
No Concession at PETAR: Combating Privatization is a Women's Struggle in Brazil

We wrote this text with many hands, from conversations and elaborations by women from the territory of the Ribeira River Valley – between Brazil's South and Southeast regions – who have devoted themselves to fighting against the concession (1) of one of the region's most important parks, the Alto Ribeira Tourist State Park (PETAR, for its name in Portuguese). The park, located in Iporanga and Apiaí municipalities, is currently administered by the São Paulo state government, and was included in a concessions plan together with other conservation units. This allows private companies (national or international) to gain the right to exploit commercially the part of the territory where the main tourist attractions are concentrated.

The Ribeira River Valley is the region in Brazil that harbors the largest portion of the Atlantic Forest biome, of which 70% is preserved. While in most of the country this biome was destroyed by megaprojects and real estate speculation, in the Ribeira River Valley local communities' relation with and defense of the forest have contributed to its maintenance. Since last century, the conservation policy conceived to house this biodiversity has been a policy 'without people', which created many parks and conservation units that restrict the ways of life of communities (2) in the territory. Only more recently, and through struggle, have some areas gone over to what is termed sustainable use areas. These units are of a type created by Brazil's National Conservation Units System, and were meant to operate under a regime that tolerates the presence of communities in the territories. This is not entirely the case in practice, seen as even in these locations there are many conflicts between people's ways of life and the rules of Conservation Units. As a rule, the way environmental and land issues are resolved in the Ribeira River Valley is through the expulsion – forced or by wearing down – of the communities that inhabit it.

Advances in terms of the implementation of more sustainable use areas – where one can practice traditional agriculture, even though permission is required – have allowed communities to remain on the territory. But their real demand has always been the regularization of land ownership. Although they have inhabited the territory for centuries, most communities do not have their lands demarcated or deeds for them, which generates great insecurity. Land conflicts have worsened in Brazil with new policies of digitalization of territorial organization, like the Rural Environmental Registry (CAR) (3). In other words, these communities continue to this day fighting for their right to land, as well as fighting in parallel against the environmental policy, especially in the parks.

Privatizing the concession for 30 years: displacements, insecurity and gentrification

This is the case of *quilombola* and *cabocla* communities in Iporanga municipality that were superimposed by the Alto Ribeira Tourist State Park (PETAR). Ana Ercilia – a resident of Iporanga since her childhood, environmental monitor and involved in the current struggle against the concession of the park to the private sector – relates that in 1958, at the time when the park was created, people from the territory believed it would be an amusement park, such was the absence of

dialogue and transparency of the authorities vis-à-vis the communities. After some time, they came to understand the actual kind of park that had arrived at the territory, already by then owing to restrictions in access to services like electricity, and when people started being prevented from upgrading or enlarging their own homes and yards. Since then, there began a struggle to push back PETAR's limits to no longer include Bairro da Serra, a district that was 'cut in half' when the park was established. Much of its territory ended up inside the park. Bairro da Serra harbors both traditional communities and long-standing residents of Iporanga, as well as important items of Ribeira River Valley's historical and cultural heritage. The struggle of the dwellers, through their association, ensured an agreement that redrew the park limits so that people's homes stayed outside the zone with restrictions. However, the farmland remained inside the conservation unit, which greatly restricted people's way of life and meant that tourism work became families' only source of income.

The park limits were redrawn but the land ownership regularization of the Bairro da Serra community did not happen. Several families have been displaced by the park to this district, which is in PETAR's surrounding buffer zone, but the displacement was not accompanied by deeds to the land. The families only have a provisional right to remain, which does not guarantee that the park will not resettle them. (4) This situation is particularly difficult for the women, whose work is concentrated in their own yards and who earn a living mostly from their work there and at various local business initiatives.

Currently, the communities are facing a new offensive onto the territory. The São Paulo state government, based on its privatist policy, has opened an international tender process for the concession of an area of the park – where most of the main tourist attractions are located – for a period of 30 years. This took place in the second half of 2021, already during the pandemic, and without any public consultation whatsoever. Since then, a broad resistance movement against the concession of the park has emerged.

The struggle against the concession is organized with the involvement of residents, peoples and communities, researchers, activists and supporters in general. Women make up a major share of this resistance. Based on their self-organization, they have demonstrated that they are particularly impacted when the government chooses to strengthen public-private partnerships in this way. The question of land regularization, for instance, is being completely ignored in this process. That a private company could literally own the territory for 30 years and that the families, especially the women, should continue to live with the insecurity of not owning their land is an aberration. It clearly demonstrates that the state's intention in promoting this concession is not improving communities' quality of life, as it alleges.

Even though the park was imposed upon the communities in the 1950s, over time they appropriated it as best they could. Owing to the intense restrictions placed on their way of life, one of the main sources of income that dwellers have today is community based, autonomously organized work in tourism as environmental monitors. Currently, there are 250 monitors registered with PETAR. Visitors usually hire them, and their presence is compulsory in the case of visits to the caves. They are residents of the communities and beyond presenting the park's attractions they talk about the history of the Ribeira River Valley and the communities where they live. The organization of monitorship as paid work was part of the negotiations between the state government and the communities as an alternative source of income in the face of restrictions to the use of the territory and to customary practices that were turned into environmental crimes. One of the changes proposed in the privatization RFP specs is that tourists may self-guide inside the park, which would make it even harder for the environmental monitors to obtain an income, as they would cease to be essential to the tourists.

With the concession, communities – and especially women, who run the various small businesses in the area surrounding the park – will cease having a leading role in the tourism field. The concession holder will take on that role. For example, the concession plan involves greatly increasing the number of yearly visits to the park, creating trails for vehicles and publicizing new attractions. The women fighting the concession argue that with these initiatives the government wants to impose another type of tourism on the territory. Instead of people interested in getting to know the communities through the local guides, who are also sources of knowledge about local ways of life, it wants tourism organized by companies that are likely to prioritize the hiring of bilingual guides, for example, rather than members of the local community.

This tourism package undoes the “bread-winning flow”, a kind of economy constructed over time by the communities, which are themselves set to become just another tourist attraction. This new and extremely colonialist tendency has worsened under the neoliberal government of São Paulo state, which is implementing a development program called “Valley of the Future”. Communities other than the ones surrounding PETAR have been classed as tourist attractions by this program, including with signs on highways, without any kind of consultation or dialogue with the communities about this. So the community becomes a foreigner in its own territory. Gentrification, likely to happen via the construction of hotels and higher ticket prices – actions forecast in the concession process –, will make it impossible for community members to access the park, a place they know well and where they enjoy spending time.

The effect forecast is not the valuing of communities and the building of economic alternatives. Rather, people fear they will be pushed out of their territory more and more, and will find themselves forced to migrate to the peripheries of the surrounding cities, a trend already observed particularly among the young, who have not remained in the territory. Furthermore, for the ones that do remain, there is concern about increasing sexual violence and objectification of women’s bodies with the significant inflow of men from the outside. The concession of the park also has no matching measures in terms of improving the public policies that service the community. Given that the concession, if granted, will last 30 years, the women are especially concerned about their young children, who will spend their childhood, adolescence and early adult life in this privatized territory.

This privatization is taking place at the same time as the “Valley of the Future” project advances in the Ribeira River Valley, which also raises doubts as to how the exploitation of the territory will take place. The main front of this development project has so far been opening up the region to mining. (The whole region of Iporanga, including the area of PETAR, was exploited by mining in the past.) Since the concession process provides for the use and exploitation of the territory, this raises the suspicion that mining activities may return in certain parts of the territory, including inside PETAR. After all, as the women state, when it comes to these projects “everything is connected and stitched up in advance”.

In the legal sphere, this whole process has been conducted on the basis of approvals granted in the dead of night, with no participation by communities directly affected. The state government has gone as far as using documents from other meetings (minutes, photos) to claim that consultations with the community about the concession were held. Due to the pandemic, health precautions become the alibi for not holding major public consultations. What has happened in practice is that hearings are deliberately hollowed out since they are proposed in an online format or in-person but in the state capital, in a context where dwellers lack internet access and the resources to travel. According to the specs, the actions to be developed by the company that wins the concession include activities that go against the park’s Management Plan. This unmask the environmental racism involved in the privatization: if it means companies develop their business, the environmental impact studies need

not be taken into account. Nevertheless, this way of conducting the concession, i.e., by disrespecting traditional communities' right to prior, free and informed consultation (ILO Convention 169), has been understood by part of the Judiciary as valid, which has speeded up the process in spite of these irregularities.

In an even greater offensive than the state government of João Dória, in São Paulo, the federal government of Jair Bolsonaro launched on February 7, 2022, a decree for the concession/privatization of five Conservation Units. One of them, the Serra da Canastra National Park, was created during the military dictatorship and overlaps an area of 1,500 families of rural producers, including 43 communities and 550 traditional families, recognized as Canastreiros.

Women self-organize and resist

When nobody is being heard, least of all are the women. The spaces for participation are scarce and, moreover, tend to be set aside for just a few leaders – men, in general – who, owing to the patriarchal structure of the communities themselves, do not take women's concerns, perceptions and arguments to the public debate. This, in addition to the disregard the State has shown towards the issue of participation, has made women unite in their own collective, from where they organize the fight against the concession from their self-organization. As well as enhancing the resistance based on a plurality of voices, women's self-organized spaces have also been important as a form of self-care against the harassment that the State has undertaken over the course of the process, which has even caused mental illness and emotional distress among the communities.

What is evident is that the types of conservation 'without-people' that have been adopted as the model and that have for decades dictated the environmental policy of several countries, including Brazil, is very efficient for capital in the current historical period of expansion of its borders. The creation of territories without people means the creation of territories without resistance, where privatizing projects – as in the case of PETAR's concession – can develop unfettered. We believe that the struggle against the concession in this case will be victorious because the communities of Iporanga have never accepted the fact that their own territory is not their property. Over time, given that the imposition of the park was a reality that could not be changed, they gradually became more and more its owners, appropriating means to live and create within that environment. However, they have always exposed what they see as wrong and fought over the still latent conflicts, like the absence of deeds to their land.

It is not by chance that the State's concession plan provides for the closing of one of the park's entrances via Iporanga municipality, even though this entrance greatly facilitates visits to one of the park's top caves. It is an attempt to exclude the most resistant communities, making it no longer viable for them to access the park or work as environmental monitors. This reminds us that the history of the Ribeira River Valley has been the history of the erasure of the paths trodden by traditional communities, and the construction of paths that privilege the flow of capital. Federal highway BR-116 – a major highway that cuts in half many of the Ribeira River Valley's municipalities and is responsible for much of the cargo haulage in Southeast Brazil – is an icon of this.

What we know is that the old paths never actually cease to be used, and that the elderly are especially concerned about reminding the young about where these paths pass, where they are and where they end up. The privatization project intends to uproot communities from their territory based on a re-architecture of such paths, but it is failing to take into account the capacity of resistance and inventiveness of the peoples that laid them.

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(1) In order to support the struggle organized by women against the privatization of PETAR and follow this movement, please access <https://www.petarsemconcessao.minhasampa.org.br/> and sign the online petition.

(2) The Ribeira River Valley harbors a variety of traditional communities and peoples, like the Guarani Mbyá and Guarani Ñandeva indigenous peoples, and quilombola, caiçara and caboclo communities.

(3) The Rural Environmental Registry (CAR) is a tool created by Brazil's new forestry code. It is a geo-referenced digital registry of the country's rural territory. This instrument, which ought to guide the implementation of environmental policies, has been used and a document that justifies what has been termed digital land-grabbing in many countries of the Global South. To find out more, [check here](#).

(4) For more information on the history of Bairro da Serra and relations between Iporanga's traditional communities and PETAR, see "Florestas e lutas por reconhecimento: território, identidades e direitos na Mata Atlântica brasileira" by Pedro Castelo Branco Silveira. [Available here](#).