, its use and its preservation. The conflict centres around the question who has the right to claim, occupy and exploit physical spaces of strategic interest.

The natural environment has become Canoas' principal economical asset. It serves as a resources base for the region's most important economic strategies: ecotourism, subsistence agriculture, cocoa cultivation, wood extraction and environmentalism. As a consequence, whoever controls the use of Canoas' natural environment holds a highly strategic position. The cocoa boom first resulted in a pattern of land concentration. Canoas' tourism potential has served as an even stronger incentive for land appropriation and speculation, in particular in the coastal zone. The land adjacent to Canoas came to belong to a sole owner (SCT, 1996a, p. 100). With the increase in tourism, this pattern has given way to the parcelling of territories into small lots. While a decade earlier estates in the coastal zone measured between 100 and 1000 hectares, by 1996 the average size in the southern part of the APA was of 200 m² (SCT, 1996b, p. 19). Almost all land between the road

and the coast of the APA had been acquired by external actors (SCT, 1996b, p. 15). Local smallholders have remained invariably without land titles to their plots.

Inequalities in access to natural resources have increased with the creation of the APA. The resource uses prioritised by its management plan are environmental preservation and tourism. The categories of *Preservation* and *Conservation* account for 65,7% of the territory. 12,7% of the APA is reserved for the development of tourism infrastructure. The *Agriculture Zone* is limited to 11,7% percent of the APA (SCT, 1998, p. 15). The latter consists mostly of already deforested land, with considerable space occupied by cattle-herding. Forms of land use permitted in this zone are forestry, reforestation, cattle-herding, apiculture, fish farming and “subsistence agriculture through techniques appropriate to tropical environments” (SCT, 1998, p. 19). Current practices of subsistence agriculture, in particular slash and burn techniques, are not compatible with these regulations. They have been strictly curtailed. The establishment of protected areas often entails an abrupt change in local rural economies previously based on exploitation of various natural resources (Place, 1991, p. 187). The implementation of the APA of Canoas has significantly restricted the rural population’s access to natural resources. In particular subsistence agriculturists have been affected.

Interventions by IBAMA are the main vehicle through which restrictions in resource use are imposed. IBAMA only acts upon denunciations. Roberto, key figure in Canoas’ environmental movement, admits that the lion’s share of denunciations to IBAMA of environmental infringements in the APA of Canoas stem from him and his colleagues. This share rises in the case of denunciations against residents of the Miranda. A common practice is to report by mobile phone the burning or clearing of rainforest observed while driving on the road to Rio Claro. The majority of the written denunciations by Onda Verde that I was permitted to consult, are directed against the cutting of trees in the rural zone by subsistence agriculturists. These denunciations are generally backed up by references to environmental laws, rhetorically placing the infringements in the criminal sphere by the use of expressions such as “criminal acts” or “criminal deforestation”.

Various rural leaderships affirm that IBAMA has succeeded in curtailing slash and burn practices within the APA through rigid control and intervention. As these practices are crucial in the rural subsistence economy,

this has had profound consequences. “The land is weak and becomes exhausted after a few years. When this happens, you have no other choice but to clear new land. IBAMA prohibits this, so many people move to town because they can not survive anymore on their own land”, says Evanilson, president of the Association of Rural Workers. He also mentions cases where IBAMA intervened after the felling of only one tree. One subsistence agriculturist was fined over 10.000 Reais⁵ after felling a tree on his land for the construction of a chicken fence. According to Milton, the majority of Miranda residents consists of former subsistence agriculturists that were not able to adjust their life strategies to the APA’s regulations. This implies a mere relocation of environmental problems and the creation of new social problems. The concentration of coastal land in external hands has also curtailed local access to crucial resources. Artisan fishing was a common practice among the rural population to complement their diet. However, many new owners of coastal estates have prohibited access to their land in an attempt to privatise beaches. Many rural families have remained without the possibility to fish.

The struggle for control over natural resources has also led to interest conflicts between federal institutions. In particular IBAMA and the INCRA – the national institute for agrarian reform – have clashed. There are three settlements of INCRA within the APA of Canoas. The settlement of Samaipata, located near the road and consisting of 32 families, has received 810 hectares from INCRA. Of the area expropriated by INCRA, 80% was destined for cultivation. The remaining 20% was defined as a reserve. According to Olivia – spokeswoman of the settlement – IBAMA consistently intervenes when residents of Samaipata try to convert part of the cultivation area to agriculture. As a result, the residents are at a deadlock.

Local people complain about the absence of viable alternatives. Environmentalists promote the cultivation of a variety of fruits as a suitable alternative to current agricultural practices. This alternative, however, is rejected by rural leaderships as not viable. It would require a starting investment for which most subsistence agriculturists lack the means. Also, these fruits would only start yielding sufficient returns after six years. No

⁵ At the time approximately 6 thousand US\$.

financial means are available to bridge this period. The current crops – manioc, potato, means and rice – have a much shorter production cycle, ranging between two and twelve months. At the time of research, ecotourism was not an alternative either for the rural populations, as their participation in tourism was negligible.

Another recurring argument of the rural population is that they are not responsible for most environmental degradation. They claim that the lion's share of deforestation has been perpetrated by the sawmill of a company from the state of Espírito Santo, by middle- and large-scale landowners converting their territory into pasture land, and because of the growing demand for wood from part of the expanding tourism industry. According to Olivia, "it is mostly small-scale deforestation close to the road that the IBAMA and Onda Verde deal with, more extensive deforestation is neither punished nor discussed". She claims that at night trucks loaded with wood pass the settlement, coming from the interior of the APA. Such practices are also reported by informants living in other parts of the APA. People of Samaipata have repeatedly denounced these practices with IBAMA. However, IBAMA has not reacted once.

Part of the explanation for this bias is that IBAMA of Rio Claro only operates during office hours and therefore has no capacity to deal with infringements perpetrated at night. However, it also strongly illustrates the strategic alliance between IBAMA and Canoas' environmental movement. This alliance is clearly perceived by the population of Canoas. According to Olivia, "Onda Verde wants to impose its law upon us by denouncing us to IBAMA". The bias also illustrates the prioritisation of environments that are located within reach of the tourist's gaze.

The data presented so far suggest that environmental preservation is a selective process. Furthermore, environmental education concentrates on the urban zone of Canoas, in spite that the project's staff consider environmental degradation much more serious in the rural zone. And though the local population are defined as target group of the EEP, much of the project's output seems directed at tourists, for example folders, videos and audio tapes with Canoas' attractions and bumper stickers. According to its co-ordinator Roberto, the formal goal of the ecotourism component of the EEP is "to convince inhabitants of the rural zone that ecotourism is an economically more beneficial form of land use than cutting trees or cultivating manioc". In practice, however, its focus is entirely on existing tourism structures and

large-scale entrepreneurs with investment capacity. Efforts concentrate on the coast and the access road. It seems no coincidence that these are also the most important spaces for the tourism industry. Roberto even claims that “in truth, environmental education is only the means to accomplish our objective: the development of ecotourism”.

What constitute critical natural resources at a particular time and place is socially determined (Painter, 1995, p. 7). Environmental preservation is embedded in specific practices, that suggest that some environments are more deserving of being preserved than others. In the case of Canoas, these privileged environments coincide with those that are of strategic interest to the ecotourism industry. The most important stretches of rainforest within the district of Canoas are located on its western borders, at a considerable distance from town and coast. Significantly, they have been left *outside* of the APA and therefore are not protected (SCT, 1996b, p. 16).

The migrant community claim that ecotourism is the economic activity which offers most benefits to Canoas’ natural environment. Simultaneously, they attribute the responsibility for environmental degradation to the local population, in particular subsistence agriculturists. In the name of environmental necessity, this dual argument enables the ecotourism industry to claim access to natural resources and to curtail local competition in the use of these resources. This is not uncommon. There is a tendency among environmental organisations and policy makers to regard local populations as the main threat to the natural environment (Monbiot apud Mowforth; Munt, 1998, p. 264; Troost, 1995). “As a consequence of their vulnerability and lack of power, smallholder producers often have received a disproportionate share of the blame for environmental decline” (Stonich, 1998, p. 29). Impoverishment is certainly an important cause of environmental degradation. The urgency for survival leaves poor people with no other option than over-exploiting natural resources (Painter, 1995, p. 8-9).

However, political ecological research shows that the bulk of environmental degradation is the result of practices by wealthy individual or corporate interests, using natural resources for the purpose of capital accumulation (Painter, 1995; Stonich, 1998, p. 29). Their easy and renewed access to natural resources fails to provide an incentive for using them in a sustainable manner. Both processes are interrelated. The same policies and practices that increase the access of powerful players, contribute to the marginalisation and resulting impoverishment of smallholders. Therefore,

“the crucial issue underlying environmental destruction in Latin America is gross inequity in access to resources” (Painter, 1995, p. 9). In Latin America, the way in which social inequities are institutionalised guarantees the unequal distribution of control over natural resources (Durham, 1995, p. 252).

Not only environmentally degrading practices are intimately related to questions of power, but also the attribution of responsibility for them. Power grants stakeholders access to valuable resources and enables them to divert responsibility for the deterioration of these resources to less powerful stakeholders. The ways in which the attribution of responsibility for environmental problems is used politically, becomes important in the definition of solutions. In the case of Canoas it has generated policies and actions, that partly result in a diminished competition from small stakeholders in the access to natural resources.

The APA as a conservation model is intended to reconcile local economic interests with environmental preservation. In practice, however, the APA of Canoas has substantially restricted the opportunities of local people to pursue their economic survival strategies, granting them little more than a marginal role within the ecotourism framework. Ecotourism is presented to the population of Canoas as a development strategy that will resolve all economic problems. The question, however, is whether tourism can be a viable livelihood alternative in a context in which the most fundamental social problems continue unresolved. The unequal distribution of power not only restricts the local population’s access to natural resources. It also reduces their opportunities to substantially benefit from tourism.

Concluding remarks

The implementation of preservation policies and the rapid pace of tourism development have resulted in the emergence of new, external power groups in Canoas. Gradually, power is shifting away from local to external hands. This results in conflicts over the access to valuable resources. Ecotourism exploits environments while at the same time depending on their preservation. This paradox leads to the restriction of competing forms of natural resource use, in the case of Canoas through the implementation of environmental regulation. A crucial question for understanding environmental policies and their consequences is: what is being preserved, by whom and

for whom (Mowforth; Munt, 1998, p. 12)? In the APA of Canoas, the environments receiving priority are those that form part of ecotourism's direct resource base: the town, the coast and the access road. The driving force behind environmental preservation comes from the environmental movement, the ecotourism industry and government agencies. All these are external actors. Interventions have also mostly benefited external groups, in particular the ecotourism industry and the environmental movement, through an increase of control over natural resources. Local people, on the contrary, have had their access to natural resources restricted. It is by no means the intention to depict the local population as passive victims of events. Though considerable, the power of Canoas' environmental movement and ecotourism sector has its limitations. For example, it has not been sufficient to have the settlers of the Miranda evicted. Also, the migrant community does not have the least influence upon the decisions of local political organs. The resistance strategies of the local population and their leadership, however, are beyond the scope of this paper.

Ecotourism has profound social impacts through the transformation it generates in the distribution of access to and control over natural resources. World wide, the ecotourism industry makes new and increasingly powerful claims on local natural resources. Such claims are secured through public environmental policies, the most visible of which are the creation of protected areas. The establishment of such areas is legitimised by the necessity for environmental preservation. However, as the case of Canoas shows, the logic behind them is just as much to extract economic value from them through tourism development. Such interventions regulate and redistribute access to natural resources. The various social groups involved have unequal influence on the political level where such interventions are decided upon. Some are favoured, such as the ecotourism industry and environmental groups in the case of Canoas. Others are disadvantaged, in particular local populations depending on natural resources for their life strategies. This can lead to over-exploitation of remaining resources or displacement of environmental degradation through migration. As the establishment of protected areas increases inequalities in the access to natural resources, an important question to be further explored, is whether such policy does not indirectly contribute to a net increase or mere displacement of environmental degradation.

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