



“A cold, hard asset”: Conservation resource spectacle in Chilean Patagonia

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ABSTRACT

Chile's public conservation estate has expanded by unprecedented margins in recent years, following the creation of several mega projects. One such project is the Route of Parks of Chilean Patagonia, a public-private partnership to protect nearly 30 million acres of land across 18 national parks at the bottom of the South American continent. The partnership, over two decades in the making, was proposed by the U.S.-based philanthropic foundation Tompkins Conservation but rejected by previous presidential administrations before finally being accepted in 2017. This article traces the role of two complementary forces behind the project – big philanthropy and big conservation – showing how both shaped the state's eventual decision to take historic action for environmental protection. I argue that resource spectacle is key to understanding the ‘how’ and ‘why now’ of this mega project. Whereas traditional resource spectacles are conjured to court buy-in from private actors for extractive projects, a conservation resource spectacle is conjured in this case to court buy-in from the state for a large-scale national parks project. Big philanthropy emphasizes the spectacular investability of national parks by selling them as “a cold, hard asset,” akin to Chile's other natural resources. It does this by rendering the value of protected nature legible and consumable through the same resource-making techniques that define extractivism. Yet, these resource-making techniques when applied to environmental protection not only establish perverse incentives for action, they also help fuel the convergence of conservation and extraction.

1. Introduction

You have to look at national parks today as a *cold, hard asset* of the country. It's like copper in the ground, or fish in the sea. National parks drive more tourism than any other mechanism in the world, over a long period of time. So, as a country like Chile is looking for the diversification of its economic development and so on, the ministers who are driving economies in a country, they need to look at the national parks system – and a well-managed national parks system – as an investment, as an asset. You have to change the notion. It's not just because they're fabulous, it's because they really do function, they change an economic model, not only at a regional, local level, but at a national level because you are talking about global markets when it comes to national parks. It's the best brand, other than Marlboro and Coca-Cola. (Kristine McDivitt Tompkins, 5 September 2019, emphasis added)

Chile's public conservation estate has expanded by unprecedented margins in recent years. Over 21% of terrestrial territory and 43% of marine territory is now protected, following the creation of several mega projects including the Route of Parks of Chilean Patagonia (CONAF, n.d.; MINREL, 2021). The Route of Parks emerges from a novel public-private

partnership (PPP) between the U.S.-based philanthropic foundation Tompkins Conservation and the Chilean state to protect nearly 30 million acres of land across 18 national parks at the bottom of the South American continent. It pitches ecotourism as a regional development alternative with national parks serving as engines of local economic growth. The partnership was proposed by Tompkins Conservation, over two decades ago, but rejected by previous presidential administrations before finally being accepted in 2017. This article posits that the state's eventual support for the project was shaped by the complementary forces of big philanthropy and big conservation. Chile's Route of Parks exemplifies big philanthropy's growing involvement in biodiversity protection and its increasing promotion of big conservation as the best way to counter the accreting effects of climate change on global ecosystems.

Key to understanding the ‘how’ and ‘why now’ of this mega project is the concept of resource spectacle: the dramatic performance of nature's resource-ness, particularly as marketized and consumable commodities. Traditional resource spectacles are conjured to court investment from private actors for extractive projects, such as those predominating in the mineral landscapes of northern Chile or the forested landscapes of south-central Chile. In the extreme southern zone of Chilean Patagonia,

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however, Tompkins Conservation and The Pew Charitable Trusts are conjuring a resource spectacle to court investment from the state for a large-scale national parks project. Describing the zone as a suite of “world-class natural resources [that] do not enjoy the world-class protections they deserve” (The Pew Charitable Trusts, n.d.), big philanthropy lobbies for big conservation in Chilean Patagonia because of its rare combination of open, undeveloped territory – the majority of which is state-owned – and cheap land prices.

In this article, I argue that big philanthropy engages spectacle in order to attract the stakeholder buy-in that big conservation necessarily requires. Spectacle frames the Route of Parks as a resource worthy of political legitimization and fiscal investment from the Chilean state, which has historically regarded conservation as a threat to economic growth and development. As indicated in the epigraph, big philanthropy emphasizes the spectacular investability of national parks by marketing them as “a cold, hard asset” to national policymakers, akin to Chile’s other natural resources. It does this by rendering the value of protected nature legible and consumable through the same resource-making techniques that define extractivism. These resource-making techniques not only establish perverse incentives for environmental protection, they fuel the convergence of conservation and extraction. I develop my argument by addressing three interrelated questions: when is spectacle invoked in resource-making, how was spectacle invoked to “make” big conservation a resource in Chilean Patagonia, and what are the broader effects of this process?

This article draws on thirteen months of qualitative field research in Chile, completed between late 2017 and mid-2020. The research employed Peck and Theodore’s (2012) ‘distended case approach’ in order to study the globalizing policy model of conservation PPPs and how it circulates between sites of invention and sites of uptake, transforming both the policy model and the connections between these sites. Conservation PPPs travel to Chile from various sites of invention: U.S. universities, think tanks, consulting firms and, increasingly, philanthropic foundations. As I show below, their connections to various sites of uptake within the Chilean state apparatus have produced a novel kind of resource spectacle.

Data was generated through in-depth interviewing, participant observation, and document analysis. Field sites included government offices, philanthropic offices, and civil society organizations in Santiago and the regions of Los Lagos and Aysén in Chilean Patagonia. The municipalities of Puerto Varas, Chaitén, Coyhaique, and Chile Chico were specifically targeted given their roles as major administrative and tourism hubs for the Route of Parks. A total of 79 interviews were conducted with current and former government officials, philanthropists, foundation and NGO staff, and tourism professionals. Participant observation was conducted at 17 in-person or virtual events relating to the Route of Parks, including academic seminars, congressional committee hearings, conservation philanthropy workshops, and community meetings. Finally, important print and digital documents were analyzed, including the public–private partnership agreement (cf. MMA, 2017a), a project report by McKinsey & Company (2016), and promotional materials produced by Tompkins Conservation and The Pew Charitable Trusts.

I begin by outlining a theoretical framework for interpreting the Route of Parks, using the literatures on resource spectacle and conservation and development. This is followed by a brief explanation of big philanthropy and big conservation and their specific manifestations in Chile. Next, I introduce the case, detailing the origin story and project aims of the Route of Parks. Then I show how big philanthropy conjures big conservation as a resource spectacle in Chilean Patagonia through three resource-making techniques meant to sell the success of the project to state policymakers: resource legibility, resource potentiality, and resource futurity. The article concludes with a discussion of the broader implications of conservation resource spectacles, their problematic relationship to extractivism, and what this means for state-based and philanthropic interventions.

2. Spectacle in Resource-making

The literature on resource spectacle draws on the central claim of critical resource geography “that ‘natural resources are not naturally resources’ but the products of cultural, economic, and political work” (Bridge, 2011, p. 821). Natural resources must be ‘coaxed and coerced’ (Tsing, 2005) into being through social practices of ‘resource-making’ (Himley, 2021; Irarrázaval, 2021; Richardson & Weszkalnys, 2014; Valdivia et al., 2021).

One resource-making practice is spectacle, deployed to attract and maintain investor buy-in (Braun, 2020; Watts, 2004). While spectacle is broadly interpreted in the literature – as drama, divination, illusion, or magic – the ideas of French Situationist Guy Debord are foundational. Debord (1970) defines spectacle as “not a collection of images but a social relation among people mediated by images” (Thesis 4). Critiquing the mystification and alienation of life under advanced capitalism, he argues that social relations are conditioned not only by the objects of consumer culture but increasingly by its images: “This is the principle of commodity fetishism, the domination of society by ‘intangible as well as tangible things,’ which reaches its absolute fulfillment in the spectacle, where the tangible world is replaced by a selection of images which exist above it, and which at the same time are recognized as the tangible *par excellence*” (Debord, 1970, Thesis 36).

Following Debord, scholars emphasize the visuality and fetishism of resource spectacle. Spectacular images and speculative discourses render the value of nature-as-commodities visible to the market, while concealing the underlying social relations that produce this value (Kneas, 2017; Zalik, 2010). They also emphasize the temporality of resource spectacle. Describing the ‘economy of appearances,’ Tsing (2000) writes that the dramatic performance of resource abundance preconditions its actual economic performance because “profit must be imagined before it can be extracted” (p. 118). She recounts the Bre-X scandal, in which a Canadian junior mining company reaped billions on the Toronto Stock Exchange in the 1990s from fraudulent claims of a gold rush in Indonesia. There was no gold rush, and yet the mere appearance of one drove an investment frenzy. This scandal illustrates how resource spectacle is timed to attract financial capital in the present by anticipating a future that may never exist (Fent & Kojola, 2020; Huber, 2018; Kneas, 2016).

Igoe (2010, 2013, 2017) bridges Debord’s and Tsing’s work to consider how spectacle functions through contemporary conservation. Images not only mediate relations between people, they mediate relations between people and the environment: what he calls ‘the spectacle of nature.’ Igoe grounds his thesis in the history of Tanzania’s tourism industry, developed with help from an Austrian conservationist and filmmaker who insisted that nature could be turned into money by turning it into images. Since the 1950s, spectacular images of the Serengeti and Maasai Steppe have catalyzed a tourism boom in Tanzania, which has in turn catalyzed the transformation of more landscapes to mimic these spectacular images and make more images, thus driving more tourism revenue.

In a recent article, Louder and Bosak (2022) propose the concept “spectacle of nature 2.0,” arguing that the process Igoe originally described is increasingly digital and interactive. Using Tompkins Conservation’s Parque Patagonia project – now known as Patagonia National Park and part of Chile’s Route of Parks – they show how tourists and other individuals are not only invited to consume conservation through spectacle but to actively participate in producing the spectacle and its underlying conservation project via social media posts, travel blogs, monetary donations, and voluntourism. This spectacle was mobilized to garner support for ‘saving’ Patagonia, yet in ways that deliberately subsumed or obscured “the underlying capitalist logics of

the project and the social tensions it has created” (Loudner & Bosak, 2022, p. 1).¹ Ultimately, the spectacle of nature engenders an endless feedback loop between symbolic representation and material reality in order to sell certain stories about capitalism and conservation “in which economy and ecology appear to harmonize” (Igoe, 2017, p. 9).

Harmonization of economy and ecology is the primary objective of conservation and development: a model integrating biodiversity protection and poverty alleviation through market-based activities promoted as economic and environmental ‘win-wins’ (Adams et al., 2004; Tallis et al., 2008). Integrated conservation and development projects (ICDPs) and other ‘people-oriented’ approaches emerged in the 1980s in reaction to mainstream conservation’s longstanding approach of ‘fortress-style’ protectionism (Wilshusen et al., 2002). ICDPs remain popular today despite widespread criticism that they routinely fail to deliver on conservation or development (Brown, 2002). Studying an ICDP in Papua New Guinea, West (2006) questions the logic of what she calls ‘conservation-as-development’ and whether the “needs, wants, and desires, on the part of rural peoples, can be met by the protection of “biodiversity” on their lands” (p. xii-xiii). She critiques the neoliberal ideology that frequently co-opts such projects, reducing nature and social relations to mere commodities.

Ecotourism, the mechanism driving many ICDPs, weds environmental protection and economic development by design (Stronza et al., 2019). It is often portrayed as a sustainability panacea generating funds for protected areas and employment opportunities for surrounding communities consistent with local conservation mandates (Honey, 2008). A number of scholars, however, argue that ecotourism promotes the expansion of capitalism and the neoliberalization of conservation by subjugating nature and people to new forms of market management (Büscher & Dressler, 2012; Duffy, 2002; Fletcher, 2011, 2012). For Fletcher and Neves (2012), “widespread advocacy of ecotourism as a “panacea” for diverse social and environmental ills can be interpreted as an implicit endorsement of its potential as a manifold capitalist fix” (p. 60).

A growing body of research documents the negative social and environmental impacts of ecotourism (Buckley et al., 2016; Holmes & Cavanagh, 2016; Loperena, 2016; Ojeda, 2012), while also finding that its benefits flow mainly to foreign firms or local elites (Benjaminsen & Bryceson, 2012; To et al., 2012). The rise of ecotourism in Chilean Patagonia has been problematized as a form of neocolonialism that articulates new linkages between territorial control and the logics of capital, albeit through environmentalist discourses (Núñez et al., 2016, 2018). Núñez et al. (2020) describe how industrial corporations are stockpiling land for ecotourism ventures or private nature reserves, a move they call ‘eco-extractivism’: a particular kind of ‘green grabbing’ (Fairhead et al., 2012) committed by industrial-extractivist actors that reflects the speculative financial logics and behaviors of industrial-extractivist investment.

Scholars studying the political economy of conservation and development note that the negative impacts of ecotourism, and other gaps between the representations and realities of ICDPs, necessitate the production of success narratives (Lund et al., 2017; Svarstad & Benjaminsen, 2017). According to Büscher (2013, 2014), selling the success of ICDPs is critical for mobilizing political and financial support from policymakers. This is achieved primarily through marketing: “a strategy to change people’s perceptions about issues or things in line with predetermined objectives and so create buy-in and legitimacy for a particular product, idea, or political agenda” (Büscher, 2014, p. 81). In an industry that is largely ‘future positive’ (Mosse, 2004), selling the success of a conservation and development intervention helps secure legitimacy and funding up front and irrespective of any concrete outcomes that may or may not result.

This article bridges the theoretical and conceptual insights on resource spectacle and conservation and development to understand a new ICDP in Chile: the Route of Parks. The Route of Parks combines philanthropy with public administration to further conservation and development in Chilean Patagonia. Philanthropic actors frame the Route of Parks as a resource spectacle to make it more politically palatable and financially alluring to policymakers. In Igoe’s (2017) words, they use “images and performance to conjure desired future realities, giving them the appearance of having already been achieved. If successful, such strategies inspire investors and supporters to bring forth the funds by which the conjured realities are actually brought into existence” (p. x). This, I argue, demonstrates the key role of spectacle in selling the success of ICDPs. The following sections trace how these actors apply speculative techniques of resource-making – the same used to attract investor buy-in for extractive production – to attract state buy-in for large-scale environmental protection. That resource spectacle is invoked in this context too highlights the synergies between contemporary conservation and extraction, including how they “make use of similar logics, strategies, and technologies” (Enns et al., 2019, p. 969). It also indicates that the analytical purchase of resource spectacle applies to a broader range of activities than scholars presently acknowledge. Next, I introduce the complementary forces driving this resource spectacle in Chilean Patagonia: big philanthropy and big conservation.

3. Big philanthropy & big conservation in Chilean Patagonia

Big philanthropy describes the ethos and approach of the most prominent international philanthropic foundations working on biodiversity conservation in Chile today: Tompkins Conservation and The Pew Charitable Trusts. Tompkins Conservation was founded by American philanthropists Kristine McDivitt Tompkins and the late Douglas Tompkins, whose wealth derives from the outdoor apparel industry.² Since the early 1990s, they have protected a staggering two million acres of private land, spending over \$345 million on conservation and species rewilding projects in Chile and Argentina (Tompkins Conservation, 2019). Tompkins Conservation’s Chile-based operation was recently renamed and rebranded as Fundación Rewilding Chile. The Pew Charitable Trusts is a U.S.-based philanthropic conglomerate founded in the 1940s by Sun Oil Company executive Joseph N. Pew. It focuses a \$6 billion endowment on a variety of public-interest issues, including ocean and terrestrial conservation in the United States, Canada, and Australia. In 2018, it launched a 20-year partnership with the Chilean state, pledging to work with local NGOs, universities, and government agencies to improve conservation outcomes in Chilean Patagonia.

These foundations exemplify big philanthropy not only because they wield enormous asset portfolios, but also because they wield enormous organizational capacities that rival those of the Chilean state. Big philanthropy fulfills a range of conservation activities on its behalf, such as: supplying land and infrastructure to SNASPE, Chile’s public conservation system; training park rangers and other employees of the National Forestry Corporation, known as CONAF, which administers SNASPE; running wildlife recovery programs; funding academic research; formulating new legislation and public policies; developing new models for parks administration and concessioning; and building coalitions across government and civil society (CONAF & Fundación Yendegaia, 2018; CONAF & The Pew Charitable Trusts, 2018). Big philanthropy justifies the necessity of its conservation activities by highlighting important gaps and weaknesses in the state’s approach. For instance, The Pew Charitable Trusts notes that only 113 parks staff are employed in Chilean Patagonia; in the Aysén and Magallanes regions, where the bulk of national parklands are concentrated, every park ranger “looks after an average of 63,800 ha (246 square miles) – an area the size of

¹ See Núñez et al. (2021) for a slightly different take on the role of spectacle in conservation in Chilean Patagonia.

² Tompkins was co-founder of Esprit and The North Face brands, while McDivitt Tompkins is former CEO of Patagonia, Inc.

Singapore” (The Pew Charitable Trusts, 2019). A chronic lack of fiscal and human resources severely limits state capacity to manage biodiversity and monitor threats, including forest fires, illegal logging, invasive species, and ocean contamination from the salmon industry.

Big conservation describes the kind of intervention that big philanthropy increasingly advocates. Big conservation is informed by an emerging paradigm known as large landscape conservation that seeks to connect working lands, protected lands, and urban areas through integrated ecosystem management. Large landscape conservation pursues landscape-level initiatives that bring together multiple sectors and stakeholders to “address land and water problems at an appropriate scale, regardless of political or jurisdictional boundaries” (McKinney et al., 2010, p. 20). It is championed by an extensive network of universities, think tanks, NGOs, and philanthropic foundations headquartered in the United States, including the University of Montana, Harvard University, the Lincoln Institute of Land Policy, and the Center for Large Landscape Conservation. The broader idea behind big conservation is that biodiversity loss is a big problem necessitating big solutions (Adams, 2020). Through initiatives like Nature Needs Half and Half Earth, this idea has permeated the scientific community and is now gaining favor with major donors. Big philanthropy’s embrace of big conservation and its emphasis on collaborations at the landscape scale challenges the methodological nationalism of traditionally state-bound territorial approaches, while also helping globalize this U.S.-centric paradigm by exporting American conservation ideals overseas via donor-funded initiatives (cf. Nelson & Parrish, 2018).

In Chile, big conservation circulates through workshops, seminars, and binational peer learning exchanges hosted by a transnational network involving The Pew Charitable Trusts, Tompkins Conservation, Harvard University’s regional office in Santiago, the Lincoln Institute of Land Policy, the International Land Conservation Network, and the Chile-California Conservation Exchange. This network considers Chilean Patagonia a model setting for big conservation for two reasons. First, large-scale conservation interventions are still feasible here. Population and urban density are low, and open landscapes remain more or less intact due to the region’s political-economic history as a rangelands economy (Núñez et al., 2016). Second, large-scale conservation gains are cheaper to achieve relative to other places in Chile and abroad because local land markets are less competitive and less expensive. As a former senior staffer at Tompkins Conservation said of Douglas Tompkins, “he sought and obviously found in Chile an ideal setting and an economic opportunity because at that time thirty years ago the land was cheaper. He could spend less money in Chile than in the United States” (Interview 57, 16 October 2019). In other words, Chilean Patagonia offers a bargain deal for big conservation that big philanthropy exploits to maximize its impact.³

For these same reasons, scientists recognize Chilean Patagonia as having high remaining conservation value and as being a last-best place to concentrate efforts for ‘conservation triage’ (Hayward & Castley, 2018; Packer & Polasky, 2018). In a global environment increasingly constrained by biodiversity loss and insufficient funding to address it, conservation triage favors the optimization of current funding to prioritize certain geographical areas over others. That Chilean Patagonia is scientifically understood as a high-value, last-best place for big conservation helps explain why it has become a target of big philanthropy. At the same time, it illustrates the degree to which big conservation has ‘gone global,’ in search of new settings befitting the ideal of large-scale interventions for large-scale gains. The transnational nature of both big philanthropy and big conservation is key to how these forces leverage

spectacle and exert influence in Chile specifically, where until recently domestic philanthropists paid onerous tax penalties of up to 40% for donating to conservation-related causes (Interview 15, 18 March 2019). Transnational donations have been subject to different standards, as have partnerships between transnational foundations and the state, which were crucial for carrying out a project as large and complex as the Route of Parks.⁴

4. The Route of Parks

On March 15, 2017, McDivitt Tompkins and President Michelle Bachelet launched a novel conservation PPP that created or expanded eight national parks in Chilean Patagonia. Known as the Network of National Parks, the PPP added 10 million acres to SNASPE, including a joint donation of over a million acres of private lands owned by Tompkins Conservation and 2.4 million acres of adjacent public lands. It also included the reclassification of 6.6 million acres of existing forest and national reserves (CONAF, 2017; MMA, 2017a). It is the largest terrestrial conservation initiative in Chile in over half a century, and the largest private land donation ever received by a national government (Daley, 2017). Moreover, the PPP established the Route of Parks, a companion policy and branding framework promoting conservation and development through ecotourism in Chilean Patagonia’s national parks and surrounding rural communities. Geographically, the Route of Parks exemplifies the large-scale ideal of big conservation, spanning one-third of the country and protecting a territory roughly three times the size of Switzerland. The Network of National Parks and Route of Parks are mapped in Fig. 1.

Both the Network of National Parks and Route of Parks, though public–private projects officially, were proposed and largely planned by big philanthropy. Tompkins Conservation even identified which public lands should be donated by the state.⁵ This reflects a strategy the Foundation has employed in Chilean Patagonia since the early 1990s: buying and conserving private lands, often next to public lands, then gradually donating these lands to SNASPE. Tompkins Conservation’s previous donations helped create Corcovado National Park in 2005 and Yendegaia National Park in 2013. With the Network of National Parks, the Foundation aimed to donate its remaining conservation lands to SNASPE in exchange for a sizable matching donation from the state. Importantly, it tried and failed to do this twice before, during President Bachelet’s and President Sebastián Piñera’s first terms in office (2006–2010 and 2010–2014, respectively). After the Piñera administration concluded that such a project would inhibit economic growth by removing too much land from production, the Foundation resolved to add a development component to its proposal. The Route of Parks was quickly born, pitching a vision of rural development based on national parks.

The Route of Parks is an ecotourism circuit that utilizes Chilean Patagonia’s limited but scenic highway and ferry infrastructure – built by military labor under Pinochet’s dictatorship (cf. Urrutia et al., 2022) – to link the region’s 18 national parks. Tompkins Conservation’s promotion of conservation-based tourism as a development alternative should be understood in relation to its years-long support of the social movement Patagonia Without Dams, which defeated a massive hydroelectric power project, and growing extractive pressures posed by salmon aquaculture and coal and heavy metals mining (Bustos et al.,

⁴ For example, Tompkins Conservation avoided paying a penalty on its donation because Chile’s Congress eliminated it in a legal reform known colloquially as ‘the Tompkins law’ (*la ley Tompkins*). Multiple informants intimated that the donation was dead on arrival without this legal reform (Interview 57, 16 October 2019; Interview 79, 13 December 2019).

⁵ Tompkins Conservation employs someone who specializes in territorial planning for conservation and has intimate knowledge of the geography of state property.

³ Chile’s highly neoliberal regime of natural resource governance offers a further bargain for big conservation. Liberalized land markets, strong private property rights, and a general openness to foreign land ownership – originally designed to benefit big industry – have enabled big philanthropy to easily acquire land for conservation (Holmes, 2015).



Fig. 1. Map of Chile's Network of National Parks & Route of Parks.

2017; Schaeffer, 2017). The Pew Charitable Trusts is also affiliated with the Route of Parks, collaborating with Tompkins Conservation and the Chilean state in recent years on a long-term philanthropic conservation finance mechanism known as Project Finance for Permanence (Beer,

2022).

At the heart of the Route of Parks and its concomitant resource spectacle is a digital media campaign that markets Chilean Patagonia's national parks to domestic and foreign audiences. This includes a bilingual website offering tourist information on the parks and surrounding communities, trip planning tools, suggested itineraries, and links to local service operators. The campaign espouses four objectives typical of ICDPs, but modified to emphasize big conservation: environmental protection, local economic development, integrated ecosystem management, and climate resilience (see Fig. 2). As one informant at Tompkins Conservation suggested, the goal is to change Chile's international image so that it "will be known not only for its wine, or for its astronomy, or for its salmon, but also for its conservation vocation" (Interview 13, 14 March 2019).

In terms of the quantity and location of land, the same partnership proposal that was rejected by President Piñera in the early 2010s was accepted by President Bachelet several years later. Only one ingredient was added: the Route of Parks campaign. According to a former senior staffer at Tompkins Conservation,

Doug [Tompkins] realized that he had to clothe this thing in a story and he built the Route of Parks as a means to make possible, or attractive, or more attractive, the conservation project behind it... Tourism was never an interest for him, but he realized, strategically, intelligently, that tourism was a way to sell conservation." (Interview 57, 16 October 2019)

The final donation attempt was formalized in mid-2015, just months before Tompkins died of hypothermia following a kayaking accident in Chilean Patagonia. President Bachelet, now in her second term, determined this time "the country could not say no" (Interview 53, 9 October 2019). To understand how big philanthropy succeeded in selling this ICDP to state policymakers, I turn to enumerating its performance of what I call 'conservation resource spectacle.'

5. Conservation resource spectacle

Big philanthropy engages conservation resource spectacle as a central strategy for pursuing its goals in Chile – goals that are premised on the national parks model and thus require state buy-in. Traditional resource spectacles perform the drama of 'spectacular accumulation' (Tsing, 2005) in order to attract private investment from financial actors for mining and other extractive projects. Big philanthropy, on the other hand, performs this drama for opposite ends: in order to attract public investment from state actors for the large-scale conservation projects it increasingly favors. Following Büscher's (2014) call to explicate how, exactly, ICDPs like the Route of Parks are sold to policymakers, I argue that conservation resource spectacle is one way these projects are rendered attractive and sellable, especially in state contexts where extractivism predominates.

In Chilean Patagonia, big philanthropy conjures a conservation resource spectacle to reimagine the region's territorial vocation away from a sub-national rangelands economy based on livestock grazing and toward an international conservation economy based on ecotourism (Blair et al., 2019; Louder & Bosak, 2019). The goal, as one informant stated, is to make ecotourism "the next sheep of Patagonia" (participant observation, 26 July 2019). Patagonia is an historical 'resource periphery' (McElroy, 2018) of the modern Chilean state and has long been regarded as an economic backwater. Yet, given the twin demands of development and environmental change, big conservation is emerging as a new regional resource frontier. Big philanthropy sells the success of this resource frontier by marketing the Route of Parks as "a cold, hard asset." This entails resource-making, or the social processes through which nature is made knowable, exploitable, and investable (Kama, 2020; Li, 2014). Spectacle is a crucial resource-making practice here, deployed to perform the resource-ness of national parks through the Route of Parks campaign. Spectacle enables and potentiates speculation:

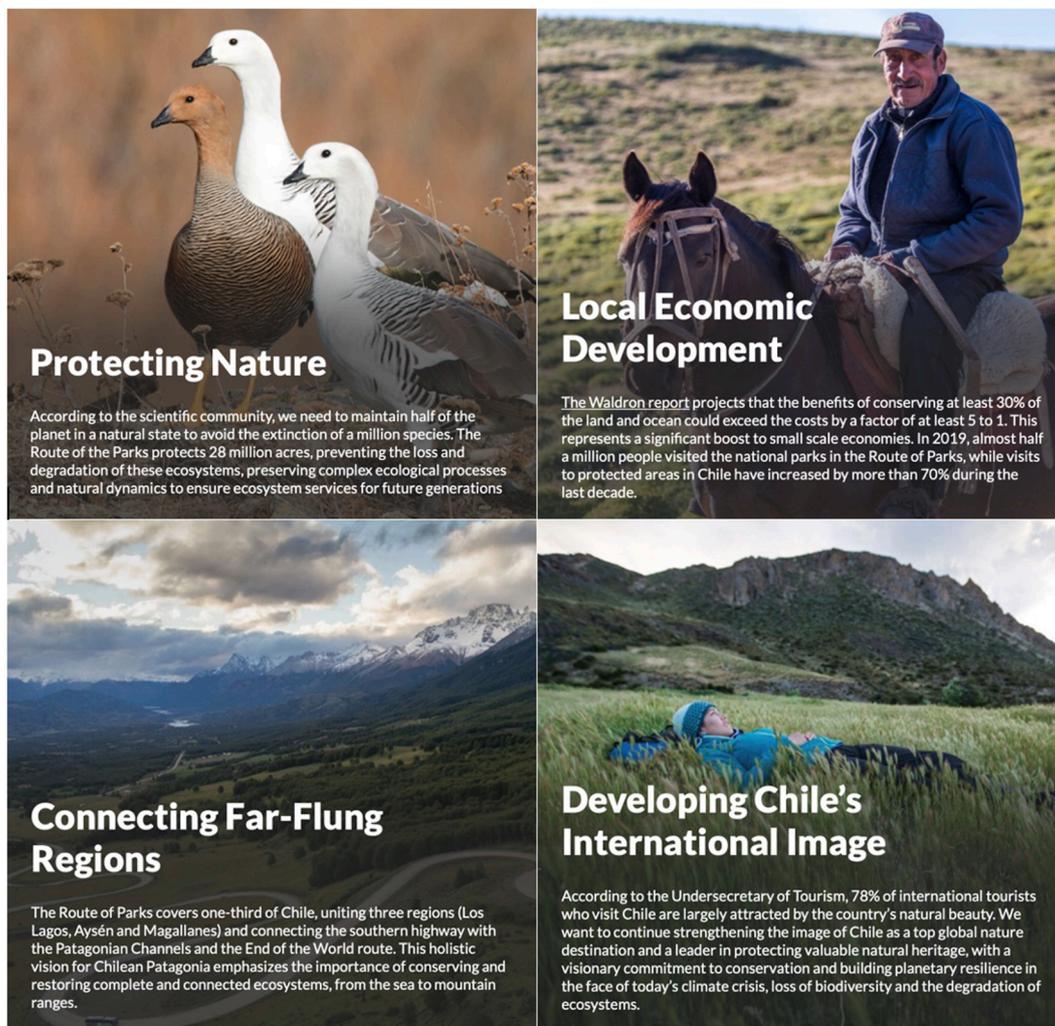


Fig. 2. Project Objectives of the Route of Parks (Source: Rewilding Chile, 2018).

economic activity that aims “to anticipate the future; to stimulate its emergence; and to control it” (Bear, 2020, p. 8). The conjuring of a conservation resource spectacle in Chilean Patagonia involves three resource-making techniques: performing resource legibility, speculating on resource potentiality, and spectacularizing resource futurity. I describe and discuss each technique below.

5.1. Resource legibility: The spectacle of superlative ecology

Tompkins Conservation and The Pew Charitable Trusts render the Route of Parks legible as a value-bearing resource through a visual and discursive spectacle I call ‘superlative ecology.’⁶ Visual and discursive spectacles have always animated conservation projects, and big philanthropy’s campaign in Chilean Patagonia is no exception. Through a spectacle involving professional photography, glossy websites, print publications, tourism ads, and social media campaigns, the region is rendered unique, exotic, pristine, and therefore deserving of the highest levels of environmental protection. During fieldwork, I recorded

⁶ Massé (2019) also analyzes the relation between conservation, spectacle, and philanthropy, focusing on the “rhino poaching hotspot of the Mozambique-South Africa borderlands” (p. 1). Whereas in his case a ‘spectacle of (anti-) poaching’ is deployed by international NGOs to elicit support from donors, in this case the spectacle of superlative ecology is deployed by donors to elicit support from the state.

countless instances of philanthropic actors describing the region in superlative terms, as “the last wild place on Earth,” “the least contaminated place on Earth,” and “the only place on the planet that remains untouched” (Interview 15, 18 March 2019; Interview 49, 10 September 2019; participant observation, 26 July 2019).

The spectacle of superlative ecology renders big conservation as a dual resource: simultaneously possessing value for its own sake (the intrinsic value of protected nature) and value to be realized through markets (the exchange value of protected nature). This enables Tompkins Conservation and The Pew Charitable Trusts to conjure the Route of Parks as a territorial project that is symbolically *and* economically investable (cf. Lunstrum & Massé, 2021). It is not a singular effort by big philanthropy, to be sure. Parallel efforts to fix conservation and ecotourism as Chilean Patagonia’s new territorial vocation are taking place across the public and private sectors (Mendoza et al., 2017; Núñez et al., 2020). Yet, the Route of Parks campaign provides powerful branding and a unified political vision for the region – that it should remain free of the mines, forest plantations, salmon farms, and related forms of extractive-led development that prevail elsewhere in the country. Describing the objective of the Route of Parks campaign, a Tompkins Conservation staffer explained:

[We are] positioning the territory as a conservation destination... and we want this to be a national concept. We are doing different things – from participating in tourism fairs, for example, to working with tour operators – so they begin to include the concept of the

Route of the Parks in their tourist packages. We want everyone to speak the same language, and when we breathe this territory, we want everyone to say the Route of Parks of Patagonia! (Interview 13, 14 March 2019)

‘Positioning the territory’ toward big conservation demonstrates the degree to which landscape change is both material and discursive, with “transformations in perceptions and representations of landscape bring[ing] about new forms of land use” (Aliste et al., 2018, p. 1).

As with other resource-making techniques, the spectacle of superlative ecology performs the resource legibility of big conservation through a politics of scale (Nygren, 2021). Big philanthropy markets the Route of Parks as a sub-national environment of supranational significance whose protection will benefit all of humanity, not just Chileans. It is depicted as a “green lung” (Interview 46, 6 September 2019) for the country and the planet, containing geo-strategic resources like glacial and freshwater reserves, old-growth forests, and peat bogs that are integral to global water security and climate change mitigation. Citing a recent study conducted in partnership with the National Geographic Society, Tompkins Conservation claims the Route of Parks is one of South America’s richest carbon sinks, storing “almost three times more carbon per hectare than the forests of the Amazon” (personal communication, 30 September 2020). Moreover, since the Route of Parks accounts for roughly 30% of Chile’s sequestered carbon total, Tompkins Conservation argues that the project is a key facet of Chile’s nationally determined contributions to the Paris Agreement. By conjuring Chilean Patagonia as too valuable *not* to conserve on humanity’s behalf, the spectacle of superlative ecology jumps scales to link local political action to global environmental impact.

5.2. Resource potentiality: Speculating on conservation-as-development

Big philanthropy sells the success of the Route of Parks by speculating on its resource potential as a rural development alternative. Adopting the logic of ‘conservation-as-development’ (West, 2006), it argues that the project will be an engine of local economic growth for more than 60 communities through ecotourism and related commercial activities (Rewilding Chile, 2022). Tompkins Conservation expresses this logic through the slogan ‘tourism as a consequence of conservation’ (*turismo como consecuencia de la conservación*), which emphasizes the economic promise of the Route of Parks even as it is governed by strict environmental protection standards. As one Foundation staffer disclosed, this is a deliberate attempt to attract buy-in from local residents and the state: “to be viable in a developing country where the economy is important, the only way to negotiate with the government is this – seeing the economic issues behind conservation” (Interview 13, 14 March 2019).

This includes enlisting the expertise of global management consultancies to quantify the resource potential of the Route of Parks. For example, in 2016, McKinsey & Company completed pro-bono analysis for Tompkins Conservation that assessed “the economic opportunity of 10 of the 17 parks, which have infrastructure and/or accessibility to support visitor growth” (McKinsey & Company, 2016, p. 5).⁷ According to McKinsey, economic opportunity lies in the potential income streams of concessionary contracts for accommodation services (e.g. hotels and campsites), telecommunications and banking services (e.g. wifi and ATM fees), transportation services (e.g. buses, car rentals, chartered helicopters), tour operations (e.g. hiking, biking, photography), retail operations (e.g. groceries and souvenirs), and sustainable agriculture. The analysis – marked ‘proprietary and confidential,’ as is standard of McKinsey reports – projects that the Route of Parks could generate up to

⁷ This analysis was led by a senior director at McKinsey & Company who serves on the Advisory Council of Tompkins Conservation, and no doubt facilitated the pro bono arrangement (McKinsey & Company, 2018).

US\$270 million and 43,000 jobs for local communities over a ten-year period. These projections are fantastical, given that Patagonia is among the least populated and least economically productive areas of the country.⁸ Such projections depend on the inherently speculative technology of scenario modeling, ranging from a conservative ‘base case’ that reflects existing conditions without modifications to a highly conjectural ‘optimal case’ contingent on unlikely modifications like “policy changes from government and increases in investments into infrastructure in and around the parks” (McKinsey & Company, 2016, p. 2).

Big philanthropy and the state have also started speculating on how many tourists will visit the Route of Parks each year and, more importantly, how much money they will spend. Chile’s protected areas receive 3.5 million visitors annually and this number is projected to increase 60% by 2025 (Subsecretaría de Turismo, 2017, 2020). Nationally, ecotourism is already a billion-dollar business that constitutes as much as 10% of local GDP in some regions (participant observation, 5 September 2019). In Chilean Patagonia, the National Tourism Service tracks tourists’ spending behavior in the parks and surrounding communities, breaking this down by nationality. On average, Brazilian, American, and Chilean tourists spend more than European tourists, who spend more than Argentine tourists, and so on (SERATUR, 2017). These statistics are now used to make projections about which foreign markets the National Tourism Service should target with Route of Parks advertising, following a key finding from McKinsey that “more needs to be done to encourage higher-spending tourists who stay longer” (McKinsey & Company, 2016, p. 7).

5.3. Resource futurity: Spectacularizing ‘ROI conservation’

Lastly, Tompkins Conservation and The Pew Charitable Trusts spectacularize the resource future of the Route of Parks by promoting a return-on-investment model of parks management – ‘ROI conservation.’ ROI conservation frames public spending on national parks as an investment rather than an expense. This paves the way for national parks to be understood as rent-bearing economic assets, or capitalized “property that yields an income stream (and not a commodity for sale)” (Birch, 2017, p. 468). An informant described how national parks generate income across multiple sectors: “it is not just the hotel that earns the tourist dollar. He will visit the businesses in town, he needs to buy food, he may buy handicrafts or hire a tourism service, and he might damage his car and need to fix it. There are a million opportunities” (Interview 12, 12 March 2019). Under ROI conservation, the future value of Chile’s national parks is “conjured like a spirit to draw an audience of potential investors” (Tsing, 2005, p. 57) who, in this case, are state policymakers.

Big philanthropy’s framing of national parks as economic assets is a stark departure from historical understandings of national parks in Chile. A former senior staffer at Tompkins Conservation hinted at these when describing the Foundation’s final donation attempt to President Bachelet in mid-2015:

I told Kris, either we do it with Bachelet or we are never going to do it because we are never going to get a right-wing government to hand over so much public land for national parks. There is a legal opinion by this Chilean think tank Libertad y Desarrollo arguing that national parks are a curse – that creating a national park is like placing a curse on the land. (Interview 57, 16 October 2019)

By contrast, big philanthropy argues that the Route of Parks promises meaningful future returns on state investments through ecotourism. It bases this argument on a 2015 study from the United States finding that

⁸ In the Aysén and Magallanes regions of Chilean Patagonia, where 14 of the 18 national parks are located, the total workforce population is just 153,000 people (INE, 2022a, 2022b).

for every taxpayer dollar invested in national parks, US\$10 are returned to local economies (National Park Service, 2015). Comparing Chile to the United States in this way is problematic, they are not analogous cases, and recently Tompkins Conservation has tempered the comparison to suggest that US\$6–10 would be returned for every taxpayer dollar spent. This remains purely speculative, however, because such a study has not been completed in Chile. Nevertheless, the logic of ROI conservation is clear: spectacularizing ecotourism and its multiplier effects on public spending renders big conservation investable as a rural development alternative, just as it has for decades in the United States.

Additionally, this model spectacularizes big conservation as the only truly sustainable resource future for Chilean Patagonia. Projections like those included in McKinsey's report strengthen big philanthropy's claim that ecotourism could become part of a national plan to transition away from copper mining, Chile's current commodity workhorse. Citing the same U.S. National Park Service data, the late Douglas Tompkins argued that conservation provides a return on investment of 10-to-1, far higher than copper mining and therefore more sustainably profitable (Interview 57, 16 October 2019). Another informant went further, suggesting that protected areas should become the CODELCO of the 21st century (CODELCO is Chile's largest state-owned enterprise and the world's leading copper producer):

We need to go from a CODELCO based on mining, which has an enormous carbon footprint, to a CODELCO based on ecological tourism, which would decarbonize the economy and reduce our carbon footprint significantly... CODELCO takes money from the ground, tourism brings money from the outside. What's more, the money can recirculate many times within the population. (Interview 12, 12 March 2019)

This reasoning is gaining traction with policymakers who face increasing pressure from Chilean scientists and civil society organizations to view national biodiversity as capital assets that, unlike copper, are renewable (Jaksic et al., 2019).

To summarize, conservation resource spectacle is the strategy by which big philanthropy sells the success of Chile's Route of Parks to the state. Igoe (2017) notes that "modernist approaches to conservation and development are not possible without fantasy and storytelling" (p. 110), and both invigorate these three resource-making techniques. Taken together, they make promises about the future predicated on the dramatic performance of success and value to influence the state's political and financial decision-making in the present. Therefore, the temporality of conservation resource spectacle mimics that of other resource spectacles where the present is summoned through anticipatory discourses about the future (Braun, 2020). These resource-making techniques, though inherently speculative, have very real effects. Tompkins Conservation shared McKinsey's report with policymakers, and it was cited as a compelling factor in green-lighting the Route of Parks (MMA, 2017b). Statistical projections and scenario modeling played a particularly alluring role by representing success and value numerically. According to one mid-level CONAF official, this is how conservation decision-making happens in Chile: "You have to go in with numbers, numbers, numbers, numbers, numbers. This is what Central [CONAF headquarters] hears. Central is interested in the dollars per hectare, in the return of ten dollars for every dollar invested, in GDP and increases to GDP, and in how many jobs are created" (Interview 21, 28 March 2019).

6. Extractivism without extraction

Spectacle is not a necessary condition of all resource-making projects. Indeed, there is a long history of private firms green-lighting projects without first conjuring a dramatic performance. If spectacle is just one of many resource-making practices, when is it invoked and why was it a necessary condition here? Spectacle is invoked in particular material and historical contexts to attract stakeholder buy-in. More

pointedly, it has become a regular feature of extractivism under financial capitalism (Tsing, 2005). As private firms turn to financial capital to realize their resource-making projects, project boosters increasingly utilize spectacle to grab and keep investors' attention. This is especially true for mining and other subterranean activities that require large, upfront investments "before the promise of a putative mineral deposit can be reliably known" (Gilbert, 2020, p. 17). Importantly, I find that the same is true of some non-extractive activities like ICDPs, which also rely on large, upfront investments before concrete outcomes can be reliably known.

Spectacle was a necessary condition here because big philanthropy could not execute its big conservation goals alone. It needed to attract stakeholder buy-in, not least because national parks – its preferred conservation designation – are publicly conferred and publicly controlled. The Chilean state has historically underinvested in national parks and big philanthropy seeks to change this by conjuring them as a resource spectacle. Whereas state policymakers are motivated by a clear desire to make money off the project, Tompkins Conservation and The Pew Charitable Trusts are strikingly indifferent about this (Beer, 2022). The Route of Parks campaign weds these competing motives by framing big conservation as a promissory engine of local economic growth, while also generating state-backed legitimacy and long-term public funding for it.

I understand this conservation resource spectacle as not just strategic but instrumental, an expression of political pragmatism by Tompkins Conservation to guarantee that its private projects would be permanently protected as national parks through a partnership with the state (Interview 22, 28 March 2019). National parks are not only the gold standard of conservation in Chile, they are also subject to international laws and norms per the Convention on Nature Protection and Wildlife Preservation in the Western Hemisphere, which the country ratified in 1967. Moreover, this PPP was established through a 'restricted donation' (*donación modal*) under Chilean law stipulating that if the state ever alters the national park designation of either the private or public donated lands, Tompkins Conservation could sue for breach of contract (Interview 79, 13 December 2019). These dynamics ultimately strengthen Tompkins Conservation's philanthropic legacy, underscoring why it pursued a PPP in the first place.

That political pragmatism figures so centrally in this case underscores the durability and path dependency of extractivism as a governing paradigm in Chile. My analysis shows that even conservation – the antithesis of extractive production – must be rendered legible and consumable through the resource-making techniques of extractive production. Barring this, state buy-in for large-scale environmental projects like the Route of Parks is highly improbable, as evidenced by the failure of Tompkins Conservation's previous donation attempts. Yet, to say that big philanthropy deploys the techniques of extractivism to market the Route of Parks to Chilean policymakers is not to say that the project is materially extractive per se. Equating the Route of Parks to the copper mines of northern Chile, or to the forest plantations and salmon farms of south-central Chile is grossly inaccurate. Rather, this case illustrates a kind of 'extractivism without extraction': how conservation becomes politically common sense in a material and historical context like Chile's where the state apparatus does not, and indeed cannot, value protected nature for its own sake because it is not designed to do so. In order for big philanthropy to sell the Route of Parks to policymakers as intrinsically valuable, it must sell the Route of Parks as economically valuable.

What are the broader implications of extractivism without extraction? Treating national parks as economic assets for the sake of furthering conservation and development in Chilean Patagonia will inevitably subject local landscapes and communities to deeper levels of market mediation and market rule that risk undermining the very conservation and development successes that project boosters sell. This is evidenced in one informant's critique that the Route of Parks campaign prioritizes "promotion over planning":

Unfortunately, the staff of Tompkins Conservation, through the delivery of a couple of parks, feel they are owners of this Route. They have announced to the world that everyone should come visit without having any idea of how many people fit, or how to prepare for all the people who will come. This is the antithesis of conservation, marketing a project that nobody knows how to handle... What infrastructure do the parks have to accommodate this? What rescue protocols? None of this is clear and today it is being announced to the world, in *The Guardian* and in *The New York Times*. (Interview 44, 5 September 2019)

Multiple informants also expressed concern that the Route of Parks will introduce problems of over-tourism (*sobreturismo*) and what locals call 'extractive tourism' throughout the region (Interview 16, 19 March 2019; Interview 18, 21 March 2019; Interview 25, 4 April 2019; Interview 30, 11 April 2019). Extractive tourism is a folk category in Chile describing the tendency of ecotourism to replicate extractivism's signature maldistribution of economic benefits and environmental burdens in rural communities, catalyzing new patterns of pollution, landscape transformation, and community change. This evokes what scholars have called the 'ecotourism-extraction nexus' where "(industrial) extraction and (postindustrial) ecotourism can be understood as two sides of the same neoliberal coin" (Fletcher, 2013, p. 70). Both overtourism and extractive tourism have plagued Chilean Patagonia's iconic Torres del Paine National Park in recent years and could quickly metastasize elsewhere if CONAF repeats similar patterns of parks management and concessioning. The concern that highly capitalized outsiders stand to gain the most from this project was affirmed by news that the concession to operate the lodge in Patagonia National Park – donated by Tompkins Conservation – was awarded to the luxury hotel chain Explora, which already operates a five-star hotel in Torres del Paine (CONAF, 2021).

Ultimately, conservation resource spectacle and the underlying dynamic of extractivism without extraction highlight the growing convergence of conservation and extraction wherein, increasingly, both associate nature with capital through the paradigm of resources (Büscher et al., 2022; Enns et al., 2019; Le Billon, 2021; Norris, 2017; Núñez et al., 2018). This case study contributes to emerging research on conservation and extraction by showing how big philanthropy and the state actively foster their convergence through the phenomenon of resource spectacle. Yet, neither reterritorializing Chilean Patagonia from a sub-national rangelands economy to an international conservation economy, nor reimagining its geopolitical status from a forgotten periphery of the modern state to a prized periphery of a planet in peril, will fundamentally alter the hierarchical (core-periphery) power relations that have historically defined it. This conservation resource spectacle merely reconstitutes those power relations, doubtlessly contributing to what Aliste et al. (2018) describe as an eco-colonization of the periphery marked by new forms of inequality and new challenges for sustainable development.

7. Conclusion

This article has explored the 'how' and 'why now' of Chile's Route of Parks, one of the largest terrestrial conservation initiatives on Earth. I have argued that big philanthropy engages resource spectacle to attract buy-in for big conservation among relevant stakeholders, and that resource spectacle was necessary for selling the success of this project to state policymakers. Through the same resource-making techniques that define extractivism, national parks in Chile are rendered economically valuable and investable to an otherwise intransigent state apparatus. Together, these techniques promote a logic of conservation-as-development, disrupting the entrenched state logic of conservation-versus-development that derailed previous attempts to green-light the project. Conservation resource spectacles, like traditional resource spectacles, are geographically constituted and geographically

differentiated; in terms of where they can be convincingly deployed, space and place matter. Chilean Patagonia is a model setting for conservation resource spectacles, given its preponderance of existing protected areas and public lands to create new protected areas.

It is not altogether surprising to see conservation conjured as such in a material and historical context like Chile's, where extractivism is deeply entrenched. It is also not altogether surprising to see conservation conjured as such by powerful philanthropic elites, who seek to stake an economic claim on big conservation in order to advance this specific global environmental agenda. Yet, the application of resource spectacle to contexts and activities beyond extractive production is worrisome – not least because it establishes perverse incentives for environmental protection. While the Route of Parks may not be materially extractive per se, it mimics and reproduces the same rentier logics that characterize state-nature relations under extractivism (Coronil, 1997; Mendoza, 2018). National parks are marketed as "a cold, hard asset," yielding income streams from the capture of ground rent, all while promising to 'green' Chile's rentier state. An additional concern here is how these rentier logics combine with 'green grabbing' logics of resource appropriation and alienation, which are spilling over from the private domain into the public domain via this novel conservation PPP. So long as conservation strategies reflect the path dependencies of resource extractivism, conservation will be subject to similar problems and pitfalls. It is therefore hard to imagine how a philanthropic strategy endorsing extractivism without extraction will deliver the transformational change that this mega project pretends.

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Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Data availability

The data that has been used is confidential.

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