Friction in the forest: a confluence of structural and discursive political ecologies of tourism in the Ecuadorian Amazon

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ABSTRACT
Tourism in the Anthropocene is a powerful driver of global connections that has direct consequences for social and environmental well-being across the planet. This political ecological analysis of tourism in the Ecuadorian Amazonian presents ethnographic vignettes to account for the ways that interwoven global discourses related to biodiversity conservation and community development are encountered, contested, and leveraged to advance particular approaches to tourism at the local level. We invoke Tsing’s theory of friction to frame these discursive encounters in the context of tourism-related decision-making in the community of Misahuallí, including instances of discursive shifts being leveraged into improved well-being of local residents. This paper makes an important contribution to the scholarship on the political ecology of tourism by bringing the emic perspectives of local residents to the forefront and by demonstrating the value of Tsing’s friction metaphor for analyzing the global connections inherent in tourism. Frictions between inequities and imbalances of power, perpetuated by both the structures and discourses associated with the use of tourism to address conservation and development objectives, remain at the vanguard of tourism research as we move through the Anthropocene.

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Introduction
With over 1.2 billion travelers crossing international borders every year (UNWTO, 2015), the phenomenon of tourism is a powerful force for bringing different ideas, values, worldviews, and discourses into contact with one another. Tourism is thus a hallmark activity of the Anthropocene, largely due to the spike in global tourism in the mid-twentieth century, the period that scholars now refer to as the onset of the Great Acceleration (Steffen, Crutzen, & McNeill, 2007). With anthropogenic disturbances threatening the life-supporting systems of the biosphere, and with the identification of international tourism as one of the primary drivers of socioeconomic and environmental change in this Great Acceleration of the Anthropocene (Steffen, Broadgate, Deutsch, Gaffney, & Ludwig, 2015), it has never been more important to understand the influence that interconnected global activities such as tourism have on local social and environmental well-being.
There have long been debates over the abilities of tourism and ecotourism to achieve lofty environmental conservation goals (e.g. Boo, 1990; Buckley, 2010; Budowski, 1976; Honey, 2008) and sustainable community development objectives (e.g. deKadt, 1979; Mowforth & Munt, 2015). Yet as the “largest scale movement of goods, services, and people that humanity has ever perhaps ever seen” (Greenwood, 1989, p. 171), tourism by its very nature involves unequal power relations. For better and for worse, these unequal relations determine how global and national-level discourses about conservation and development manifest in local-level decision-making. With the United Nation’s inclusion of tourism as a target in three of its Sustainable Development Goals, and the UN’s declaration of 2017 as the International Year of Sustainable Tourism for Development, a global discourse persists about tourism being a solution to social and environmental challenges of the Anthropocene.

As one of the largest and most transformative industries on the planet, tourism “demands a much greater degree of theoretical and empirical interrogation that it is given at present” (Duffy, 2016, p. xvi). The purpose of this paper was to provide an ethnographic interrogation of the ways that international tourism is negotiated by local Indigenous peoples, and how both discourse and structures about conservation and development manifest in their perspectives on tourism in the Amazonian rainforests of the Napo Province, Ecuador. Political ecology provides a useful theoretical framing to this analysis that accounts for where, when, and how conservation, development, and ecotourism discourses intersect in tourism in this region and lead to particular structural outcomes in and around the community of Misahualli. While we endeavor to address both structural (e.g. Blaikie & Brookfield, 1987) and discursive (e.g. Escobar, 1996) aspects of the political ecology approach, our approach draws primarily upon the metaphor of “friction” (Tsing, 2005) to characterize the ways that conservation and development discourses are encountered and emically interpreted in the context of tourism development. Through varied ethnographic vignettes that each present a different manifestation of friction in rainforest tourism, we analyze the power dynamics of tourism-related decision-making and how such dynamics influence social and environmental realities in Misahualli, Ecuador. Given the increased understanding of global and local connection that characterizes the Anthropocene, Tsing’s “friction” metaphor is invaluable as a means of conceptualizing these interfaces in the context of tourism. Introducing tourism scholars to the influential work of Tsing and the friction metaphor is thus a key contribution of this paper.

The sections that follow first briefly introduce the general structural and discursive approaches to political ecology theory. We then review literature on the political ecology of tourism, before giving a nod to Tsing's contribution on encounters of friction. This review leads to the research questions that guide the subsequent analysis. After describing the Ecuadorian study context and the ethnographic research from which this paper is derived, we introduce five varied vignettes that provide ethnographically and theoretically engaged accounts of several frictions occurring at the confluence of different ideas about conservation, development, and tourism in the Ecuadorian Amazon. These vignettes provide the context for addressing our research questions. We conclude this paper by outlining the implications of the friction concept for further research on the political ecology of tourism in the Anthropocene.

Dimensions of political ecology

Political ecology “involves a clarification of the impact of unequal power relations on the nature and direction of human-environment interactions in the Third World” (Bryant, 1997, p. 8). Brosius (1999) suggests two main approaches to political ecology. Integrating elements of human ecology and political economy, a “structuralist” approach to political ecology first emerged from the cultural ecology writings of Wolf (1972) and later came of age with the publication of Blaikie and Brookfield’s (1987) book *Land Degradation and Society*. This early work critiqued the blame levied
on developing nations by asserting that environmental problems in the “Third World” are not a simply result of policy failures in less-developed countries, “but rather are a manifestation of broader political and economic forces associated notably with the spread of capitalism" (Bryant, 1997, p. 8). This structuralist approach emphasizes the persistence of poverty resulting from exhaustion of natural resources (Blakie & Brookfield, 1987; Painter & Durham, 1995). Writings on “structural political ecology situate environmental change and resource conflicts in political and economic contexts with multi-scalar dimensions, ranging from the local to the global, and emphasized the historical processes that influence environmental change” (Campbell, Gray, & Meletis, 2008, p. 202).

Complementing the structural approach, a post-structural (Foucault, 1980), discursive perspective emerged that pinpoints discourse as a means of legitimizing certain forms of development to the expense of others (Brosius, 1999; Campbell et al., 2008). Poststructuralist or discursive political ecologists thus focus on ways that the use of particular language and symbols privileges and empowers certain viewpoints, institutions, and forms of development over others. This perspective is perhaps best embodied in the writings of Escobar (1996, 1999) and the essays in Liberation Ecologies (Peet & Watts, 1996). Scholars working in this vein seek to “dethrone ‘hegemonic’ discourses – those stories that hold a lock on the imaginations of the public, decision-makers, planners, and scientists – so that other possibilities and realities are made possible” (Robbins, 2012, p. 70). Doing so requires better accounting of local, emic perspectives (Harris, 1976), such as those captured through ethnographic methods. In this political ecological analysis of tourism in the Ecuadorian Amazon, we emphasize the emic perspectives that local government officials, tour operators, lodge owners, tourism employees, and other local residents hold about tourism’s contributions the region’s conservation and development challenges.

**Political ecology and tourism**

Stonich (1998) first brought the political ecology perspective to bear on tourism, focusing on visitation to the Bay Islands of Honduras. Characterizing the structuralist perspective, Stonich (1998, 2000) demonstrated how locals have little influence on decisions related to tourism development in their own communities and how little improvement in quality of life results from their participation in tourism, except among previously wealthy elites. Campbell (2007) drew similar conclusions in her exploration of conservation and tourism interfaces in rural Costa Rica. Additional descriptions of local resident exclusion from tourism-related decision-making have been put forth through research in numerous contexts (e.g. Belsky, 1999; Gössling, 2003). Accounting for such global to local dimensions, or glocal dimensions (Salazar, 2010), as well as the historical background of a given context, is thus key to outlining the political ecology of tourism in a given context.

Some political ecologists have focused their critiques on a particular form of tourism – ecotourism – as a neoliberal, market-based strategy that provides privileged access to biodiverse environments for affluent tourists while doing little to address the structural inequalities that maintain poverty for those residing near tropical biodiversity (e.g. Büschel & Davidov, 2016; Duffy, 2008; Fletcher & Neves, 2012; Hunt, 2011). Whether addressing tourism or ecotourism, these studies make it clear that preexisting tensions over structural inequalities in access to resources are frequently exacerbated by international tourism visitation to rural biodiverse areas of the lesser developed world.

Focusing on the language, symbols, and imaginaries associated with tourism, other scholars describe an ecotourism “bubble” (Carrier & MacLeod, 2005) that places priority on Western cultural and environmental values, practices, and worldviews (Davidov, 2013; West & Carrier, 2004). These writings highlight the ways that discourse can enforce political power dynamics, promote particular conservation and development agendas, and prioritize particular scales at which
tourism-related governance occurs. Such findings are presented in recent collections on the political ecology of tourism (e.g., Mostafanezhad, Norum, Shelton, & Thompson-Carr, 2016; Nepal & Saarinen, 2016), and they remain central to discussions of tourism in the Anthropocene.

In spite of these scholarly critiques, the global tourism industry is growing. Tourism continues to receive investment and policy support through entities such as the World Bank (World Bank Group, 2015), U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID, 2015), and the International Ecotourism Society (TIES, 2017), all of which promote tourism as a joint conservation and development tool. More broadly, in 2017 UNWTO is overseeing the International Year of Sustainable Tourism for Development, an agenda and associated discourse that unquestionably characterizes tourism as a policy tool for promoting social and environmental well-being across the globe ensures that tourism continues to have prominent role in discussions of the Anthropocene. Political ecology has clear value for analyzing the ways that tourism forces such abstract global discourses to manifest in local, often contested, realities.

Friction

Tourism is an activity that by its very nature is based on encounters between vastly different cultures, classes, value systems, and discourses. One heretofore unexplored means of characterizing these global–local encounters in the context of tourism is through the metaphor of friction outlined by Tsing (2005). Responding to the idealized notion that in a globalized world, transnational flows of wealth, power, and governance should proceed unencumbered or without friction, Tsing (2005) reclaims the idea of friction to describe those places of encounter where such flows come into contact and are often contested. The concept of friction recognizes the ways that local histories and environments collide with the recent arrivals of globalized structures and discourses. Tsing’s (2005) ethnographic analysis of East Kalimantan, Indonesia, outlines the ways that international capital and global interconnectivity manifest for local people and forests, how global connections alter traditional livelihood practices, and how external structures and discourses associated with rainforest destruction are both locally contested and occasionally leveraged into new ways of being by local populations.

The notion of friction is thus applicable to analyzing the intersections between newly emerging global phenomenon and long-standing local cultural and environmental practices. Despite clear relevance, Tsing’s (2005) influential work and the concept of friction has yet to be cited among tourism scholars or applied to analyses of tourism. As an industry that accounts for 9% of global GDP, 6% of global trade, and one in every eleven jobs on the planet (UNWTO, 2015), tourism is the epitome of the type of globally interconnected activity that characterizes the Anthropocene. Thus, while tourism continues to merit attention from political ecologists (Mostafanezhad et al., 2016), the political ecology of tourism would be served by further attention to the empowering and disempowering frictions that result from tourism’s global interconnectivity, to the challenges this presents for local communities, and to the ways that local emic understandings are leveraged into new opportunities provided by tourism-related friction (Tsing, 2005). Here, we analyze emic accounts of the frictions occurring at the intersection of structural and discursive elements of tourism in the Ecuadorian Amazon through a series of vignettes highlighting tourism’s “makeshift links across distance and difference” that are increasingly responsible for shaping this region in the Anthropocene (ibid, p. 2).

Current research questions

To explore the globally and locally interwoven assertions and manifestations of ideas about conservation and development as they are understood and negotiated by local stakeholders in the
context of international tourism in the rainforest of Ecuador, this analysis is guided by the follow-
ing specific questions:

- How does ecotourism discourse rooted in global and national political institutions circulate in the Amazonian community of Misahualli, Ecuador, manifesting in transformations to local social and environmental conditions?
- Where have these discourses encountered resistance due to conflicting emic understandings (i.e. where does friction exist), and where are these discourses readily accepted, or even leveraged, into locally beneficial outcomes, if at all?
- What can the friction metaphor and the inclusion of the emic perspectives gathered via ethnographic research add to our understanding of the political ecology of tourism and its consequences in the Anthropocene?

**Research context**

The Napo Province is the only Ecuadorian province where over half of the 100,000 residents (56.8%) self-identify as *indígena* (INEC, 2017). Indigenous communities in Napo are comprised of several ethnic groups, including the Cofan (Lu & Bilsborrow, 2011), Shuar, Achuar, Kichwa (Davidov, 2013; Smith, 2014), and Waorani peoples (Lu & Bilsborrow, 2011). Common livelihood strategies across these ethnic groups include wage labor for petroleum companies, cash cropping, handicraft sales, cattle, timber, hunting, and fishing (Lu & Bilsborrow, 2011).

While tourism is currently a minor economic development activity for the region, the percentage of the population working in tourism is growing in recent years (Doughty, Lu, & Sorensen, 2010), partly because ecotourism is seen as having the potential for reconciliation between competing agendas of neoliberal development, ecological conservation, and cultural survival (Davidov, 2013). Yet Buscher and Davidov (2016) and Davidov (2013) critique tourism’s influence on local culture and environments, drawing important attention to the ways that the very same local institutions and government entities discursively support both conservation-oriented tourism and environmentally destructive extractive activities.

Prior to the arrival of international tourism, the Napo region had long been a landscape where competing ideas about development and conservation played out. Early development efforts were characterized by the patronal Spanish *encomienda* system during the colonization period. Later rubber booms in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries led to intense environmental and social exploitation. In recent decades, the region has continued to encounter numerous poorly designed policies for land reform, unsuccessful agricultural reform, and unsound economic development decisions (Davidov, 2013). Also serving as a battleground for conservation discourse, the Napo region is often characterized as containing one of the world’s last high-biodiversity wilderness areas, a large portion of which has been designated as the Yasuní National Park (Bass et al., 2010).

Today, no discussion of conservation or development in the region can occur without reference to the petroleum extraction industry (Sawyer, 2004). In addressing the history of this ecotourism–extraction nexus, Smith (2014) explains how oil firms including Dutch Shell, French Perenco, and Canadian Ivanhoe alienated local communities not on the basis of environmental degradation, but rather on the basis of the firms’ ability to provide sustainable economic development. By touting petroleum revenues as the key means of developing the region, this industry jeopardizes not only the “peak” species of amphibians, birds, mammals, and trees that make “Yasuní...probably unmatched by any other park in the world in total number of species” (Marx, 2010, p. 1171), but also the livelihoods and lifestyles of local Indigenous community members (Sawyer, 2004; Smith, 2014).
Ethnographic research

The data presented in this paper were derived from ethnographic research undertaken in and around Misahuallí, Ecuador. The second author first visited this region in 2003, and the first author spent two seasons of dedicated fieldwork in the Misahuallí region in 2013 and 2016. Both researchers were involved in the conceptualization and design of this research, and both authors collaborated closely on the preparation of this manuscript. Here, the overall scope of methods employed in this project is described.

Study site

Tena, Napo’s provincial capital, is the region’s principal urban zone. Here, an array of tour operators provides services to visitors looking for adventure activities (e.g. white water rafting, caving) and eco-cultural tourism (e.g. canoe sightseeing, Indigenous cultural demonstrations, local cuisine). Puerto Misahuallí (hereafter simply Misahuallí) is 22 kilometers, or a 25-minute taxi ride, from the center of Tena. This community sits at the intersection of the Misahuallí and Napo Rivers. Its population is a mix of Indigenous peoples, non-Indigenous Ecuadorian natives, and a smaller expatriate population of Americans and Europeans. Tours out of Misahuallí range in length from one to five days and generally include sightseeing throughout riverside communities, rainforest hikes, tubing and kayaking, and camping in rustic cabins. Several Indigenous community tourism projects dot the nearby riverbanks. These projects also offer cultural demonstrations, traditional dance, lance throwing, cooking, and interpretation of Indigenous knowledge of rainforest ecology. Nearly all tours require travel via motorized canoes that depart from Misahuallí multiple times daily.

Data collection

Data were collected via semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and archival research. The semi-structured interviews were all conducted in Spanish, aside from one. They explored themes including but were not limited to a) leadership and entrepreneurship in tourism; b) representation of Indigenous culture in tourism; c) day-to-day operations of lodges and tour agencies; d) general characteristics of typical forms of tourism in and around Misahuallí; and e) the degree of local vs. foreign ownership and management of tourism projects. They targeted culturally specialized informants (Bernard, 2011) with expertise in the tourism industry in and around Misahuallí. A diversity of resident perspectives was sought to capture a breadth of local, primarily Indigenous, community stakeholder perspectives on tourism in the region. Additionally, frequent travel occurred to Tena to meet with regional Ministry of Tourism officials and participate in guided excursions to the municipal park, Parque Amazonico la Isla.

Twelve key informants were self-identified Indigenous residents, and four were local non-Indigenous Ecuadorian natives. An additional three informants were expatriate lodge owners hailing from outside of Ecuador (i.e. France, Colombia, and Chile/USA, the latter accounting for the only interview conducted in English). Although they represent a small proportion of our informants and an even smaller portion of the population in Misahuallí, expatriate residents represent an important manifestation of global interconnectivity and their views were also sought out. Qualitative data from 19 semi-structured interviews provide the bulk of the data analyzed here. These informants elaborated extensively on themes of local and national tourism policy, forms of tourism advertisement, notable successes and failures of tourism in the region, funding of regional development projects, and future directions for tourism in the region.

Ethnographic data were also obtained through spontaneous informal interviews that occurred with residents in Misahuallí on a daily basis. These encounters yielded emic insight into views of Ecuadorian national and international tourists, the varying ways that tourism businesses are
structured and operated, and the influence of four main business-owning families in the town. Participant observation then consisted of tourism activities including boat trips to tourism projects, tours of lodge premises, meals with lodge owners and employees, and informal interactions with visitors to tourism projects. These informal interview and participant observation data were documented in detailed fieldnotes (Musante & DeWalt, 2011). Lastly, archival resources were gathered from Web sites of local tourism agencies, reports from locally active NGOs, and government sources including the Ecuadorian Ministry of Tourism.

**Analysis**

Field notes and interview transcriptions were compiled into a corpus of ethnographic data within MAXQDA. An initial open coding process identified emergent themes based on repetitions in responses, local resident or Indigenous categorization of phenomenon, use of metaphors and analogies to convey local perspectives, and theory-related materials (Bernard, Wutich, & Ryan, 2016). Iterative coding leads to more coherent categorization of these themes and the recognition of tensions and friction between competing discourses. As opposed to providing an exhaustive, in-depth account of a particular political–ecological friction in Misahuallí, the approach here instead presents a breadth of vignettes that each provides an emic view of the friction resulting from encounters with discourses associated with conservation, development, and tourism in this region of the Ecuadorian Amazon.

**Friction in the forest**

The five vignettes that follow each meant to represent a place of encounter (Tsing, 2005). Through vignettes, “an analyst builds a description of an event, activity, or person drawing the description directly from field notes” (Musante & DeWalt, 2011, p. 197). These vignettes were chosen as they provide maximum variation accounts of global–local friction that tourism generates and, in some cases, alleviates. The first vignette centers on emic Indigenous residents’ interpretation – and support – of Ecuadorian president Rafael Correa’s change of policy from biodiversity conservation to petroleum extraction in the highly biodiverse Yasuní National Park. A second vignette moves toward the regional level of Tena to provide an account of the ways in which the juxtaposition of petroleum-driven development and ideas about environmental conservation has unfolded in the recent history of an interpretive eco-park. In the third vignette, the local mayor is profiled. His perspective on social and economic development needs of his district is analyzed to reveal how shifting attitudes toward tourism are influencing the development investments in Misahuallí. A fourth vignette then compares emic Indigenous and expatriate views on the appropriate approaches to tourism. The fifth and final vignette illustrates an event unfolding over time – the creation of a women’s cooperative – that transformed traditional livelihoods and gender roles into new cultural patterns among an Indigenous community near Misahuallí.

**Vignette #1: globally significant biodiversity meets a crude industry**

Discourse serves as a means of legitimizing certain forms of development to the expense of others (Brosius, 1999). Nowhere is this truer than in the greater Napo River region, home to Yasuní National Park, regarded as one of the most biologically diverse places on the planet (Bass et al., 2010; Finer, Moncel, & Jenkins, 2010). The only two existing voluntarily isolated Indigenous groups in Ecuador inhabit the park, along with an additional 3,000 contacted Indigenous people belonging to Kichwa and Waorani groups. Yasuní is currently one of three “recommended destinations” in Amazonia promoted on the government’s official travel Web site (Ecuador Travel, 2017). Seemingly at odds with the publicity of this Amazonian rainforest as an idyllic destination
for adventurous nature travelers is the occurrence of petroleum extraction, which has been the major driver of social and environmental change in the Ecuadorian Amazon since the 1970s when oil speculation swept across the region (Sawyer, 2004; Büscher & Davidov, 2016). Driven by large multinational investments and generating massive revenues for the country, oil has subsequently risen to become Ecuador’s primary export (Sawyer, 2004; Smith 2014).

In 2007, the year of his election, President Rafael Correa announced to the United Nations the presence of large deposits of crude oil in the Ishpingo-Tambococha-Tiputini (ITT) field of Yasuní National Park. Correa declared that these reserves would remain underground indefinitely under the condition that the international community supports the Yasuní-ITT initiative (Bass et al., 2010). Through this attempt to “put social and environmental efforts first” on an international stage, Correa offered to set up a trust to collect $3.6 billion, or half of the revenues the state would have otherwise collected if the oil were actually extracted. This money was to then be invested in renewable energy projects throughout the country. The Yasuní-ITT initiative called upon international governments, civil society organizations, socially and environmentally responsible private sector companies, and citizens worldwide to contribute to the trust and keep the oil underground (Larrea & Warnars, 2009).

The Yasuní-ITT initiative brought Ecuador and Correa’s conservation and development discourse to the global stage. At home, the president leveraged this plan into strong support among some Indigenous residents of Misahualli. In the early summer of 2013, several interviewees expressed respect for their country’s elected leader. At that time, Correa had made two visits to the community since his election as president. One woman, a local community leader, believed Correa to be a savior of sorts. She recalled that during his visits to the community, Correa made sure to describe how his administration had procured an existing private multinational petroleum company in nearby Waorani territory. Motivation behind this purchase, according to the president, was to provide communities with more than just cash payouts. Correa promised school buildings, futbol fields, and potable water systems. Correa’s efforts to campaign for, provide, and verbally reinforce more sustainable, lasting compensation for petroleum activities were commendable for this informant, despite the fact that contamination from extractive activities was already well documented in the region.

Another informant in her late 20s felt empowered by Correa’s discursive tactics to bring global environmental issues to the local stage. His ability to speak the Kichwa language also earned admiration, and she quoted his statement made during one of these visits, “I am Kichwa, even though I don’t have Kichwa blood, because we are a multicultural country”. Elaborating on the influence of Correa’s speeches, this respondent felt her Indigenous culture mattered to the president, to the larger Ecuadorian community, and through the initial efforts to establish the Yasuní-ITT, to the world at large.

Yet in August of 2013, the Yasuní-ITT fund had raised just $13 million in donations. Abruptly, Correa and the Ecuadorian government canceled the plan and liquidated the trust. The administration’s explanation for this shift in policy was that without international support, biodiversity conservation was untenable. Oil exploration and drilling would have to move forward in the national park as an “economic obligation”, that is, a means of bringing development to the country’s poor. In a nationally televised speech, Correa argued:

The world has failed us… it was not charity that we sought from the international community, but co-responsibility in the face of climate change… the fundamental factor of this failure is that the world is a grand hypocrisy. And the logic that prevails is not that of justice, but of power.

The Yasuní-ITT initiative, and especially President Correa’s interpretations of it on the global stage, positioned Ecuador as a social and environmental leader among developing countries, one that had been victimized by the failure of more powerful and wealthy nations to act on behalf of the globally significant cultural and biological diversity in the country’s Amazonian rainforest. As in his visits to Misahualli, Correa situated conservation and development discourses in
opposition, though this time to establish a hegemonic consensus among the Ecuadorian people that other nations’ governments, companies, and individuals were to blame for the continued social and environmental disruptions in the Amazon.

The Yasuní-ITT initiative and its unrealized outcomes embody numerous frictions that result when well-meaning global discourse related to an unquestioned need to protect biodiversity encounters a strong nationalist development discourse that prioritizes economic development as a means of confronting poverty (Tsing, 2005). Initially emboldened by rhetoric about how the preservation of Yasuní National Park would “combat global warming by avoiding the production of fossil fuels in areas which are highly biologically and culturally sensitive”, Correa craftily evaded political responsibility for proceeding with extractive activities in the Amazon. In a widely viewed speech, he maintained that civil and governmental entities across the globe share responsibility for the conservation, or not, of the Amazonian region; this is a similar message of Ecuadorian solidarity to that which he conveyed directly to respondents in Misahuallí during his 2013 visit.

As premiums on crude oil strengthen connections between the global markets and this rural biodiverse rainforest along the Napo River, Correa’s handling of the Yasuní-ITT initiative provides an exemplar of the intertwining of conservation and development structures and discourses at a national level, and how an elected leader leverages them for political purposes, and how the resulting policy descends metaphorically from the national government in Quito down the rivers of the Amazonian region to directly affect emic perspectives of the social and environmental well-being of local communities.

Vignette #2: a regional manifestation of development in the tourism–extraction nexus

Political ecology is effective for situating environmental change and resource conflicts in political and economic contexts across local to the global scales and in ways that emphasize historical processes influencing change (Campbell et al., 2008). Such change is underway in the provincial branch office of the Ministry of Tourism in Tena. This office sits across the Pano River from Parque Amazonico la Isla, a 25-hectare municipal park that initially served as a valuable environmental interpretation center for visitors and Ecuadorian schoolchildren upon opening in 1995. Currently, the park is in disrepair and closed to the public. According to a local environmental engineer in the regional Ministry of Tourism office, for the past 20 years, funding for the project has intermittently come from several entities. It was established by the Ecuadorian government using revenues from oil exploration and drilling. Initial construction included a now-faded billboard standing over the park’s entrance, boasting “El Petroleo impulsa el Buen Vivir!” (Oil drives the Good Life!). This expression invokes the Buen Vivir nationalist discourse and movement underway in Ecuador (and across South America) at the time that called for alternatives to predominantly “Western” forms of development (e.g. Gudynas, 2011). Yet the billboard’s message, and its location in a nature park, is an illustration of contradiction and irony. When a Ministry of Tourism official was interviewed, he was asked about the Petroleo billboard and the paradox it represents sitting in an environmental interpretation center. Although he acknowledged that oil extraction is clearly at odds with the environmental education encouraged through the park’s interpretive efforts, support persists for the sign since it represents Ecuadorian support for local development. Clearly, there is a friction between competing conservation and development discourses.

Another such frictional example occurs in the park’s facilities. In 2009, a $50,000 grant from the US Embassy provided funding for refurbishments, new educational equipment, chairs, desks, cabinets, and projectors for library and laboratory buildings. The grant came with the arbitrary condition that US Civil Rights history be worked into the curriculum for Ecuadorian schoolchildren who visit the park. Evidence of the grant manifests in the form of plaques inscribed with
the US Embassy logo that embellish all signs in the municipal park and in a photo exhibit of US Civil Rights leaders on display in the library. The project has been at the mercy of whichever institutional entity is willing to invest at a given time and a shifting set of stipulations attached to such investments.

Eliminating such stipulations, Tena’s mayor cut funds to the park completely between 2009 and 2015. Operations at Parque Amazonico ceased for several years. Resident animals were rehomed, and small interpretive “bio-stations” dotting the trails around the park were disassembled. In 2015, a newly elected mayor once again reassessed the park and worked it back into the provincial budget. Yet interviewed officials still express concerns about a continued, reliable source of funding, even as the Napo provincial branch of government works to invigorate the park and prepare it to once again receive guests. The park is valued as a community resource, and earmarked provincial budget funds provide local Ministry of Tourism officials with the flexibility to organize its educational programs based around native species, biodiversity, and the importance of conservation.

With the US Embassy’s gift expended, officials no longer feel inclined to teach US Civil Rights history. The inscribed plaques remain in place. Relics of petroleum industry funding persist, including the billboard. Coupled with a criticism of Western forms of development that is inherent in reference to Buen Vivir, this sign serves as a symbol of nationalism, which is more emically desirable than discourse originating in the “West” about the US Civil Rights movement, embodied in the US Embassy plaques. The competing messages on these two signs represent an encounter of friction. Further friction comes into play when visiting tourists, both national and international, view this billboard and draw their own conclusions about the discourse it conveys regarding funding for conservation and development in the region. Such short touristic encounters are likely to overlook the nationalist explanation of the sign’s persistence and instead arrive at the conclusion that oil continues to fund the park’s existence when, ironically, it is their own presence via the Ministry of Tourism that supports the park’s operations.

Vignette #3: a discursive shift in local development priorities

Tsing’s (2005) concept of friction recognizes the ways that local histories and environments collide with the recent arrivals of intertwined global structures and discourses. Tourism development is driving such a collision in the community of Misahualli. The Napo provincial government’s budget supports municipal projects, including maintenance and renovation to Misahualli’s central plaza. This plaza is the epicenter of the town’s tourism activity and, as noted below, serves as a focal point around which frictious discourses around desired forms of development in the community are articulated. Not coincidentally, visitors to this plaza regularly encounter a troop of 30 capuchin monkeys perched among the surrounding trees. While these wild animals are free to roam throughout the town, they know enough to congregate where the tourists do. In the plaza, they find opportunities to harass newly arrived groups of foreign and domestic visitors, often conspiring to obtain sweet snacks while visitors snap a photo. They have become Misahualli’s accidental mascots, just as the plaza has become the accidental hub of tourism activity.

In the summer of 2016, the plaza was completely encapsulated in a light green tarp as reconstruction and remodeling were underway. The mayor of Misahualli at that time had first been elected in 2009 and was reelected for a second 5-year term in 2014. He also owned and operated the largest convenience store in the town center. His family moved to Misahualli when he was four months old, and he attended the local school system alongside Ministry of Tourism officials mentioned earlier. On a daily basis, the mayor could be observed inside his storefront. As he leaned on the cement ledge facing the sidewalk, residents frequently stopped by to talk throughout the day. During two separate interviews, it was noted that these visits consisted of both friendly greetings and more pressing discussions regarding town matters.
When first encountered at this daily post, the mayor was eager to discuss the plaza renovation project underway across the road from his storefront. He proclaimed the revitalization of the plaza as a victory for him and his employees. He provided a narrative about the tireless efforts of him and his staff to convince the provincial government that plaza upgrades were needed. In response to an inquiry about the problem with the plaza prior to the new construction, he replied:

No, no, no. It was just old. Remodeling. Now the park will be more open, so people can walk through (pulls out a large, rolled-up map) trees, walkways, (he lays his finger over three structures dotting the center) these are for the monkeys to climb. This is a center area here. It’s very different. It’s going to take two months; in August it’s done. The price was very high, from the provincial government budget.

Although these changes do not seem especially crucial, his enthusiasm for the project was evident.

The mayor later listed his duties for the forty surrounding villages, all part of the Misahuallí township, stating,

Roads, electricity, we have to help them out with all of these things. Now we are doing projects to make sure there’s clean water. In one or two more years, each community will have it. It’s difficult, some of [the communities] are very far away. It’s much easier to help the communities that are more organized and closer.

In recounting typical mayoral duties, a palpable shift in the enthusiasm was evident between his unimpassioned descriptions of basic development services needed by the region’s residents and a more animated discussion of the more recent renovation projects related to increasing the number of tourists visiting the region. This contrast in enthusiasm reveals a negotiation of friction between competing development discourses. When asked whether the plaza was the best place to direct provincial government funds, he emphatically prioritized the needs of tourism, stating, “yes, but more. For water fountains, things like that. It’s better than nothing. Tourists that come here want to see a beautiful park. This is our picture; this is what we show the world”.

When prompted to reflect back on the budget for plaza refurbishment, the mayor indicated he was increasingly disinclined to direct investment toward community projects related to electricity, roads, clean water, and other common development concerns.

That shifts have occurred in priorities for development, and the governance of tourism is not surprising given that the mayor, like many other residents in Misahuallí, attributes 90% of the community’s employment opportunities to tourism. Given that Lu and Bilsborrow (2011) place regional estimates at no more than to 45%, this is an obvious overstatement. Yet the mayor’s rhetorical purpose here is to emphasize that the money available from the provincial level government for typical development projects in Misahuallí is highly limited, hinders his effectiveness, and holds the community back. He feels inclined to base Misahuallí’s development priorities on the money his local government can access consistently. For the time being, what is consistently available is for improvements that benefit the tourism industry, such as beautification of the town plaza. For better or for worse, this politician’s efforts to align his personal and financial priorities with the global tourism market in an attempt to attract additional visitors to his community have pushed enthusiasm, and potentially funding, for basic development services to the side. Thus, existing frictions between colliding economic and social development discourses are renegotiated so as to procure any provincial funding available.

Vignette #4: locally contested ways of knowing and the production of tourism

As Tsing (2005) notes, competing structures and discourses associated with conservation and/or development are often locally contested. Such frictious contests are underway among Indigenous, local non-Indigenous, and expatriate residents engaged in tourism around Misahuallí. Although it is difficult to explicitly separate out these groups and explore the
manifestations of tourism knowledge they apply to their services, contrasting narratives emerged from informants’ responses to similarly framed questions regarding views on tourism and community. Interactions among people with unequal or different ways of knowing, and who work to accommodate themselves to the global force of tourism, may lead to the emergence of new or unprecedented cultural forms and discourses (Tsing, 2005). As one such example in the tourism context, one expatriate lodge owner shares his opinion on benefits or drawbacks of foreigners owning local tourism operations, stating,

There is no product like this one in the whole area, okay? The way we do tourism, cultural tourism, I haven’t seen. There’s around 27 places here, I’ve stayed in all of them. And the first thing that you notice is that the owners don’t live there. We live here the whole year. This is my house, this is where I have breakfast (gestures around the guest dining area).”

This owner espouses a sub-discourse related to tourism in which his operation prioritizes the experience for visitors and thus provides the ideal service, a service without a comparable alternative among the local counterparts.

This expatriate also espouses a particular stance toward the lifestyle choices appropriate for lodge owners. He elaborates on his lifestyle as follows,

You see I don’t have a TV; here we don’t have TV. I am un-contacted with the world … here you are un-contacted with everything. You don’t know what is happening out there (gestures upriver toward Misahualli and Tena). At least I don’t give a s**t. If Trump gets elected it’s not my problem. If Greece is in crisis, it’s f*****g their problem. If Europe is in crisis, it’s their problem.

This informant actively sought out a particular lifestyle that allows a separation from “out there”, which seems to represent not just the USA, Greece, and Europe, but also more developed countries in general.

He later explains a personal motivation and reasoning for his marginal living, extending this personal discourse into a rationale for extensive solo trips into Waorani territory for months at a time. He feels that this authenticates the opportunities his lodge provides for guest interactions with other local Kichwa residents, their traditions, and their ecological knowledge. These web advertisements and personal reasoning seem to overlap, yet there is a notable disagreement between the owner’s own isolationist rationale for inhabiting the lodge year-round and the cultural interactions encouraged for potential lodge visitors on the Web site.

Even more friction is evident in comparison with the approach taken by lodge owners and managers in Indigenous communities around him. In a region predominantly populated by Indigenous residents, expatriate sub-discourses related to lifestyle and isolation obtain little traction. When similar questions were posed to a Kichwa male who manages a small tour operator in the center of Misahualli, his emic view openly contested foreign ownership in favor of the benefits that community-owned tourism yields. He states,

When there is a foreign owner, they don’t act… For example, we are guides here. Some of those other [owners] are in Quito, in Europe, and just the administration is here. If you need the management in community [tourism], you can go right to the people. You can communicate to their face, and converse. This is the difference.

While this local Kichwa manager exhibits little disagreement with the expat’s concern for good products and services, he reveals friction with a discourse that favors foreign-owned projects, emphatically situating his own project in diametric opposition.

The reason for this friction is that community owned and operated tourism is emically viewed as contributing directly to the needs of communities that may otherwise be at risk under foreign ownership:

And these people don’t know what [communities] need, while we, if I bring my group, I already know what I can do for this location. This is the difference. For example, if you are an [outside] owner, you visit the communities on trips. Sometimes you neglect to give the help that is really needed. While I’m here, I am a
guide, I have more, how can I say… I have the idea to help. So a community that we solicit, we give
directly to the community.

The alternative narrative offered here indicates that tourism should prioritize the obligation to
local Indigenous communities engaging in tourism. As a local guide and expert in Amazonian
biological and cultural diversity, this informant claims an authority to providing services or deciding
where to spend group money in the communities when he arrives at a particular location with tourists.

While by no means exhaustive examples or the only contested discourses between foreign
owners and local Kichwa tour operators, the contrasting perspectives presented here provide evi-
dence of ongoing friction between different, contested ways of approaching tourism. A clear fric-
tion exists between expatriate discourse that prioritizes the visitor experience and a competing
emic discourse that prioritizes the development outcomes for local communities. This friction
may exacerbate the differences between these business owners and the market segments they
serve. Tourists visiting these projects encounter misconceptions and misinformation embodied in
particular discourses about who has the most moral authority to operate tourism projects in
the region.

Vignette #5: empowering encounters of friction

The interface between global discourses and local traditions does not always result in the exacer-
bation of conflict between people and environments involved in tourism. As Tsing (2005) notes,
“the effects of encounters across difference can be compromising or empowering” (p. 6). As trad-
tional subsistence lifestyles of Indigenous communities across the Amazon have come into con-
tact with globalized markets, namely natural resource extraction, small-scale tourism has
occasionally proven to be a mechanism through which communities can effectively conserve
both natural and cultural resources (Stronza, 2010). As such resources are renegotiated and real-
igned, new cultural patterns can emerge (Tsing, 2005). This is the case near Misahualli with the
Shiripuno Lodge. This operation provides a local example of how Indigenous community institu-
tions can shift over time to bring about new systems and discourses about gender empower-
ment, leading to greater autonomy and sustainable income for women.

Located a few minutes from Misahualli via river transport, Shiripuno is a traditional Kichwa
community. In 2005, with assistance from a small French NGO, community members established
the Association of Kichwa Women of Shiripuno, Misahualli, or Amukishmi. The genesis of this
local women’s association corresponded to the formation of a new ecolodge just outside the
community. At that time, community members submitted a legal statute to the Ministry of
Economic and Social Inclusion to formalize both the women’s association and the ecotourism
project. The statute’s wording details leadership roles in the association, expectations of mem-
bers, and sanctions for neglecting duties. Structural engagement horizontally with a foreign NGO
and vertically with the Ecuadorian Ministry of Economic and Social Inclusion has facilitated
Shiripuno’s entrance into the tourism market.

A notable institutional outcome that emerged from these transformations is a consensus
among Amukishmi’s women about the need to confront machismo attitudes. The registered stat-
ute outlines specific steps to be taken when instances of domestic abuse are brought to the
group. A member of Amukishmi notes that this new discourse related to gender empowerment
is atypical among communities in the region and encounters friction in a region where men his-
torically, “wanted the women to stay in their houses … they didn’t want the association … there
were fights, hits, mistreatment because of the project; [the men] didn’t want it” (Marcinek &
Hunt, 2015). As has been further elaborated elsewhere, a global connection to the NGO and the
resulting increase in regional engagement for women involved in the administration of an eco-
tourism project have fostered an increase in social capital (Marcinek & Hunt, 2015), and thus a
reduction in the friction for Indigenous women to participate in local and even regional decision-making. This has in turn supported Shiripuno’s efforts to maintain tradition, conserve natural and cultural resources, and transform existing conditions into newfound structured institutions.

As events have unfolded around the development of this women’s cooperative and the associated ecolodge, newfound institutions brought about through entrance into tourism are Shiripuno’s effort to reject an oil pipeline through their land in 2012. This decision required the community to weigh the offerings of the oil contract, including water wells, food, and other trinkets. These considerations echo a discourse associated with petroleum leading to “el buen vivir”, mentioned in the first vignette. Yet the community president took Amukishmi’s “voz y voto” (voice and vote) into consideration along with their verbalized encouragement to consider the benefits of refusal, notably “a different lifestyle for his children… [and] rich cultivated lands”. Through this alternative discourse, their new legal recognition, and their adherence to a Kichwa value of respect and coexistence with nature, Amukishmi overcame the discursive friction and influenced the community-level decision to eschew petroleum contracts in favor of an ecotourism project aimed at conserving local natural resources (Coria & Calfucura, 2012; Smith, 2014; Stronza, 2010). In this example, confronting existing gender structures with new forms of political empowerment provided transformative and empowering friction leading to the unmaking of the machismo hegemony and that now stands “in the way of the smooth operation of global power” of the oil industry (Tsing, 2005, p. 6).

Discussion

This paper has examined the encounters and frictions between ideas about conservation, development, and tourism in the Napo province of the Ecuadorian Amazon. To explore the globally and locally interwoven assertions and manifestations of conservation and development as they are emically understood and negotiated by local stakeholders, we asked three broad questions. First, how does ecotourism discourse rooted in global and national political institutions circulate in the Amazonian community of Misahualli, Ecuador, manifesting in transformations to local social and environmental conditions? The vignettes presented here provide several sharp relief examples of global conservation and community development discourses intertwining both within and outside the context of tourism in and around Misahualli. Rather than reinforcing the divergent structural and post-structural threads within political ecology scholarship, these examples highlight not only the intersections of these two threads, but also how inseparable these threads are from one another in a highly interconnected Anthropocene. Structures emerge from discourses, and discourse flows back and forth between global and local scale via particular structural channels. In this analysis, the phenomenon of ecotourism produces structures and also provides a channel that introduces alternative and competing discourses about the proper way to conserve and develop the Ecuadorian Amazon. The political ecology of tourism in the Anthropocene should thus reconcile the contributions of both its structural and post-structural, discursive traditions.

Second, we asked where have these discourses encountered resistance due to conflicting emic understandings (i.e. where does friction exist), and where are these discourses readily accepted, or even leveraged, into locally beneficial outcomes, if at all? The vignettes provide several examples of where resistance and friction occur, with at least some evidence of discursive shifts being leveraged into locally beneficial outcomes in the last two vignettes. While we acknowledge that tourism is far from devoid of environmental consequences, as numerous environmental anthropologists have noted (e.g. Büscher & Davidov, 2016; Duffy, 2008; Fletcher & Neves, 2012; Hunt, 2011), those consequences are likely to miniscule in relation to the widespread devastation to ecosystems created by extractive activities such as the petroleum industry, and thus a more sustainable option for local Indigenous populations struggling to maintain
cultural integrity amid aspirations for improved quality of life. Exploring additional examples of the loosening or elimination of friction that has limited the capability of Indigenous peoples to achieve those aspirations will be a fruitful avenues for further research.

Finally, we asked what can the friction metaphor and the inclusion of the emic perspectives gathered via ethnographic research add to our understanding of the political ecology of tourism and its consequences in the Anthropocene? The political ecology of this biologically and culturally diverse region accounts for numerous instances of friction between those espousing competing discourses on the proper approaches to tourism, conservation, and development. The data presented here demonstrate how discourse related to the development of tourism privileges particular uses of biodiversity and approaches to development, and how these discourses are reflected in local emic understandings of the transforming social and environmental conditions in Ecuadorian Amazon. Friction provides a powerful metaphor for assessing not only the global connections between the structures and discourses involved in the production of tourism, but also for the dynamics of Indigenous cultural change as new ways of knowing and being are assimilated into traditional understanding and practices. Given the loss of biological and cultural diversity underway at the global level in the Anthropocene, the ability to negotiate friction between old and new is likely to be directly related to the likelihood that particular Indigenous cultures persist in the face of such threats. Future research will be needed to test these hypothetical relations suggested by the analysis here.

Conclusion

In this era of the Anthropocene, understanding of the global interconnectedness of human activity and its consequences for the planet is at an all-time high (Steffen et al. 2007). There is growing consensus that we are approaching ecological and climatic thresholds as represented by the nine Planetary Boundaries (Steffen et al., 2015), yet other “boundaries” are evaporating via increased global to global, global to local, and local to local connections. Political ecology remains a valuable theoretical framework for assessing such global–local connectivity and its consequences. As the biggest movement of people across international boundaries outside of war, tourism is a massive industry involving more than one billion international travelers each year (UNWTO, 2015). As such, tourism is a powerful force for both crossing and breaking down barriers and for creating global connections between the discourses and structures that influence social and environmental well-being. The strong structural and post-structural, discursive traditions in political ecology ensure it has continuing value for analyses of tourism in the interconnected Anthropocene.

This political ecological analysis of tourism in the Ecuadorian Amazonian presents ethnographic vignettes to account for the ways that interwoven global discourses related to biodiversity conservation and community development are encountered, contested, and leveraged to advance particular approaches to tourism at the local level. Tsing’s theory of friction manifests in each of these vignettes involving tourism-related decision-making in the community of Misahualli. Of particular note are the instances of discursive shifts being leveraged by Indigenous peoples into improved social and environmental well-being. Additionally, the approach here makes an important contribution to the scholarship on the political ecology of tourism by placing the spotlight directly on the emic perspectives of local residents. Inequities and imbalances of power, perpetuated by both the structures and discourses associated with use of tourism to address conservation and development objectives, have long been at the vanguard of political ecology research. Specifically for tourism scholars, frictions between old and new, local and global, and discourses and structures now also move into the vanguard of research on the political ecology of tourism in the Anthropocene.
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