

Dossier: Contested Rural Scapes

Dossier: paisajes rurales en disputa

Guest Editors

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The Commission on the Sustainability of Rural Systems (CSRS) is one of the nearly fifty commissions currently operating within the International Geographical Union (IGU). Since its initial approval as a study group at the IGU World Congress held in Washington, DC, in 1992, the CSRS has worked at a global scale to deepen the understanding of rural areas worldwide. At that time, its central purpose was to explicitly incorporate the sustainability perspective—a concept that gained prominence in the late 1980s—an approach that continues to orient the Commission’s engagement with rural studies.

As of 2025, the CSRS comprises more than one thousand members from 62 countries. It is also one of the few IGU commissions that has maintained an uninterrupted trajectory for more than three decades. This continuity can be extended further when considering its direct predecessors, particularly the Commission on Rural Development (1976–1984) and the Commission on the Transformation of Rural Systems (1984–1992). The CSRS replaced the latter, first as a study group and, from August 1996 onward, as a formal commission, following its approval at the IGU World Congress held in The Hague, the Netherlands (Paül et al., 2018).

Since its inception, the CSRS’s core activity has been the organization of an annual colloquium, whose first edition took place in Montreal (Canada) in 1993. This meeting provides a unique opportunity for academic exchange and for strengthening the international community of rural geographers. In organizing these events, the CSRS seeks to alternate venues between the Global North and the Global South, while progressively rotating continents. Only in 2020, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, was the annual colloquium unable to take place, marking the sole interruption in more than thirty years. In 2021, on an exceptional basis, the colloquium was held exclusively online from Zagreb (Croatia).

A distinctive feature of CSRS colloquia is the systematic inclusion of a three- to four-day field trip in specific rural settings, conceived as a living laboratory in which participants can observe initiatives, experiences, economic activities, transformations, and conflicts, and engage in situ debates on rural sustainability. The centrality of fieldwork is such that the virtual 2021 colloquium included its own field excursion in 2022. As a result, that year was exceptional: the annual colloquium held in Egypt (Cairo and the Nile Delta) conducted its scheduled fieldwork, while the postponed field excursion of the virtual colloquium was carried out in rural Croatia.

Considering the 32 colloquia held up to the end of 2025 and the venues scheduled for 2026 and 2027, Latin America remains the least represented world region: over a period of 35 years, only two editions have been held there. The first took place in Brazil in 2003; the second, in Argentina in 2024, the latter providing the framework for the present special issue on contested rural scapes. Indeed, one of the reasons for selecting Mendoza as the venue was the explicit intention to strengthen the CSRS’s presence in Latin America, a central objective of Valerià Paül’s co-presidency mandate (2020–2024).

Since the origins of the CSRS, the written dissemination of research results has been a fundamental objective. For many years, numerous colloquia resulted in conference proceedings whose publication required considerable effort and was often delayed by several years. Moreover, in many countries such proceedings are not regarded as full scientific publications and therefore tend not to be recognized in academic evaluations. In response, recent colloquia have opted to disseminate results through articles subjected to double-blind peer review in indexed scientific journals, usually in the form of special issues published in the host country.

It is within this framework that the present special issue of the *Boletín de Estudios Geográficos* is situated. This journal, one of the longest-standing geographical journals in Argentina, is published by the Institute of Geography of the Faculty of Philosophy and Letters at the National University of Cuyo, and its first issue appeared in 1948. The publication thus fulfils the CSRS’s aim of

disseminating globally relevant research through local journals, linking the geographical reality of the colloquium's host location with editorial spaces that reflect the diversity of rural systems worldwide.

The 31st CSRS Colloquium

The 31st CSRS Colloquium of the IGU was held from 16 to 20 September 2024 at the National University of Cuyo in Mendoza, Argentina. The event brought together more than 90 researchers from 18 countries across all continents, with a strong representation from Latin America. The colloquium was entitled "*Contested Rural Spaces / Territorios rurales en disputa*" and focused on discussing different perspectives on rural development, particularly in light of existing divergences around the concept of "territory," which is used in distinct ways in Latin America (Sandoval et al., 2017, p. 43).

The central aim was to address these conceptual mismatches and the multiple constructions of key geographical concepts in order to contribute to mutual understanding (Martín, 2023), given that such differences have direct implications for everyday realities and for the transformation of rural territories. At the same time, these transformations do not occur solely "out there": an increasing number of scholars seek to enrich academic work by incorporating different forms of knowledge and worldviews. As argued by Ives et al. (2020), the concern with external phenomena and collective social structures has, in some approaches, led to the neglect of individuals' "inner worlds"—their emotions, thoughts, identities, and beliefs—despite their central role in sustainable action and transformative capacity.

These perspectives resonate with broader debates within the Anthropocene framework, which calls for rethinking human–nature relations through the conception of human and more-than-human collectives. In this context, Debaise et al. (2015) urge scholars to move away from understanding nature as an object at the disposal of human projects. The notion of territory is also closely linked to soil: in some community perspectives, it is conceived as a body that gives life, while in others it has increasingly become a commodity, with fertility as the primary mode of relating to it (Salazar et al., 2020). Territory can likewise be deeply tied to subsistence practices and place attachment (Steinhäuser, 2020). Bruno Latour has consistently reminded "modern" societies that we belong to the Earth (Latour, 2018). In this vein, attention to emerging imaginaries of hybrid territories, particularly among younger generations, becomes especially relevant (De la Vega Leinert et al., 2021).

Examples of community resistance from different regions also constituted valuable contributions to the conference. Sessions were structured around four main thematic axes: Regional production and agroecology; Rural–urban conflicts and new ruralities; Socio-environmental inequalities and ecological conflicts; and Land ownership and territorial planning. Gathering in Mendoza offered a privileged opportunity to reflect on and deepen Latin American conceptualizations within an international context, as well as to address rural spaces and the challenges they face regarding sustainable development.

Description of the Field Trip

The field trip, with around 40 international participants, explored the southern region of the province of Mendoza, beginning in the Uco Valley. There, participants observed processes of "territorialization" and the impacts of the globalization of viticulture, the expansion of agriculture into mountainous areas, and problematic water use in an arid environment, alongside examples of peasant resistance and alternative food networks. The itinerary continued to Malargüe, where livestock systems characteristic of arid and semi-arid regions—including transhumant goat

herding—were examined, along with socio-environmental conflicts related to mining and fracking, disputes over water access, and challenges associated with land access for small-scale herders and Indigenous communities. The field trip also included visits to local initiatives promoting sustainable rural tourism.

The conference was supported by the Argentine National Institute of Agricultural Technology (INTA), the EU project *Highlands.3*, and the International Office of the University of Münster.

The Contributions to the Special Issue

This dossier brings together ten scientific articles and one book review, selected by the Colloquium Organizing Committee based on criteria of scientific quality, thematic diversity, geographical diversity, and gender equity. All contributions underwent a double-blind peer-review process in accordance with the editorial guidelines of the *Boletín de Estudios Geográficos*. Taken together, the papers reflect both the richness of the debates developed during the colloquium and the plurality of theoretical, methodological, and empirical approaches that currently characterize research on contested rural scapes. As part of this plurality, the articles are published in the various languages used during the colloquium, respecting the background and/or the express preference of the authors.

Overall, the contributions address conflicts, tensions, and transformations in rural and coastal spaces across multiple scales—local, national, regional, and global—and from perspectives that engage with critical geography, political ecology, agrarian studies, territorial planning, and relational approaches to territory. Far from conceiving the rural as a homogeneous or residual space, the papers analyze it as a dynamic field of material and symbolic disputes, where development projects, regimes of access to resources, territorial identities, and differentiated forms of governance confront one another.

The dossier opens with the article by **Bernardo Mançano Fernandes**, who offers a far-reaching theoretical reflection on the conceptual construction of territory in Latin America and the Caribbean. Drawing on a critical reading inspired by Milton Santos, the author develops a conception of territory that places territorial disputes at the center, both in rural areas and in cities, addressing their multiscalar and multidimensional character. The article provides a solid analytical framework for understanding territories beyond their reduction to governance spaces, emphasizing the inseparability between material and immaterial dimensions, as well as between fixed and fluid elements.

From an empirical perspective grounded in Latin America, **Ann-Kathrin Volmer** analyzes socio-environmental conflicts in the Colombian Massif ecoregion, highlighting tensions between state environmental protection policies and extractivist strategies linked to mining. The article emphasizes the role of peasant social movements in the construction of territory and territorial identity as resources of power, demonstrating how different conceptions of territory shape and structure socio-environmental conflicts.

The contribution by **William G. Moseley** shifts the focus to the African continent, examining from a political ecology perspective the paradigmatic disputes surrounding agricultural development and food security. The author analyzes the marginal position occupied by agroecology within international agricultural research institutions, despite its growing relevance in the face of food insecurity. The article underscores the political nature of research infrastructure and argues for the need for structural transformations to enable effective change in rural territories.

Disputes surrounding nature conservation and resource appropriation are also central to the article by **Scott William Hoefle and Vicente Paulo dos Santos Pinto**, who examine processes of

green grabbing and greenwashing in the state of Minas Gerais, Brazil. Through the study of a private natural reserve, the authors critically analyze neoliberal conservation policies, revealing dynamics of elitization, exclusion, and commodification of nature in rural contexts marked by a long extractive history.

From Western Australia, **Roy Jones and Tod Jones** address conflicts over territorial management in a rural coastal area where environmental protection, Indigenous land rights, and development pressures converge. Using the concepts of multifunctional rural transition and dissonant heritage, the article reconstructs the settlement history of the area and analyzes the conflicting values of the actors involved, highlighting the complexity of territorial disputes in rural coastal spaces.

Dynamics of mobility, immobility, and cultural resilience in rural contexts are at the core of the paper by **Holly R. Barcus, Cynthia A. Werner, and Amangul Shugatai**, based on a longitudinal ethnographic study among Kazakh populations in Mongolia. The article offers a reinterpretation of migration narratives, emphasizing how everyday practices and cultural traditions contribute to strengthening ethnic identities and generating forms of resilience in rural territories undergoing multiple transformations.

In the Brazilian context, **Ana Maria de Souza Mello Bicalho and Ana Paula Correia de Araujo** analyze advances and contradictions in organic agriculture policies in the state of Mato Grosso do Sul, a territory dominated by productivist agribusiness. Drawing on several case studies, the article examines forms of collective organization, multiscale relations, and tensions between endogenous initiatives and top-down projects, revealing the inequalities that shape agroecological transitions.

The article by **Rubén Boga González** focuses on the Denomination of Origin Pisco in Peru, addressing the dispute with Chile from a pluri-scalar perspective. The author shows how the DO acquires different meanings depending on the geographical scale: as an instrument of national affirmation at the state level and as a tool for preserving local knowledge and heritage in the Ica region. The analysis thus reveals the coexistence of overlapping and sometimes conflicting interpretations of rural territories linked to geographically identified products.

From India, **Abhineety Goel** examines the effects of compensatory conservation in the Planned Omkareshwar National Park Complex, analyzing how state-imposed institutional changes reconfigure access to forest resources. Through a longitudinal ethnography, the article demonstrates that beyond formal rules, access depends on negotiations, social networks, and power relations, bringing to light new inequalities in rural territories inhabited by Indigenous communities.

The dossier concludes with the article by **Fiona Haslam McKenzie and Natalie Brown**, who analyze disputes associated with mining and the future of post-extractive rural territories in relation to land-use planning after mine closure. Drawing on experiences in Australia, the article discusses institutional challenges and proposes productive reconversion strategies that articulate governments, communities, and industry, with the aim of avoiding social and economic crises in regions dependent on mining activities.

Finally, the issue includes a **book review** authored by Ivan Šišak of *Tourist Concessions on the Maritime Domain in Croatia*, a collective volume edited by Saša Poljanec-Borić, Neven Ivandić, Aleksandar Lukić, that examines, from a socio-economic perspective, tourism concession policies along the Croatian coast. The review closely engages with the central theme of the dossier by addressing disputes over access, management, and commodification of coastal spaces considered common goods, highlighting the challenges of territorial governance under conditions of intense tourism pressure.

Taken together, the works assembled in this dossier provide a broad and diverse perspective on contested rural scapes, contributing to the renewal of theoretical and empirical debates on contemporary rural transformations and strengthening the international dialogue promoted by the International Geographical Union.

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Ana Cornelia Steinhäuser is a postdoctoral researcher and lecturer at the University of Münster, working in the Applied Landscape Ecology and Ecological Planning group. Her research focuses on agroecology, social-ecological systems, and the role of intangible values in landscape perception and management. She is a member of the Center for Interdisciplinary Sustainability Research (ZIN) and actively contributes to international sustainability initiatives.

Steinhäuser also co-chairs the IGU Commission on the Sustainability of Rural Systems and collaborates with several academic networks in agroecology and geography. Her work spans multiple regions, including Europe, Latin America, and Africa, reflecting a strong comparative and international perspective. In addition to research, she leads innovative teaching projects that integrate social science and ethnographic methods into landscape ecology.

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