Protected Areas, Conservation Stakeholders and the ‘Naturalisation’ of Southern Europe

Jose A. Cortes-Vazquez

Discipline of Geography, School of Geography and Archaeology, National University of Ireland Galway, Galway, Ireland

The critical analysis of conservation conflicts in Protected Areas (PAs) raises interesting questions about the redefinition of human-environment relations in the current ecological crisis. In recent years these debates have unveiled that, in the attempt to define the ‘proper’ place of humans in nature, PAs have embodied modern dualistic worldviews, which understand nature as a realm different from society, culture and ‘civilisation’. This paper suggests that the utilisation of these worldviews should be understood as part of the conceptual apparatus that enables a transition in management roles in Protected Areas, through which new empowered groups are granted the right to control and use natural resources. By analysing the practices and discourses of conservation stakeholders at the Cabo de Gata-Nijar Natural Park, in southern Spain, this paper shows that modern ideas of nature are essential to the collective appropriation of Cabo de Gata by new empowered groups because these ideas justify a new way of managing local resources in accordance with their own interests and desires. This has deep implications for the study of people-park conflicts and the problems associated to the promotion of more environmentally friendly ways of mastering the environment, which must be approached in the light of the power relations associated to the appropriation of territory and natural resources. The paper also concludes that, in order to understand how the nature-society dualism still dictates the way we should relate to the environment, we must trace the practices of those who bear this worldview and unveil the strategies and mechanisms that are used.

Keywords: protected areas; conservation policies; ecotourism; nature–society; Europe; conservation stakeholders

Introduction

Central to the constitution of current ecological crises are modernist environmental views that separate nature from society and which make possible large-scale exploitation and despoliation of natural resources (Arnold, 1996; Latour, 1993). This ontological separation is also integral to the emergence of modern environmentalism and many attempts to redress the ecological problems caused by capitalism (Pepper, 1996). The
tensions surrounding this separation and attempts to deal with them are visible in numerous conservation conflicts, from disputes between biodiversity conservation and farming, fishing and grazing practices to the material and symbolic eviction of local groups from conservation-targeted areas (Redpath et al., 2013). Critiques of these conflicts contend that, despite promoting new environmental attitudes, most conservation initiatives have failed to question the nature–society separation inherent to ecologically depredatory initiatives.

Critical Social Sciences studying conflicts in protected areas (PAs) have produced especially incisive analyses of the links between conservation policies and the nature–society dualism (West et al., 2006). They are indebted to the query of the US National Park model and its connection to a Western rhetoric of wilderness, authenticity and untouched nature (Cronon, 1995), which has largely inspired a State-centred conservation model in many other countries in Africa, Asia and Latin America (Adams, 2004). This model hinges on the coercive utilisation of the State’s force and technologies of governance upon some social groups in order to create ‘islands’ of supposedly untouched nature; its most extreme manifestations being termed ‘fortress conservation’ (Brockington, 2002; Igoe, 2004).

Although this model has had a limited impact on the design of PAs in other regions such as Western Europe, where local inhabitants’ presence and interests are to a certain extent acknowledged in conservation plans (Redford, 2011), their critical examination reveals that, in the attempt to define the ‘proper’ place of humans in nature, these PAs have also embodied dualistic environmental views. Drawing on an ontology named ‘Western Naturalism’ by Descola (2005), these conservation policies have incorporated ideas of nature and society in binary opposition, extending the belief that conservation depends a great deal on limiting the transformation of natural resources by humans (Santamarina, 2009). However, we need to take into account that areas such as those in the European Mediterranean Basin are broadly accredited as highly transformed and shaped by human beings (Grove and Rackham, 2001). This rather explicit counter-intuitive utilisation of dualist ideas of nature is what converts European PAs in unique places for the study of Western naturalism within the conceptual apparatus that justifies the introduction of conservation policies.

This paper seeks to make a contribution to this field by focusing on key members of the network of actors that support conservation policies in European PAs. Through the study of their situated interests, intentions, practices and environmental discourses, my analysis engages with two main bodies of work. The first is the study of the drivers of conservation policies and development initiatives, whose narratives are usually portrayed as apolitical in the process of decision-making (Escobar, 1998; Ferguson, 1990; Peet et al., 2010; Robbins, 2004) and associated debates about the role of scientists, economic lobbies and expert bureaucracies in policies of environmental governance (Brockington and Duffy, 2010; Jasanoﬀ, 2004; Scott, 1998). The second is the study of Western naturalism (Descola, 2005) and the questioning it has been subjected to in recent decades (Castree and Braun, 2001; Haraway, 1988; Latour, 1993;
Whatmore, 2001). In particular, I engage with ongoing debates that query if naturalism can become an empirical object of study for ethnographers, which would involve studying those who bear and enact this particular ontology (Candea and Alcayna-Stevens, 2012).

My analysis centres on a particular case: the Cabo de Gata-Níjar Natural Park, in the Region of Andalusia, southern Spain. The story of conservation in this extremely dry, coastal place features decade-long social disputes regarding the introduction of a more environmentally friendly way of managing natural resources, which has tried to hamper the expansion of mass tourism, industry and intense irrigated agriculture and to redress the ecological impact of non-intensive, customary practices, such as fishing, grazing and dry farming. I examine the key role that certain local stakeholders played in this process and how modern ideas of nature were utilised to transform Cabo de Gata from a historical farming, grazing and fishing area to a biodiversity reserve and ecotourism destination. For reasons that I will explain in due course, my analysis will centre on two specific groups: scientists and new ex-urban inhabitants.

My examination of the Cabo de Gata-Níjar Natural Park draws on a growing literature about the links between the nature–society dualism, people–park conflicts and issues of territorial reintegration and land-use reorganisation across Europe (Cortes-Vazquez, 2012; Green, 2005; Ruiz et al., 2009; Santamarina, 2009; Vaccaro and Beltrán, 2008; Valcuende et al., 2011). For example, in Andalusia the establishment of new PAs in the last quarter of a century, covering up to 20 per cent of the territory, has paralleled the promotion of ecotourism; a new economic activity articulated around Western rhetoric of wilderness, authenticity and untouched nature (Escalera, 2011). This has introduced land-use changes not only informed by environmentalist concerns but also by European Union (EU) macroeconomic interests, which aim to promote the growth of a service economy within economically marginal areas, replacing customary farming and fishing practices whose reliance on subsidies makes them clearly deficient within a globalised economy (Coca, 2008; Gonzalez, 1993).

In order to conceptualise similar processes of ecological redefinition, environmental governance and land-use reorganisation and their connection to the actions and interests of empowered groups, usually with an urban background, some scholars have proposed such terms as ‘re-territorialisation’ (Vaccaro and Beltrán, 2008) and ‘heritagisation’ (Frigolé and Del Már mol, 2009; Quintero, 2009). More or less explicitly, these terms hinge on an approach to the idea of territory as an area that a particular group claim to be their own, granting some of its members the control and management of natural resources (cf. Godelier, 1986). With a similar rationale, I will refer to the issues analysed in this paper using the term ‘naturalisation’ for it stresses the essential issues. The Oxford Dictionary defines the term naturalise, from which naturalisation derives, as (1) admitting (a foreigner) to the citizenship of a country, (2) establishing (a plant...
role of the idea of nature in justifying the introduction of conservation policies, which I will approach as the collective appropriation of a territory and its resources by new empowered groups.²

This paper starts with a historical review of the Cabo de Gata-Nijar Natural Park. I will describe the collaborations in which scientists and new ex-urban inhabitants engaged in support of the establishment of this Natural Park during the 1970s and 1980s. I will then analyse the conceptual apparatus that underlies the discourses these conservation stakeholders have enacted; discourses whose aim is both to justify their support and to delegitimise those that oppose conservation plans in Cabo de Gata. I will particularly emphasise their strategic utilisation of the nature–society dualism amidst notions of livelihood, value and land-use rights. Finally, I will show the extent the Park policy embodies these interests and environmental narratives.

This analysis will permit me to reflect about the impacts conservation initiatives have on vast areas across Europe and the influence of certain ideas of nature in the material and symbolic reshaping of these territories. This will allow for a more empirically based examination of the political dimensions of modernist ideas of nature, the intimacies between these ideas and certain interests and the challenges this poses to the ethnographic study of people–park conflicts, when we approach them as conflicts over the control of certain territories and their natural resources.³

or animal) so that it lives wild in a region where it is not indigenous and (3) regarding as or causing to appear natural and explaining (a phenomenon) in a naturalistic way. Although the mainstream use of the term regards the first definition, the other two meanings are closely related to the main subject of this paper. Despite the confusion that this might generate, the reason for using the term naturalisation concerns its explanatory power. I believe the term summarises the process of material and symbolic production of a space in accordance with the particular environmental views that are inherent to Western Naturalism, which is the main phenomenon I study here. As such, I contend that the term is much more suitable than those more general ones, including re-territorialisation and heritagisation. Whether there might be connections between this phenomenon and others covered by the term Naturalisation, it is by no means my intention to explore them in this paper.

²This reflects the large extent my analysis is influenced by Foucauldian and Marxian approaches to the society–environment nexus and the production of nature (Castree, 2000; 2002) as well as by related analysis about the links between conservation policies and the distribution of privilege, fortune and misfortune (Anderson and Berglund, 2003; Brockington et al., 2008).

³The findings I am presenting here are the result of a six-year research, working with members of the Department of Social Sciences at the Pablo de Olavide University (Spain) on two applied research projects involving ethnographic fieldwork in several protected areas in Andalusia, southern Spain (project references: SEJ2004/SOCI-06161 and P06-RNM-02139). I carried out my own research at the Cabo de Gata-Nijar Natural Park alongside these two projects. Using an ethnographic approach based on semi-structured interviews and participant observation, I focused on social conflicts following the introduction of the park’s management and land-use zoning plan. I opted for qualitative data since my intention was not to survey different positions towards conservation initiatives, but to obtain a ‘thick description’ – in Geertz’s
The birth of a Natural Park

The Cabo de Gata-Níjar Natural Park is a 495 km² coastal PA located within one of the driest regions in Western Europe. A long history of scarce rainfalls, erosion and resource misuse has generated extremely poor soils in the area. To date only animal and plant species fully adapted to its desert conditions are able to grow wild. Barren plains and hills, characterised by the absence of trees and shrub, dominate the landscape. These are interspersed with small farming fields, where wheat and barley are grown for the feeding of goats and sheep herds (around 300 animals per herd). The protected marine area, which covers almost 25 per cent of the Park, comprises a sandy seabed with small groupings of seaweed and some reefs. It hosts a small but diverse in-shore fishery that is exploited by local fishermen. Other activities in the Park include ecotourism and small initiatives of fish farming and intense agriculture in plastic poly-tunnels.

Like most rural regions in Andalusia, over the last half of a century this area has undergone major changes: the 1950s and 1960s agricultural crisis, an intense de-agrarianisation process, strong rural–urban migrations, transformations linked to the political and economic integration within the EU, interventions derived from a growing concern about environmental problems and changes related to the incorporation into global markets (cf. Delgado, 2010). These phenomena have deeply influenced Cabo de Gata’s socio-economic conditions, moving from decades of deep economic crisis, impoverishment and marginalisation to a growing dependence of a service economy, the intervention of globalised discourses and disputes over conflicting development strategies. As I will explain in the next few paragraphs, these changes show different aspects of a transition in management roles over natural resources, which at times has become a rough and drawn-out process.

In the early part of the twentieth century most inhabitants in Cabo de Gata were small landowners and landless labourers who were working in the local mining industry and in the estates of just a few big and powerful landowners. A deep economic and social crisis was starting to affect this place. Intense mining, farming and grazing activities in the previous centuries had caused severe soil degradation and decreasing yields (Sánchez, 1996). Moreover, the dependence of small landowners and landless people on wage labour⁴ made the local economic situation quickly worsen following the end of both mining activities and the exploitation of large plantations of esparto

(1973) terms – of the senses and meanings given to the changes occurring in Cabo de Gata from the day-to-day experiences of different groups. For this paper, I am using data gathered via semi-structured interviews and participant observation with Park Managers, scientists, NGO members, ecotourism entrepreneurs and other new exurban inhabitants, as well as those obtained from an in-depth literature review and the analysis of Park’s conservation plans and other secondary information sources.

⁴This dependence on wage labour is to be understood in relation to the privatisation of common lands, which mostly benefited big landowners (Góngora, 2004) and transformed the livelihoods of most small landowners and landless people, who relied on the utilisation of common lands as
grass in the estates of big landowners. This crisis also dragged down local in-shore fishing activities, which depended on the commercialisation of their catches in the nearby farming and mining towns (Compán, 1977). By the 1950s and 1960s the area was already renowned as one of the poorest and most marginal in Spain; farmhouses, villages and lands were progressively being abandoned as migration became unavoidable for those with fewer economic resources (Goytisolo, 2004 [1960]).

The 1970s and 1980s brought about a sea change. Intense irrigated agriculture under plastic poly-tunnels and mass tourism quickly spread from neighbouring areas, where they were becoming extremely successful. Population levels began to grow; the area’s economic potential attracted both new investors and some of the people who had emigrated years before (Fernández and Egea, 1991). Another extremely important phenomenon was taking place alongside these changes. A growing number of people from both Spanish and northern European urban areas started to settle down in the region. The strong urban development experienced in most coastal areas in Spain granted the barely inhabited, desert landscape of Cabo de Gata new meanings and values. These ex-urban inhabitants – mostly artists, students and young entrepreneurs – interpreted the abandoned condition of the place in a ‘naturalistic’ way. They felt they had discovered a ‘remote and natural’ space – the ‘ideal’ place to start a new, ‘alternative’ and ‘genuine’ life far from the ‘artificiality’ of modernity and city life.

Furthermore, a much more powerful phenomenon was also to deeply impact the region in those years. Following a nationwide political swift that tried to leave behind the environmentally exploitative policies introduced during the early Franco dictatorship and to come closer to European political trends, the 1970s and 1980s witnessed the establishment of multiple new PAs across Spain. Biologists, geologists and botanists played a key role in this by informing the selection of those areas with remarkable ecological values that were worth protecting (Mulero, 2002). In Cabo de Gata, these scientists joined the new ex-urban inhabitants in their effort to stop the expansion of poly-tunnels and mass tourism, which they both deemed a threat to the local ecological and aesthetic qualities. As a result, a local environmentalist movement emerged, requesting the introduction of conservation measures (Castro and Guirado, 1995).

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5 Between 1900 and 1970, the population level decreased by a striking 38 per cent. This trend changed from the 1980s onwards. The number of people living in Cabo de Gata has doubled since then (from 2700 to around 5700) (Source: Andalusia Statistic Institute. http://www.juntadeandalucia.es/institutodeestadisticaycartografia/; last access: July 2011).
6 Similar population movements, which Vaschetto (2006) terms ‘utopian migrations’, have been studied in other parts of the World, for example in South America.
7 Although some conservation initiatives in Spain date back to the early twentieth century, it has been from the 1970s onwards that the number of new PAs increased as never before. In Andalusia they were covering almost a quarter of the territory in just a few years.
Favoured by this ‘greening’ political shift, their demands were quickly successful and the Andalusia Regional Government established the Cabo de Gata-Níjar Natural Park in 1987.

The development of a ‘green’ tourism industry within the Park became one of the main priorities for policy-makers, with the aim of providing an environmentally friendly economic alternative for local inhabitants (Castro, 1989). However, the goal was not only to address concerns about the local populations’ means of living but also EU macroeconomic interests. The latter were seeking the promotion of a service economy in marginal regions across the EU in order to develop multifunctional rural areas and reduce their dependence on highly subsidised farming and fishing practices. Another continent-wide affair was also at stake as new Parks were expected to play a part in the territorial redistribution that sought to compensate exceeding externalities from highly industrialised and urban areas in central Europe with a protected periphery, where recreational practices were being fostered. As a result, Cabo de Gata, like many other locations across ‘peripheral’ Europe, witnessed a deep land-use reorganisation process, led by supra-local and supra-national institutions with the local support of increasingly empowered groups with an urban background.8

However, most of the small landowners, farmers, shepherds and fishermen who still inhabited this area were reluctant to accept these transformations, whilst those aspiring to capitalise on irrigated agriculture and mass tourism totally opposed them. The conservation policy introduced in the area not only promoted ecotourism but also banned poly-tunnels, industrial developments and mass tourism and restricted customary uses in many areas, including grazing, dry farming and in-shore fishing. As discussed elsewhere (Cortes-Vazquez, 2012; Cortes-Vazquez and Zedalis, 2013; Valcuende et al., 2011) a troublesome relationship between these different groups and conservation supporters was to condition social life in Cabo de Gata to present times, especially as the Park mostly occupied private lands.

Furthermore, the argument that these farming plots, old mining areas and in-shore fishing grounds were natural areas worth protecting from human aggression contradicted what most farmers, shepherds and other local groups believed to be the ‘proper’ way of using local resources in a region they judge historically poor and ecologically hostile. A closer look at the conservation measures introduced in the Park will help us understand the source of these conflicts and the role played by the environmental redefinition that accompanied the creation of this Natural Park.9 But

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8For more information at EU level, see Baker et al. (1994). For specific details on how this affected the framework Region of Andalusia, see Marchena (1993). Some notes about its influence in Cabo de Gata can be found in Provansal (2003).

9Although in this paper I focus exclusively on conservation supporters, I believe further clarifications about local population’s position against the Park would be welcome. As I analyse elsewhere (Cortes-Vazquez, 2012; Cortes-Vazquez and Zedalis, 2013; Valcuende et al., 2011), it has been small landowners who have more fiercely opposed conservation measures. Reasons behind this concern the nature of irrigated agriculture in poly-tunnels, which report substantial
before doing this, we need to analyse in more detail the interests and desires of those social groups that supported the transformation of this historically farming, grazing and fishing area into a biodiversity reserve and ecotourism destination.

Conservation and local stakeholders

As previously mentioned, in the late 1970s amidst a greening political context the Spanish Government asked a group of scientists to produce a catalogue of areas that could be worth protecting within the Almeria Province, where the Natural Park is located. One of the activities carried out by this group of experts – mainly geographers, geologists and biologists from different University Departments and National Research Councils – was to study Cabo de Gata’s most outstanding features: its volcanic rocks, rare species of flora and fauna and the functioning of its uncommon desert ecosystems. Their intention was to assess the natural value of this region.10 Like in many other contexts where expert knowledge – uncritically portrayed as objective and apolitical (Franklin, 1995; Jasanoff, 2004) – has been used in support of politically driven decisions (Fairhead and Leach, 1996; 2003), these experts’ research findings were instrumental to changing the perception of Cabo de Gata from a barren land to a biodiversity hotspot and therefore key to supporting the idea that it was worth protecting.

Fuelled by these findings, in less than a decade environmentalist ambitions quickly expanded from the protection of only a few metres of coastal lagoons in 1978 to a much larger area almost the current size of the Park in 1987.11 Some of these scientists settled down in the area and started to work in the Park Office and other regional and mixed environmental agencies. Some of those who remained at their home universities and research institutions also kept close links with this place by becoming authoritative members of the Park Governing Board.12

revenues without requiring large estates. Moreover, this positioning also concern the historical relationship maintained with big landowners. These have been able to capitalise both in mass and nature tourism at the same time that benefited from the revalorisation of lands following the Park establishment. In addition, in recent years the Andalusian Government has been purchasing private lands in Cabo de Gata as a strategy to improve conservation management. Park Managers acknowledge that acquired lands mostly belong to big landowners who were able to offer larger plots at a lower price. Small landowners perceive this with distrust.

10More details about this process in Capel (1980).
11The Park extension increased once again in 1994.
12The Park Governing Board (Junta Rectora, in Spanish) is an advisory consultant panel formed of different groups of stakeholders (scientists, NGOs, farmers, fishermen, local and regional government and tourism entrepreneurs, among others). They periodically meet to discuss issues concerning the Park management. However, despite its name, their only function is to provide advice, lacking any management capability or power to change the Park policy. These are exclusively on the hands of Park Officers and the different environmental bureaus of the Andalusia Regional Government.
Two particular aspects of expert influence on this area appeal to my analysis. First, their findings not only supported the establishment of the Natural Park but have also informed conservation management up to this time. The values they have identified, which include endemic plants, communities of migrant birds and exceptional marine ecosystems, are key arguments to defining which parts of the Park deserve stricter protection. Furthermore, they are also essential to deciding which human-related elements must be preserved. These include some archaeological and ethnologic items because of their architectural singularity (eighteenth century coastal towers, constructions linked to old mining and farming activities such as farmhouses, water cisterns, terraces, wells and mills) or because of their historical contribution to the maintenance of present ecological conditions (for example, the links between dry farming and rare birds’ nesting habits).\footnote{What is particularly interesting of these human-related components is that they are deemed the remaining signs of the ‘traditional’ inhabitants of Cabo de Gata, who are considered to have held a ‘wise’ know-how that permitted them to adapt to a dry environment in an efficient, environmentally friendly way. This form of regarding local inhabitants has acquired great importance in the Park policy in current years. Behind it, there is a serious attempt to integrate human presence within the conservation landscape (see similar cases in Anderson and Berglund’s (2003) edited volume). Yet, as I will discuss in forthcoming sections and these authors have also stressed, the depiction of ‘traditional’ humans and their role, in a style that recalls the kind of ahistorical narratives analysed by Wolf (1982), raises further problems.}

Second, some of these scientists and experts, in their role of Park Managers, officers, rangers and guides, have become responsible for meeting the Park’s conservation goals. As such, their views about the ‘proper’ place of humans in nature – based on the Western modern nature–society dualism – permeate their decisions and strongly influence the way the Park is managed. The next quote is a good example:

> The role of Park Managers is to decide which conservation initiatives must be implemented. For example, if there is an interest in restoring a watercourse, we need to take into account its multiple functions. As key components of traditional mechanisms for the collection of rainwater, watercourses provide an essential service for the irrigation of orchards and domestic water supply. As such, they must be kept free of weed and shrubs. This makes sense, right? But if we study a particular watercourse and discover that it has now become a preying area for Bonelli’s eagles, for example, our decision will then consider this new ecological function and prioritise it, because it is more important than that of a traditional water supplier. (Male, biologist, member of the Park management team)\footnote{To facilitate reading, this and the other of quotations in this paper have been translated from Spanish into English.}

Experts and expert criteria have also been instrumental to the development of a ‘green’ tourism industry in Cabo de Gata. This mirrors a worldwide trend that regards tourism as the key to overcome the contradictions between nature conservation and economic development. New modalities of tourism (ecotourism, sustainable tourism, nature
tourism) have caught the attention of institutions and policy-makers all around the World (Ceballos-Lascuráin, 1996; West and Carriers, 2004). In Cabo de Gata, experts have embraced ecotourism as the best economic alternative for local inhabitants because it supposedly permits them to live in this Natural Park by means of a ‘low-impacting’ human activity.\textsuperscript{15}

In recent years, ‘visiting a natural place’ has become a powerful gimmick that attracts thousands of tourists to Cabo de Gata. This has required the intervention of Park officers, who have developed several initiatives to guarantee that ‘nature’ is attractive and accessible for visual consumption. For example, one of the Park’s attractions is that it provides tourists with the possibility of ‘being closer to nature’ through quiet countryside walks far from noisy, crowded and polluted urban environments. To make this possible, Park Managers have worked towards the design and construction of a network of pathways, with access to vantage points, signs and an efficient rubbish collection system. Further examples include the construction of costly infrastructure (Visitors Centre, Information Points, Campsites, Botanic Gardens) and the edition of information material (Maps, Park Guidebooks). The next quote shows the importance Park Managers give to this role:

In relation to tourism, we do several things: environmental reports, projects related to public use and conservation. We shouldn’t talk strictly about tourism, but about infrastructure, projects and dissemination material that enhance the Park public use. […] For example, we started by building up a Visitors Centre that, like in other Parks, provides a broad overview of this space. Then we established a few Information Points alongside the coast, which are open during the high season. We also worked towards the creation of a network of pathways that span along the Park and covers its most salient particularities: inland pathways, coastal pathways and other theme pathways that focus on geological values, ethnographic or cultural aspects …[…] All these are elements that facilitate the Park touristic use and that differentiate this place from any other that is not a Natural Park. (Female, biologist, member of the Park management team)

The importance of ecotourism gives those that engage with this economic activity a protagonist role in conservation efforts. On one hand, Park Managers have good reasons to address ecotourism entrepreneurs’ requests because they have become conservation’s best allies at the local level. On the other hand, these entrepreneurs, a vast

\textsuperscript{15} The literature specialising in tourism and Protected Areas has questioned this supposedly flawless relationship and has stressed the influence exerted by tourist expectations – based on a Western rhetoric of wilderness, authenticity or primitive life (Vivanco, 2001; Wels, 2004) – on conservation management because they urge Park Managers to take actions so that these areas become attractive to potential consumers (West and Carriers, 2004). In other words, to achieve this win-win partnership between conservation and development through tourism, Parks must remain attractive and accessible for tourists, which eventually make conservation to be somehow dependant on the success of tourism initiatives.
majority new ex-urban inhabitants,¹⁶ have also good reasons to give their support to the Park’s policy for nature protection is essential to preserving their own livelihood. As such, ecotourism has prompted the emergence of a new sense of ownership and belonging, which, as I am about to explain, has developed during the last few decades.

The number of new ex-urban inhabitants in Cabo de Gata has steadily grown since the first few started to arrive in the late 1960s and 1970s. Fleeing from urban areas in Spain and other parts of Europe – France, the UK, Denmark, Switzerland, Germany – they were on the lookout for ‘natural’ locations ‘untouched’ by urban development and modernity, where they sought to commence a new ‘alternative’ lifestyle. Although they first came as tourists, some of these people ended up settling down in the area, purchasing or renting old farmhouses at a relatively low price.¹⁷ As already mentioned, they lobbied with scientists for the establishment of the Natural Park. But they also played an important part in the development of ecotourism and, through this, in the definition of the Park’s conservation policy and the transformation of this area.

The development of the first few ecotourism initiatives, mostly accommodation and outdoor activities, was key for these new groups to settle down in the area. These initiatives hinged on the utilisation of new images and narratives that portrayed this peripheral region as a place that remained traditional, natural and untouched by modernisation; images and narratives that urged tourists to visit the area while it stayed authentic and unspoiled.¹⁸ The establishment of the Natural Park soon became essential to maintaining these activities since the quick development of intensive agriculture, mass tourism and industry was threatening the area’s main attractions. In fact, it was by virtue of the Park policy that this place became an ‘island of untouched nature’ and a ‘natural paradise’ surrounded by plastic poly-tunnels, factories and seaside resorts, a phenomenon that paradoxically increased the area’s appeal and attracted more new ex-urban inhabitants. The next quotation is an example of how this was experienced first-hand:

We opened this hotel in 1988. There were very few people working on tourism here by then. I had studied in Germany and when I was about to finish my degree and write my dissertation, I came here to spend a whole winter. It was the first time I saw this

¹⁶Some other local inhabitants (old farmers and fishermen and their descendants) have also initiated some tourism activities, although in a significantly lower proportion. This is clearly manifested in the marginal position they occupy in the main association of ecotourism entrepreneurs that exist in the Park (Natural Park Tourism Entrepreneurs Association [ASEMPARNA in Spanish initials]).

¹⁷Housing prices had plummeted due to the deep economic crisis in previous decades and the high levels of emigration that were being experienced at that time. Further particularities such as exchange rates between national currencies (Deutsche marks or British pounds being much stronger than Spanish pesetas) also explain this.

¹⁸It is interesting to note the references to a modernist, lineal sense of time in these images and narratives. For an explanation of the relationship between dualist ideas of nature–society and this sense of time, see Latour (1993).
abandoned farmhouse [the actual hotel]. After asking some people, I finally got hold of the owner and we ended up buying it. The first thing we did, as I had studied languages, was offering Spanish courses for foreigners. Then we started Tai Chi and Yoga courses. We got in touch soon with a travel agency which was interested in promoting these kinds of initiatives. They included us in their catalogue. You know, there are lots of people in Germany that look for ‘different’ places to go on holidays, places outside mass tourism circuits... people that travel during low season. Those are the kind of people that come to my hotel. They are usually middle class teachers, doctors... who are looking for quiet, original, authentic places. The kind of places you find in Natural Parks.

(Male, nature tourism entrepreneur, originally from Germany)

Through the dissemination of these images and narratives about Cabo de Gata, these new ex-urban inhabitants have also conditioned the way local resources are managed. The rhetoric that they use in printed vouchers, advertisements, postcards, websites, blogs and oral communications has contributed to the definition of what is ‘proper’ and ‘improper’ in this Natural Park. As such, they place uninhabited valleys and endemic plant species in opposition to cities, plastic poly-tunnels and irrigated crops; ageing mills, old farmhouses and small hotels versus factories and tourism resorts. Furthermore, this rhetoric also differentiates between ‘proper’ and ‘improper’ Park users and inhabitants, featuring traditional peasants, ecotourists and scientists in sharp contrast to mass tourism, poly-tunnel farmers and urban developers.

As we will see in the last section of this paper, the analysis of the Park policy permits us to identify the extent conservation measures embody these people’s interests and desires. However, a closer examination of the different discourses that conservation stakeholders enact in relation to conflicts with other local groups (farmers, fishermen, shepherds, landowners, urban developers) will furnish us with further evidence of the extent conservation supporters collaborate towards meeting common goals and the ideas of nature they use to do so. We focus on this issue in the next section.

People–park conflicts and different ideas of nature

The establishment of the Cabo de Gata-Níjar Natural Park triggered decade-long conflicts with some local groups. For example, in the late 1990s social tension escalated when many farmers and landowners tried to install plastic poly-tunnels. They had witnessed the successful development of this activity in neighbouring areas and were determined to capitalise on it. However, to their surprise, they discovered that this was forbidden since 1987. They argued that the Natural Park had been established without a proper and broad popular consultation and that this had made many landowners oblivious to the new regulations. They reacted with anger and created a pressure group (the ARROPE association) to overturn the Park policy. Even worse, in the heat of the moment some decided to disregard the bans and built up poly-tunnels on their own lands.
Conservation stakeholders witnessed these issues with horror and decided to take action. An environmentalist NGO\textsuperscript{19} and an ecotourism association\textsuperscript{20} emerged in this context to join forces. They organised meetings and demonstrations, denounced illegal practices – such as new poly-tunnels – on websites and newspapers\textsuperscript{21} and urged Park Managers and governmental agencies to take exemplary actions against offenders. They decried that the growing presence of intense irrigated agriculture in the Park was a threat to its natural values and accused local farmers and landowners of putting personal gain before public assets. They lamented that these groups had forgotten the supposed ‘know-how’ that allowed their ancestors to make a living off this place without harming the environment. Take the following quote as an example:

Those that had a small plot, where they used to grow wheat and barley, now want to install poly-tunnels. You can’t even breed a pair of goats with the yields you get from dry farming, but you can make a fortune out of poly-tunnels. That is good business. So, when they get in trouble with the Park, they can’t come saying: ‘Oh, we are so poor!’ No, we are not that stupid… (Male, freelance and NGO member, originally from Almeria city)

Similarly, the support given by some local groups to the development of mass tourism in the Park has also raised conflicts with conservation stakeholders. Especially controversial have been certain initiatives developed within or near the border of the PA. Because of its international notoriety, the Algarrobico Hotel case is perhaps the best example. The construction of this hotel on the Algarrobico beach, next to the town Carboneras, in the earlier part of the 2000s sparked the outrage of conservation stakeholders. They vilified it and accused it of trespassing the red line that separates the Park from its surroundings, while criticising the damage it would cause to valuable ecosystems. They took their actions even further this time as they brought the case into court and initiated an international campaign to denounce that this hotel was illegally constructed within a PA.\textsuperscript{22}

Finding out legal responsibilities was to become a drawn-out judicial process. Meanwhile multiple demonstrations organised by both hotel supporters and hotel detractors revealed widening social divisions within the Park. Some local groups defended that the hotel was essential in order to create much-needed jobs. On the contrary, conservation supporters alleged that local people were unable to appreciate the

\textsuperscript{19}Amigos del Parque Natural Cabo de Gata-Nijar (Friends of the Cabo de Gata-Nijar Natural Park): http://www.cabodegata.net/.

\textsuperscript{20}ASEMPARNA: http://www.cabodegata-nijar.es/.

\textsuperscript{21}See, for example: ‘Ecologistas en Acción denuncia’ (1999) and ‘Ecologistas denuncian’ (1999).

\textsuperscript{22}Different news items that appeared in several international newspapers are evidences of this: ‘Building blight’ (2006), ‘Costas turn back tide’ (2006), «Espagne» (2009) and «Naturpark in Spanien» (2009).
natural value and beauty of this area, its exceptional features and the necessity to avoid its destruction.

The analysis of these conflicts, as well as many of the others that have emerged in relation, for example, to land ploughing, in-shore fishing, grazing and fish farms, reveals underlying aspects of conservation stakeholders’ arguments that go beyond the value of natural assets and that relate to new senses of ownership and belonging. As such, it is frequent to encounter the opinion among these stakeholders that nature conservation is also a way of preserving people’s livelihood. For them, the construction of new hotels and poly-tunnels and also the grazing of endemic species or fishing in marine reserves threaten the values on which ecotourism relies. They reprimand those in favour of these activities for damaging nature and impairing the successful development of a green tourism industry. In other words, they reproach the locals for going against their means of living, which depend on the protection of nature from certain forms of human exploitation. The following quotes illustrate this:

They don’t care that this is a public asset... They don’t care that this is a Natural Protected Area ... With the Algarrobico Hotel, the illegal poly-tunnels, urban developments ... they are just looking to fiddle the system! There is where you realise how weak this is ... This is a Nature Park and here both nature and humans are protected: those who live inside the Park and whose main activities depend on the Park being just the way it is ... With the Algarrobico Hotel, what kind of shameless person would sell this hotel on the basis that it’s in a Natural Park? This is the most Anti-Natural Park thing I’ve ever seen! (Female, ecotourism entrepreneur, originally from Madrid)

This [place] has a big problem with overcrowding. And all these new big hotels are only bringing more and more tourists. This place has very sensitive areas where even walking might cause a great impact on rare plant and animal species, because they can be so easily damaged. You can kill all these endemic species if you are not careful enough. And if we ruin this, we ruin our natural heritage and our main source of income. They say we [ecotourism entrepreneurs] are environmentalists, like in a negative way ... But, apart from our education and ideology, I always answer: Those of us who live off this Park are its main defenders, because it not only concerns our ideals but also our way of subsistence, our life! (Male, ecotourism entrepreneur, originally from Almeria city)

Similarly, scientists and experts also acknowledge this problem and agree that conservation measures are justified not only because they preserve the Park’s natural values but also because they preserve the livelihood of the Park inhabitants. Take the following quote as an example:

Tourism plays a very important role in the Park, especially because most other activities [farming and fishing] are currently a minority. The main income for the Park inhabitants is

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23See, for example: «Ecologistas en Acción protesta» (1999); further examples can be found in the Amigos del Parque NGO’s self-edited journal El Eco del Parque: «Roturaciones ilegales en La Isleta y Los Escullos» (2004); «Roturación en San Miguel» (2006).
tourism, but this is threatened because most tourists only come in high season and also because they all want to have their own summerhouse in the Park and that damage nature. That is incompatible. (Female, biologist, member of the Park management team)

Despite some punctual internal disagreements between Park Managers, ecotourism entrepreneurs, NGO members and scientists,\(^{24}\) the protection of Cabo de Gata has always remained a common and shared goal. As we have seen throughout this and the previous section, different and multiple situated interests and desires are behind the support given to the Park policy. What remains to be examined is how the Park policy has addressed these interests and desires and how modern ideas of nature have been used in order to justify the transition in management roles that made possible the transformation of Cabo de Gata from a farming and fishing area to an ecotourism destination and biodiversity reserve.

**Conservation measures and the naturalisation of Cabo de Gata**

The most important management tool in the Park is the land-use zoning plan. The first plan came into force in 1994 and divided the Park’s total extension into 4 zones (A, B, C, D) and 10 subzones, bounding each of them to a different degree of protection. Whilst most activities were forbidden in Zones A and B, many were allowed in Zones C and D. This zoning plan was in force for 14 years, until a new one was approved in 2008 without major differences. I summarise the 2008 plan in Table 1.\(^ {25}\)

What is particularly relevant to my discussion is how the Park land-use zoning plans make use of certain environmental narratives based on the nature–society dualism in order to justify different levels of restriction. For example, Zones A, where the most restrictive measures apply, are deemed virgin natural areas barely transformed by human action. Only conservation practices and scientific research are allowed in them. In Zones B the Park policy allows some non-intensive farming, fishing and grazing practices as well as ecotourism. Zones B are regarded as semi-natural areas, where ‘traditional’ practices have shaped the local ecosystems in such a non-aggressive way that there are still significant values in them. In Zones C and D most practices are allowed, even intensive agriculture, although under the supervision of Park Managers in order to avoid any harm to those natural values found in other parts of the Park. This

\(^{24}\)Further clarification is required at this point. Although for the sake of clarity and brevity I have made an effort to present the position of all these different conservation stakeholders as somehow homogeneous, the real situation is not so neat. Over the past two decades, there have been several conflicts between them, in particular as NGO members and ecotourism entrepreneurs urged Park Managers to take more severe actions to stop the installation of polytunnels, illegal ploughings, fish farming and the construction of new hotels.

\(^{25}\)The original documents can be accessed at the environmental section of the Andalusian Government website: [http://www.juntadeandalucia.es/medioambiente/site/portalweb/](http://www.juntadeandalucia.es/medioambiente/site/portalweb/); last access: June 2011.
more permissive regulation is justified because Zones C and D are said to lack significant natural value due to years of human exploitation.

This division into completely natural, partially natural and barely natural areas shows the instrumental use of dualistic ideas of nature–society in the justification of land-use changes. The modern, Western ontological premises that underpin these ideas, as discussed by Latour (1993), explain that the more transformed by humans an area is judged the less natural it is considered, thus involving less restrictive measures. However, a closer look into the kind of activities that are either allowed or forbidden in each zone unfolds a paradox: the counterintuitive utilisation of modernist ideas of nature, in as much as the land-use zoning plan renders certain activities either essential or compatible with nature conservation. As I will explain in the remaining paragraphs of this section, this suggests that these ideas of nature are utilised to grant certain groups the right to use natural resources as well as to disenfranchise others, instead of protecting the Park from human intervention.

An analysis of the mechanism that makes the above possible shows that the Park land-use zoning plan not only conveys a redefinition of the physical environment but also of social relations. This redefinition of social relations is articulated around a new social hierarchy, which hinges on a new categorisation and classification of human–environment relations into: (1) modern and intense activities, such as agriculture in plastic poly-tunnels, mass tourism, mining and industry, which are regarded as potential destroyers of the Park’s assets; (2) customary, non-intensive farming, grazing and fishing practices, which are considered somehow respectful to the environment because they have historically produced valuable semi-natural ecosystems by making use of an ecologically wise know-how; (3) modern, environmentally friendly activities,

**Table 1:** Zoning categories.
such as ecotourism, that make conservation and economic development compatible because they exclusively rely on the visual consumption of nature and (4) scientific research, environmental education and conservation management, which are considered essential to the correct preservation of nature. For the sake of clarity, I simplify this in four different roles, defined in terms of the relationship they are said to maintain with nature: (1) nature destroyers, (2) nature producers, (3) nature consumers and (4) nature protectors, respectively.

Table 2 summarises the compatibilities and conflicts associated with these roles in the different parts of the Park, according to the land-use plans. The table also permits us to visualise the new social hierarchy that regulates land-use rights and distribute uneven access to natural resources among the different local groups. As such, it becomes the most important mechanism to meeting conservation goals, including not only the supra-local concerns that aim to protect European peripheral regions like Cabo de Gata while promoting a service economy, but also the situated interests and desires of local conservation supporters.

Scientists and experts are on top of this hierarchy. Their research and administration activity are allowed all along the PA, even in Zones A, which should supposedly be kept free from human action. A step below in this hierarchy we find ‘traditional’ farmers and fishermen as well as ecotourists and ecotourism entrepreneurs. The people belonging to these groups are allowed to carry out their practices within some parts of the Park (Zones B, C and D) but not in Zones A. However, they are not completely free to decide how to use local resources for their activity is always either directly or indirectly monitored and controlled by experts and scientists. Finally, at the bottom of this hierarchy there are those who engage with modern, intensive activities (poly-tunnels, urban development and industry). Their activities are banned within most parts of the Park, and, in the

| Nature protectors: scientific activities, environmental education, conservation management | Nature producers and consumers: traditional, non-intensive activities, ecotourism | Nature destroyers: modern, intensive activities |
|---|---|---|
| Natural areas (Zones A and some Zones B) | Compatible | Conflicitive |
| Semi-natural areas (Most Zones B) | Compatible | Compatible | Conflicitive |
| Non-natural areas (Zones C and D) | Compatible | Compatible | Compatible |

Table 2: Summary of conservation compatibilities and conflicts.
rare case they are allowed – mostly in those areas catalogued as non-natural – they need to adjust to the multiple requirements imposed by those people at the top of this hierarchy, so that these activities do not impact natural or semi-natural areas.

A final critical examination of this hierarchy in relation to the issues analysed throughout this paper permits us to identify the intimacies between the Park conservation policy and the situated interests and desires of those stakeholders that this paper centres on. Although both ‘nature producers’ and ‘nature consumers’ have the right to use local resources in many parts of the Park, the analysis carried out in the above sections suggests that they have a different capacity to influence the Park policy. As I hope to have already demonstrated, the relation between experts, Park officers, ecotourism entrepreneurs and the new ex-urban population at large is close enough to deny that ‘nature consumers’ hold a much more privileged position than ‘nature producers’ in what concerns their capacity to influence the Park policy.

Furthermore, the role of ‘nature producers’ compel farmers, shepherds, fishermen and landowners either to behave the way conservation supporters say that ‘traditional’ inhabitants should behave or to engage with ecotourism and become ecotourism entrepreneurs. Otherwise, if they attempt to capitalise on poly-tunnels or mass tourism, they will be putting themselves at risk of facing prosecution for contravening the Park plans. This shows their lack of influence in resource management for the Park plans relegate them to a position that is actually closer to that of ‘nature destroyers’ than to ‘nature consumers’. They end up having little capacity to influence the Park policy and to give voice to their own interests and desires in the Park land-use plans. As such, the ‘Naturalisation’ of Cabo de Gata has less to do with the limitation of human impact on the environment and more with a redefinition of land-use rights that grant control of natural resources to conservation stakeholders, while disenfranchising those other groups that oppose or question conservation.

Conclusions

I have tried to demonstrate in this paper that the utilisation of modernist ideas of nature is essential to the collective appropriation of Cabo de Gata by certain social groups because it justifies a new way of managing local resources in accordance with their interests and desires. This suggests that conservationist arguments do not merely hinge on the unquestioned capacity of scientists and experts to protect nature from human aggressions neither on the ontological premises of Western naturalism that has historically been so influential in the conservation field. These are just part of the conceptual apparatus that enables a transition in management roles, through which new empowered groups, whose livelihood and desires are rooted in keeping places sparsely populated, barely urbanised and visually attractive for ecotourists, are granted the right to control and use this territory, allowing for its transformation into a biodiversity reserve and ecotourism destination.
The ethnographic analysis of people–park conflicts in the Cabo de Gata-Níjar Natural Park provides clear evidence of this phenomenon and permits us to identify some of its political and economic drivers. Any questioning of the naturalisation of this place, such as that supported by farmers and landowners, is deemed a threat not only to natural values but also to many stakeholders’ livelihoods because it hinders the successful development of ecotourism. To ensure the future of this activity, the Park policy relegates conservation objectors to a powerless role so that their demands and land-use rights – whether stemming from land ownership or historical bonds – are suppressed. Instead the Park policy grants these rights to those who, despite lacking either land ownership or historical bonds, have gained significant power from the support of supra-local institutions (EU), the spur of a fast-growing economic activity (ecotourism) and the moral justification provided by a globalised greening rationale.

The above has deep implications for the study of people–park conflicts and the problems associated with the promotion of more environmentally friendly ways of mastering the environment. The establishment of this Natural Park is to be understood within a context where new actors intervened in a space that became ‘naturalised’. Animals, plants and ecosystems acquired new meanings and values, which justified the introduction of conservation measures and the development of ecotourism as an alternative to activities such as intensive agriculture and mass tourism. As such, this story must be read in terms of the power relations that accompanied a process of territorial appropriation; and it is in this same way that we need to frame the disagreements and contestations articulated by other local groups, such as farmers, fishermen and landowners.

This is especially important if we consider that one of the main critiques emerging from the examination of conservation practices in PAs is that they distribute fortune and misfortune among different social groups and even different members of a particular group (Brockington et al., 2008). Sometimes this is caused directly, through physical evictions, sometimes indirectly, through symbolic alienation. This means that most social problems in conservation-targeted areas – problems that are prone to threaten conservation goals – have less to do with environmental education and more with the different aspects of a transition in management roles over natural resources, which tend to disregard the interests and desires of many local inhabitants.

Finally, what also seems clear from the analysis I carried out in this paper is that, 15 years after Escobar (1999) foresaw the end of Western naturalism, rather than giving way to less essentialist accounts of the reality ‘out there’, modern ideas of nature prevail and in some cases have even become reinforced for political and economic reasons. The analysis carried out in this paper adds to those suggesting that naturalism is still a powerful worldview that dictates how we should relate with the environment and that PAs have become one of the main material and discursive means to achieving this (West et al., 2006). It also shows, as Yates-Doerr and Mol (2012) suggest, that if we want to make naturalism the object of ethnographic research, we need to trace the practices of those who bear this worldview and examine where the power that fuels its expansion emanates from.
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Notes on contributor
Jose A. Cortes-Vazquez (Seville, Spain, 1982) graduated in 2011 with a Ph.D. in Environmental Studies from the Pablo Olavide University (Spain). His research interests include the ethnographies of nature conservation, sustainable development and people–park conflicts. He specialises in the European Mediterranean Area, particularly southern Spain, where he has been working since 2005. At present he is Lecturer in Geography at the School of Geography and Archaeology, National University of Ireland Galway.

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